

# Choosing a Private University in Buenos Aires: choice spatialization in diversified contexts<sup>1</sup>

Sebastián Gerardo Fuentes<sup>II</sup>

## Abstract

This paper describes the dynamics of private universities' expansion and the discussions that look for an explanation, within a context of diversification and growth of higher education. The purpose of this study is to analyze the spatial and esthetical dimensions of university choices by middle-high and high-class young people from Buenos Aires; a phenomenon that has been barely addressed by socio-anthropologic studies on higher education. This ethnographic research intends to understand the dynamics of reproducing and producing social and educational inequalities in universities and college clubs. It reconstructs the phenomenon of class spatialization in universities, which is explained by both the institutional expansion of the private and state sectors and the appearance of highly segmented education markets. The selection of university based on the different scales and dimensions of space –localization and population addressed by the institutions, perceptions on college infrastructure, and meanings that associate university with place and social classes– justifies proposing the spatialization of higher education choices as a heuristically productive category to situationally understand meanings and power relationships involved in processes of education privatization, articulating urban and educational segregations.

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**II-** Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas CONICET/FLACSO/ UNTREF, Buenos Aires, Argentina.  
Contact: sebasfuentes3@gmail.com.

## Keywords

Spatialization – University – Private – City – Inequality.

# **Elegir la universidad privada en Buenos Aires: especialización de la elección en contextos de diversificación<sup>1</sup>**

Sebastián Gerardo Fuentes<sup>II</sup>

## **Resumen**

*El artículo describe la dinámica de expansión de la educación privada y las discusiones que buscan explicarla, en el contexto de la diversificación y expansión de la educación superior. El objetivo del trabajo es analizar las elecciones universitarias de jóvenes de sectores medios altos y altos en Buenos Aires, en su dimensión espacial y estética, fenómeno escasamente abordado en la investigación socioantropológica sobre la educación superior. Se basa en una investigación etnográfica que buscó comprender la dinámica de la reproducción y producción de la desigualdad social y educativa en universidades y clubes universitarios. Reconstruye el fenómeno de la espacialización según clase de las universidades, que se explica tanto por la expansión institucional del sector privado y público, como por la instauración de mercados educativos altamente segmentados. La elección de la universidad en función del espacio en sus distintas escalas y dimensiones –localización y población a la que interpelan las instituciones, percepciones sobre la infraestructura universitaria y sentidos que asocian universidades con lugares y clases sociales– permite plantear la espacialización de las elecciones educativas como categoría heurísticamente productiva para comprender situacionalmente los sentidos y las relaciones de poder implicados en los procesos de privatización de la educación, articulando la segregación urbana con la educativa.*

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**II-** Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas CONICET/FLACSO/UNTREF, Buenos Aires, Argentina.  
Contacto: sebasfuentes3@gmail.com.

## **Palabras clave**

*Espacialización – Universidad – Privada – Ciudad – Desigualdad.*

## Introduction

The title for this paper reflects a situation experienced by young people from middle-high and high sectors in Buenos Aires: explaining why they choose a privately-funded university. This need for an explanation has its particular characteristics in Argentina: the importance given to the state-funded university<sup>1</sup> in the education of high and middle classes since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (BUCHBINDER, 2005). Four historical moments may be mentioned as having a strong impact on the association between university and social class: the University Reform in 1918; the initiatives during the Peronism administration on free tuition and university access during the 1940s; the creation of private universities (PP.UU), authorized during the end of the 1950s; and the appearance of state-funded universities in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (outskirts), which occurred in two moments: in the 1990s and in 2000. The growth of private and state funded universities in different parts of Argentina as well as the increasing complexity of socio-educational circuits force us to look beyond the structural differences between both types of educational institutions: tuition in public universities is free and in most cases, there are no quotas on the number of applicants even though some implement admission exams and courses to facilitate –and sometimes limit– the access to higher education. In the case of PP.UU., the payment of a monthly tuition –the sum varies depending on the university, its location and degree program– constitutes their distinctive mark and condition for existing. However, this huge distinction does not explain *itself* the processes of competition for applicants or the growth of enrollments at higher private education during the last years.

Higher education massification, institutional diversification and expansion

**1-** In this paper the terms public, national and state-funded university have the same meaning.

of the private sector (CHIROLEU, 2006), and privatization of enrollments are all articulated processes: their growth has been synchronic. These are known phenomena but an ethnographic analysis may reveal the local relationships and decisions that remain unknown in relation to the role that education choices and institutions' policies play within the complex net that links them. Based on ethnography of families from privileged positions, we intend to describe how the decision to study at a private university is made by young people from middle-high and high sectors through a dimension that is not frequently used in studies on education choices: the space in its different scales.

The studies on education choices have helped explain phenomena related to socioeconomic inequalities and cultural differences (NEUFELD, 2000; AGUIAR, 2012; TIRAMONTI, 2009; ZIEGLER, 2007; FUENTES, 2013). We think that choice is not an individual act to maximize advantages but rather a decisional process in which several actors are involved – in this case, young people, families, university marketers, academic counselors (psychologists, educational psychologists, etc.), relatives, friends, and acquaintances, amongst others-. Even though costs and benefits are weighed, they are defined in context; that is to say, according to what the actors believe within their action and reflection dispositions as most convenient or proper based on perceptions construed from the habitus and/or tendencies related to class position and education (BOURDIEU, 2002). Deviating from approaches focused on the rationale actor theory, we think that choices are made in specific spaces that involve different types of criteria and meanings: morale, emotions, ideology, etc. The spatialization of choices is a dimension that has been barely studied. With this concept we point out that space is not just a dimension related to the *context* of a choice. Space is lived and imagined (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002); it is culturally conceptualized and disputed as well as unequally distributed –in its uses and

representations, and in people's possibilities of mobility-. In keeping with the development in urban anthropology (CHAVES; SEGURA, 2015), we argue that urban space and actors build the city dialectically; that the space for mobility and socialization conditions the perceptions of the landscape, the city, the places owned and those *of others*.

The above-mentioned dimension has been analyzed by studies on education but they have not used an ethnographic approach. Research and findings that link the spatial dimension with education inequalities have been focused on analyzing regional inequities and policies to spread and decentralize services (RAMA; CEVALLOS, 2016; DIDOU APETIT, 2011; CARDOZO; LORENZO, 2015). The differential access to university has also been studied from regional indicators (VIGGIANO; MATTOS, 2013; OSPINA LONDOÑO et al., 2015). These studies localize the phenomenon of the increasing demand for higher education and massification processes, and provide demographic data revealing quantitative dynamics of territorial inequities. Perosa, Lebaron and Kerches da Silva Leite (2015) have shown how the poorest regions of Sao Paulo account for most inequalities by analyzing education achievements in relation to urban infrastructure and public services. Although these approaches are important to understand the relationship amongst socioeconomic conditions, education circuits and space, our perspective gives relevance to ethnographic dimensions and/or those that can be registered at a local level from the point of view of actors at the creation of education spaces, as done by Dubet (2005) with respect to French students and Carli (2012), for college students in Buenos Aires. Both authors show the impact of socioeconomic transformations on the sociability experience by young people at university and the symbolic distances that they have to go through with respect to space to participate in college life.

## Theory and Methodological

### Approach: Ethnography of and from Spaces

Between 2009 and 2015 we undertook an ethnography in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (in Spanish, AMBA)<sup>2</sup> to inquire for the processes involved in the creation of socio-educational inequality considering the experience of young people and families from middle-high and high sectors in keeping with the anthropological research on elites (TIRAMONTI; ZIEGLER, 2008; ZIEGLER; GESSAGHI, 2012). The ethnography included open interviews<sup>3</sup> to 52 individuals (young people, adults, representatives of universities and social clubs for their students, etc.) from middle-high and high classes; participant observation at university places: special courses, ceremonies, religious actors, volunteering, libraries, student associations, etc., and the space used by university students in sport clubs. Fieldwork was done through two types of access: the first one was a club with university students as members, in this case, Club Universitario de Buenos Aires (CUBA)<sup>4</sup>. These young people attended different private and public universities. The second type of access took place at Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA), one of the first private universities created in 1958. The selection criteria for both institutions

**2-** Urban spot that covers the City of Buenos Aires (CABA) and 24 political districts –constituencies- in the Province of Buenos Aires that surround CABA like a ring.

**3-** Interviews were taken in different scenarios: university libraries; a café at downtown nearby the individuals' college or workplace; a family home in a gated community in the Northern area of Buenos Aires. The ethnographer does not only pay attention to the *content* given by the interviewee but also to the relationship built, the way interviewee and ethnographer are positioned and the space: the places chosen by the interviewees constitute research data since the ethnographer is forced to move like the *natives* and understand the meaning of those places in their daily life.

**4-** This club was funded in 1918 by university students who were opponent to the University Reform from Córdoba (FUENTES, 2016) and it is formed by professionals. There are admission requirements: payment of an initial fee and the recommendation from members. In this club, we had contact with young people, their families and institution representatives. These people attend traditional state-funded universities such as Universidad de Buenos Aires and/or private ones like UCA, Universidad del Salvador, Austral, etc. Given that the ethnography involved a broader study of sociability at clubs, some young people belong to similar social and sport clubs.

were based on the fact that they are perceived as *distinguished* by their members and by those who do not belong to the institutions and/or are associated to a population from middle-high and high sectors from Buenos Aires<sup>5</sup>. The research included an analysis of documentary material from the universities, indicators and registers from Argentina Secretary of Education [Ministerio de Educación de la Nación], and surveys on *territorial* policies from private and public universities.

The young people interviewed attended public or private universities located in CABA or the *Northern Area* and therefore, the survey on their choices revolved around the past. Several criteria were used to analyze education choices<sup>6</sup> but this work focuses on studying the spatial aspect. Space is conceived in different scales and dimensions: the urban space they live in and where actors are addressed; the building-space in which they pictured themselves studying and upon which esthetical classifications are construed; the different territories that actors associate specifically with *class* inequality. These scales help us understand how choice spatialization undergoes a process of appropriation and fragmentation in which the creation of spaces/education institutions reveals new complexities of contemporary production of social inequality.

### **The Dynamic of Private Education in Argentina and the Discussions around It**

Data provided by Argentina Secretary of Education (ARGENTINA, 2013) confirm

**5-** The case of UCA is paradigmatic of the process we intend to explain throughout this text since it is an institution still associated with elite sectors and catholic conservatives. Nevertheless, its student population has been diversifying since the 1990s in both its social and ideological composition. At the time of the ethnography, both institutions –CUBA and UCA- had a similar population in quantitative terms (20,000 members in the first case and almost 20,000 students in the second one).

**6-** Other aspects surveyed are involved to perceptions on the quality of education, family traditions under the choices, gender differences and their transformation. The last two items were not studied under this work and will be the purpose of future research.

the rise of school enrollments at the private sector, particularly during the period of 2003-2008 and more notoriously, at primary and university levels. The tendency slows down in the subsequent years, especially in high and technical education; the enrollment for primary schools keeps growing and it decreases at university level by 2012-2013. By 2010, 25.7% of enrollments at all education levels and modalities occurred in the private sector while that same percentage was of 22.7% in 2003 (ARGENTINA, 2013). The latest figures to which we have had access (from 2014) show a population of 1,871,445 students at university level, 78.4% of which were in the state sector and 21.6%, in private institutions. The infrastructure availability for the same year is of 122 institutions, 46.7% of which are public universities, 51.6% are private, one international university and a foreign one representing 0.8% each. Institutional diversification results in unequal distribution: the private sector accounts for most part of the school offer, there are more institutions with fewer students.

The discussions over the expansion of private education in Argentina have focused on the general economic growth as one of the causes or conditions that had influence over families' education choices. It is argued that as the economic income increases, families opt for enrolling their children at the private sector and the decision is then materialized when the offer is made available (NARODOWSKI 2010). According to Gasparini and other authors (2012), an increasing economic growth explains the higher school segregation; that is to say, the consolidation of school circuits based on social sectors in which private-funded education increases in middle and high sectors when the economic growth rises. Based on data from Ennis and Porto (2001), García de Fanelli (2014) proves that PP.UU. have a stronger presence of young people from sectors with higher income. On the other hand, Narodowski and Martínez Boom (2016) provide an explanation based on political economics, regarding the



increase of the private sector as a way out from state-funded schools by middle classes and the consolidation of the public school as a place for poverty management which in consequence, dismantles the demand. Private schools are demanded and tailor-made by middle classes and public schools respond to no demand because, in their view –with which we do not agree–, popular sectors do not present demands for quality education. Explanations based on the demand –either because families’ income increases or because they change their criteria and preferences – do not provide a comprehensive account for the phenomenon; the warnings from Morduchowicz and other authors (1999) are important: attention should be paid to the link between offer and demand. According to these authors, the development of the private sector, as a result of the state subsidy to private schools under Act 13407 from 1947, may be construed as an offer strategy that might indicate that public and private education are complementary, or as an education expansion taking place in both sectors. However, the same authors show that private education was experiencing an increase during the years prior to the passing of the Act, making it necessary to wonder if there was a previous demand from society that resulted in the legal framework.

Taking into consideration the context of the socioeconomic crisis suffered in Argentina during the 2000s, Kessler (2002) examined the way in which schools were shaped by the attending or targeted population rather than the other way around; this was also pointed out by Tiramonti (2004). In an scenario of major social and political conflict as that occurring in those years, Tenti Fanfani (2007) believes that families’ preference for a private education is better explained by their need to secure school days and higher possibilities of students being taught as opposed to public institutions affected by suspensions of school days, teachers’ strikes, training events, etc. Teaching, assistance and care provision jointly helped understand the recent transformations in the expansion of the private education. According to Ziegler

(2016), public education’s loss of prestige within the social imaginary is related to the financial and symbolic impact created by the transfer of education administration fulfilled in the 1990s<sup>7</sup>. This reform is key in Feldfeber’s (2003) observation on how the definition of public education became a shared field and a matter of jurisdiction when the types of administration (state or private) were outlined under the Federal Education Act [Ley Federal de Educación] from 1993. This set of discussions focuses not only on the economic dynamics in the expansion of private education but also on the ability of different social sectors to impose their values and preferences upon the school (VAN ZANTEN, 2005) or school’s capability of imposing them, and it confirms our remark on the construction of school choices: the importance of the moral dimensions and the relationships between families and education institutions considered at their local level (FUENTES, 2013). It is still pending to assess the mechanisms and meanings accounting for the choices that contribute to segregation and fragmentation of spaces and education circuits in the case of universities as well as the role of institutions’ policies on the interaction of higher education’s offer and demand.

### **Urban Segregation and Universities for Every Social Class**

Urban life movements of privileged sectors have been historically related to the expansion of the education service. Elites’ suburbanization in the region of Buenos Aires followed the pattern of displacement by the popular sectors, building a commuting ring adjacent to the core city but marking a difference in regions and values associated with middle-high and high sectors in terms of *life quality* and *green*, amongst others (LINDÓN 1997; SVAMPA 2001; JANOSCHKA 2002). Life

**7-** The public school was no longer associated with the *Federal Administration* or the *Federal State* (with its resulting prestige) but only with the local level, which was construed as a drop in its value.

in the gated communities of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA) was perceived as safer, calm and esthetical, resulting in the relocation of those sectors –that began during the second half of the 20th Century– and the creation of private elementary and high schools in the *Northern Area*.

We use the term Northern area as defined by the actors, which includes the most traditionalist districts of San Isidro, Vicente López, Bella Vista (though it is a neighborhood in the district of San Miguel), Villa de Mayo, some parts of Pilar, and fragments of those same districts or others that accounted for most of the expansion of the residential offer in gated communities and private neighborhoods over the last two decades: Tigre, Pilar, Malvinas Argentinas, San Fernando and Escobar. The social and education circuit of these families revolves around those districts and the neighborhoods in the *Northern Area* of the City of Buenos Aires (CABA) such as Palermo, Recoleta, Parque, Belgrano and Núñez. When I asked my interviewees “Where do your cousins/aunts/uncles/grandparents live?” the answers made reference to gated communities and districts from (and in) regions in the Northern area, where I was also asked to meet them for the interviews. It is a proximity experienced from a perception of a continuing territory, as a *solution* to the social demands from these sectors; a junction with residence, education, health, place of work and sociability<sup>8</sup>. The rise in car traffic heading to CABA, constant congestions at the motorway (Norte-Panamericana Access), traffic jams due to protests and/or car accidents, the distance perceived with respect to the use of railways –linked to popular sectors and felt as unsafe–, have contributed to an increase in the demand for local solutions to the education needs of those sectors. As told by an interviewed girl who has a *weekend* house in Villa de Mayo: “I’d

**8-** An example of this could be the great number of rugby clubs located in the Northern area either because they were originally from there or their fields have been moved during the last years.

stay everyday there [the gated community] if we hadn’t had our job here [in CABA]. Imagine going back and forth every day, at least an hour and a half traveling! It’s mental!”

If the greatest development of private neighborhoods and gated communities in the Northern area occurred during the 1990s (SVAMPA, 2001), the growth of the children from those families, who have finished high school at private institutions, explains a greater demand for higher (private) education in the region. There is a diversified offer of university education<sup>9</sup> in the Northern area. The presence of state and private universities in the Northern corridor of AMBA has risen over the last two decades. In the case of the state offer, it includes new campuses from traditional universities and newly established institutions. The first group is composed by Universidad de Buenos Aires – UBA<sup>10</sup> from CABA that has opened centers for the First-Year program Ciclo Básico Común (CBC)<sup>11</sup> in different districts in AMBA y outskirts in Buenos Aires. The establishment of CBC centers gives students better access to university courses, decentralizing it. In the Northern area, the centers were opened in San Isidro (1987), Pilar (2009), San Miguel (2009), Tigre (2011) and Ingeniero Maschwitz-Escobar (2013). The opening event for the latest center is key to understanding this policy. News coverage highlighted:

After uncovering – together with Escobar’s Mayor – the commemorative plaque, UBA’s Dean, Rubén Hallú, stated that “this is not

**9-** We have not included other types of institutions such as technical colleges or teaching training institutions.

**10-** There are also two public universities created before the 1990s: Universidad Nacional de Luján that established a regional campus in San Miguel during the 1970s –the center and university were closed by the latest dictatorship and then re-opened during the return to democracy– and a delegation center in San Fernando in 1993; and Universidad Tecnológica Nacional with a regional school in General Pacheco – Tigre district– since 1972 and focused on engineering programs related to the industrial activities in the region.

**11-** CBC was created in 1985 and is mandatory. It aims at preparing and guiding for the specific degree programs and works as an interdisciplinary introduction to scientific/bachelor knowledge. CBC is the first-year course for every discipline program offered at UBA.

just CBC, when UBA arrives, the university arrives in its full scale,” pointing out to the undergraduate courses offered by Universidad de Buenos Aires. He also highlighted the “solution to place issues” by satisfying the demand with the education resources required to achieve a better training, securing employability of young people from Escobar (ESCOBARNEWS, 2013).

The statement is addressing an audience that thinks of the university in terms of employability. There are no mentions with respect to educating professionals more closely associated with middle or high sectors with university tradition. Moreover, it highlights the social role played by university on solving problems from a specific territory.

The recent public universities created during the 1990s include: Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento – UNGS- (established in 1992); it has its *campus*<sup>12</sup> at the district of Malvinas Argentinas. This institution started offering undergraduate courses in 1996 after carrying out several researches to determine its mission based on the context in which it was located<sup>13</sup>. When defining the context, it makes reference to the huge number of students that must commute from the districts to attend technical/university courses (over 6,000 students); “in terms of employment, it was defined as a “bedroom suburb” as the availability of job opportunities, education options and specialized services was lower than their demand” (UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL..., 2006, p. 23); it also points out the great number of domestic migrants and the level of poverty. Its Statutes and Regulations provide:

**12-** This English term has been borrowed and incorporated into Spanish by both state and private universities, showing the extent to which higher education has been globalized over the past decades, as pointed out by Carli (2012).

**13-** Marquina and Morresi (2012) make reference to the tension experienced at UNGS for addressing the context of poverty that surrounded it without becoming a *university for the poor*.

To develop a University that shall not exclude, helping to reduce asymmetrical experiences: society’ dynamics should be focused on equality of opportunity. Free tuition is guaranteed for undergraduate and graduate courses: the economic resources of the person or family shall not determine the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills (UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE GENERAL SARMIENTO 1999, p. 1).

The purpose of social inclusion and reduction of inequality are explicitly mentioned and their audience is the population that used to be excluded. In 2009, Universidad Nacional de José C. Paz is established in the district under the same name: located nearby Pilar, this district is associated with poor and popular sectors and the university was explicitly created to offer higher education to social sectors that had never had access to it<sup>14</sup>. As pointed out by Cardozo and Lorenzo (2015), geographic localization has historically led to unequal access to higher education since institutions have been established in urban cores. Given the complex urban grid of Buenos Aires, strategies of establishing universities or campuses in new locations indicate an attempt of overcoming inequalities by territorial policies. The places chosen in the Northern area by those institutions refer to young people from middle-low and low sectors: not only due to the spatial proximity to be solved but also due to the socio-economic conditions of the targeted population.

PP.UU.’s location in the Northern area follows the residential development in the region during the 1980s. Universidad del Salvador established its *campus (Pilar branch)* in 1987. Universidad Austral (UA), which was created in 1991 by groups linked to Opus Dei in Recoleta and Puerto Madero, CABA, opened its campus in Pilar in 1998. During the past years, UA has moved the degree courses offered in the *city* to its campus in Pilar and its building in CABA

**14-** The first two deans that managed the university constantly highlighted *social inclusion* as part of the project to establish the institution in this district.



is currently (2014) composed of postgraduate programs, seminars and administrative units.

Universidad de San Andrés was created in 1988 by the Scottish group Asociación Civil Educativa Escocesa San Andrés and received authorization to teach in 1990. It established its campus in the district of San Fernando and developed degree programs on social sciences and humanities (Law, Education, Economics, Business Administration, etc.). In 1995, Universidad Argentina John F. Kennedy from CABA opened its campus in San Isidro by the Motorway Panamericana and has established new venues both to the North and South, creating a center in Lanús in 1997. Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales established in the second decade of 2000 two annexes in the Northern area: San Isidro and Olivos. Universidad de Belgrano opened a university center in 2011 in Tigre. Instituto Tecnológico de Buenos Aires, an institution devoted to educating engineers, has two campuses in the Northern area: in San Isidro and Pilar where admission courses can be taken. Although there were centers from other catholic universities in the North, such as Universidad Católica de Salta with two venues in Bella Vista (San Miguel) and San Isidro, Universidad de San Isidro was established in 2012 as part of the education services from the traditionalist group Grupo Marín, a foundation linked to the Bishop of the Diocese of San Isidro with decades of work in kindergarten, primary and high school and teaching training. The following description from a university exemplifies the way in which PP.UU. define themselves and address students from middle to high sectors: “USI’s proposal is to be close not only by its geographic location but also by the human proximity to its students and the community in general” (UNIVERSIDAD DE SAN ISIDRO DR. PLACIDO MARIN, 2014). Geographic proximity mixes with *human* proximity, a familiar and known environment that embraces those sectors’ values (BONVIN, 1979).

PP.UU. have moved to the North in an attempt to attract young students who are weary or not keen on the daily commuting

to CABA and who do not feel appealed by public universities. They may choose a public institution, especially UBA, but the target audience in the Northern area is characterized by social class diversification. During their expansion, PP.UU’s communication policies have highlighted esthetical and social values – such as proximity and family- and signed agreements with private high schools from the region. A region of education competition has been developed in a pseudo-market whose target is different from that of the public universities, which is clearly associated with middle-low sectors, young people from families with no higher education. Those PP.UU. that have still not opened centers in the *Northern Area* and are established in CABA feel this process as a competition. That is the case of Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA): this institution has traditionally absorbed the education demand from young people of catholic families from middle-high and high sectors. According to data provided by this institution:

I can confirm you that, geographically, more than a half of our students are from Capital [CABA]. And by Capital, I mainly mean downtown and the North. Those students from Gran Buenos Aires [AMBA] are too over 70% from the so-called *North corridor* and a little bit from the West (Juan<sup>15</sup>, institution representative, UCA)<sup>16</sup>.

The *North corridor* matches our previous description of the *Northern area*. That territorial origin is associated with social sectors that have gone through the private education circuit, are mostly catholic and generally live in gated communities and private neighborhoods. An administrative authority from UCA compares the choice criteria by *today’s* young people with his own decision process. During the 1990s, having a single campus in the exclusive area of Puerto

**15-** The names have been change to preserve their identity. Interview held in 2014.

**16-** Almost 70% of its students have studied in private high schools.

Madero<sup>17</sup> might have been a distinct advantage in UCA's process of expansion. Recent years' increase of the competition with PP.UU. located in the Northern area and students' new tendency of preferring *nearby universities* have resulted in the relocalization of university services and the search for another target<sup>18</sup>.

The criteria for university choice are based on proximity and family both in terms of territory and social homogeneity. These criteria, which have already been spotted by universities during their *market analysis*, explain the design of an education policy of relocating university services. While the creation of UBA's CBC centers and new state universities is meant at increasing education opportunities for sectors that were not able to access or finish university courses, at improving employability, etc., PP.UU. are driven by targeting a social sector that is keen on having services at a short distance, introducing themselves as *of quality* or *of excellence* without losing a sense of family.

Universities' targeted audience is therefore defined by a clear distinction of social class; that is to say, they address students based on origin, condition and education experience; locating at the Northern area follows this approach according to universities' association of place and class. The rationale and creation of an imaginary space from which students are addressed go hand in hand with an education policy of territorially-based services. Even though inequalities exist within the *Northern area*, each type of institution will address different *types* of students depending on the socio-economic profile that is being targeted. In this scenario, the demand for PP.UU. keeps growing.

### **Choosing spaces: Between state disinvestment and private esthetics**

When choosing university, young people give great value to infrastructure. Attention

**17-** In 1994, UCA starts building its infrastructure in one of the most exclusive and expensive neighborhoods in CABA.

**18-** In 2014, it launched its *education district* in the Western area of the City of Buenos Aires, in Liniers, changing the target to middle and middle-high sectors from the West and South of AMBA.

is sometimes paid to the esthetical effect, particularly if the buildings are modern, trendy and *green* with gardens, yards and parks. The decision is also dependent on the equipment, laboratories, computers, internet access, etc. This set of values applied to the chosen university was mentioned by students from public and private institutions. Even though this may not be the case for all PP.UU., a key aspect in defining the offer from universities that openly aim at educating young people from high sectors is the creation of a friendly environment to learn and develop university sociability, a *nice* place linked to the urban spaces they are used to live in and move around. An analysis of the students' social trajectory shows that the above-mentioned esthetical preferences resemble the spatial experience underwent at their private high schools: in general, *being green*, the friendly environment and the buildings and sport infrastructure are important characteristics for these institutions (SVAMPA, 2001; DEL CUETO, 2007; FUENTES, 2015). A university that also offers that continuity of experience with its *values* weighs strongly when making the decision.

*Proximity* and place are central because they help maintain friends and other activities (VAN ZANTEN, 2005). When I asked Pedro, who lives in an exclusive private neighborhood in Pilar, why he decided to study at the campus of Universidad del Salvador in the same district, his instant reply was: "because it is nearby." Pedro's life revolves around his courses and activities at the local Rugby club. Should he need to attend a university in "capital" (CABA), "I would not have the time I want for my friends, to train at the club, go to the gym, my girlfriend." Pedro does not need to work, he is financially supported by his family and his choice is based on the time availability resulted from selecting an option that is *close* not only geographically but also in its social profile: "they [university colleagues] are like those at the high school, quite the same ones."

María Victoria was seated at one of UCA's rooms with comfortable armchairs watching

the urban landscape of Puerto Madero's dike while other young people practiced rowing, when she was telling me about her experience at UCA: "it's like high school"<sup>19</sup>. This similarity combines two elements: on the one side, infrastructure/aesthetics. On the other, the organization of classroom hours: all courses are taken together, in blocks (in the morning shift, for instance) and generally, classroom groups are the same during the first three or four years. This creates a daily temporality similar to that of high schools, including breaks in which everyone goes to the yard/park, chats and relaxes in the park, etc. Apart from the closeness of some teachers that "become personally acquainted" with the students, this teaching scheme contrasts with the massive experience that is supposed to be characteristic of large state universities with their crowded classrooms, and reveals how widely *closeness* is defined both in material and symbolic terms, which are key dimensions in the production of social inequality; a *personalized* and familiar spatial experience.

Those who had chosen *new* public universities from AMBA expressed their surprise by their infrastructure: "it looks like a private one," they claimed. The description of state-funded institutions as resembling private ones hints at public education's loss of hegemony, especially at the university level, in which public institutions were a point of comparison amongst other evaluation items. This refers to a process characterized by the growth – massification of the education level- and damages in building conditions due to lack of state financing during the 1980s and mainly, the 1990s. With no maintenance of the infrastructure and scarce state resources, public universities experienced a growth in their populations which resulted in a building imaginary of precariousness, insufficient infrastructure – many students in small rooms-, and no less important, *ugly* buildings, as portrayed and pointed out to this

**19-** The analysis focused on choosing the university institution. The degree programs offered by every institution must surely influence the decision but it will be subject of future research.

researcher while speaking to students on those places. This model has been changing since 2003, particularly, in the case of universities from the outskirts of Buenos Aires – including higher investments on university infrastructure, adequate room capacity, etc.-. As we have shown, the effects of the previous process have nevertheless persisted in the ways in which university places are perceived.

### **Spaces with *class*:** Sociability problems

The search for certain *social* homogeneity is present at both sides of the offer-demand relationship. It is actively fostered by families in their quest for differentiation. We have found several narratives on this expectation even from students coming from other Argentine provinces. Fernando, from Entre Ríos, studies Law at UCA and values the prestige that this university may have on that field, ranking close to UBA, the institutional basis of comparison<sup>20</sup>. His talk makes reference to well-known professors, lawyers that have studied in the institution and have opened prestigious law firms or have been appointed as judges. The "type of people" is also mentioned as influencing the decision. Supposedly, people "with some money" would attend UCA and even though he does not describe himself or his family as "people with money", he acknowledges that feature in the university's student profile. And this fact is not free from problems and controversy over its "classism", which some referred to as "elitism."

Fernando faced difficulties to "blend" with his classmates because his shift was full of "guys from San Isidro." He mainly criticized that they used to move "in mass, all together, always them, they were insufferable and were everywhere". When choosing, young people strategically use the social image of a university with an "elite type" of population – as described by one of Fernando's colleagues-

**20-** By this we want to mention that those who study at other universities make up explanations of the reasons why they have not chosen UBA, as if it were the natural option.

but students' diversity shows that that image is representational – with its political effects- and the learning experience is characterized by difficulties in socializing based on an association between social class and place/space in the city.

This association between space –in this case, of origin- and university does not only entail *positive* aspects for the institution by becoming linked to the privileged sectors that generally choose it. It also carries difficulties since these students from *San Isidro* are negatively portrayed by their *endogamy* and high self-esteem. This poses a risk for the university: becoming tied to privileged sectors may scare away students who have already chosen it –like Fernando- or might not choose it because “it’s distant”- as already described- and represents “elitist” sectors. Diversification entails, and forces, universities to become territorial and specific or, in some cases, widen their targeted population. Internally, these institutions constitute a complex social collection and the expansion of this subgroup should be understood as a progressive and deep differentiation that responds to the tastes and also the spatial trajectory and movements of future students. Getting linked to an association with an “elite” territory may limit their growth.

## Conclusion

The relationship between students' choice and the spatial dimension, and the construction and movement around the city by students has barely been addressed at neither the research or policy levels. University localization and infrastructure are not data from the *context* of the education, its quality, the production of inequalities or education research. Deep urban segregation and fragmentation are linked to social class within the same process in which actors (institutions and young people/families) made their choices. Inequalities are organized by the space. Either by the way in which students are addressed based on *class* and

territory, or how they associate infrastructure with certain university parameters or models, or the way in which a private institution's growth is hindered by the association between space and social class: the creation of socio-educational inequalities finds in space a key to its reproduction, which is not usually perceived.

Even though PP.UU.'s student population is not actually composed only by those sectors, universities' differential targets based on social class contributes to an imaginary that associates public university with popular sectors and private institutions with privileged groups. The spatialization of the education choice involves an active process, in which institutions and choosing actors (young people and their families) take part in a complex urban scheme that contributes to reproducing previous inequalities despite the development of policies that attempt at reverting them. We have opted for spatialization of choices rather than spatial choices because it is not about selecting from a range of possibilities: the space intervenes in the way in which the education choice is made through actors' evaluations and perceptions as well as the social inequalities that are embodied in institutions' urban and material space.

The study on education choice spatialization adds complexity and widens the phenomenon of education privatization undergone by Latin-American counties during the last decades, even though this is a global process that affects specific regions of the world and different ways of production and expansion (BALL, 2009). As we have tried to show, reasons are multiple because sectors made their choices based on criteria that also lay down on the changes of urban life, the increase of segregations, and differentiations even within high sectors. Making only mention to education privatization hides these associated processes and homogenizes a heavy institutional diversification. The growth of private education does not occur *in the air* but rather in the territory where actors move, learn and imagine being part of.

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**Sebastián Gerardo Fuentes** holds a PhD on Social Anthropology, Master Degree in Social Sciences with major in education, and teaches Philosophy at high and special schools.