

“El Pueblo: Circulation of a Concept and Imaginaries of a Common World ”

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The Asociación, a.k.a. Los Ñetas, is a group born in the prisons of Puerto Rico in the 1980s. Following different waves of immigration, the group has circulated and developed in the prison system as well as the streets of New York, Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Barcelona (Spain). Since their conception, Los Ñetas have implemented a democratic type of organization, wherein the leader (president) of each chapter is elected and every member has one voice and one vote. Since the mid-1990s, the group has been undergoing a process of pacification.

Introduction: The Multiple Meanings of the Term “Pueblo”

Several studies on ghettos and other spaces of relegation have tended to show how individuals who live in them are marked by anomie and a lack of mobility. Those inhabitants are said to have a restricted relationship to space, confirming Bourdieu’s observation that lack of capital ties one to a place.¹ On a global scale, studies of working-class neighborhoods have brought to light the emergence of a globalized world of ghettos, of spaces of relegation characterized by exclusion and confinement. Though these spaces are somehow connected through a specific imaginary and the circulation of people, they remain closed, circumscribed places in which inhabitants have limited or no mobility at all.

Urban theories travel along with concepts that unravel representations of the world—for instance, the concept of “ghetto” that has become an international metaphor for poor and racially segregated neighborhoods. In this contribution, I analyze the circulation of the *Pueblo* concept based on the history of one group, *Los Ñetas*. Following a historical and multi-sited ethnography, I focus on the evolution of how the Ñetas conceptualizes and uses the term “*Pueblo*.” I argue that the spatial meaning of the concept has grown and expanded its horizons, rendering possible the creation of a *Ñeta world*.

As I trace the evolution of the *Pueblo* concept and the formation of an imaginary of a common world, I try to show how we can reverse our relationship to urban space and understand how this globalization is experienced. This lead to rethink circulations from the perspective of an anthropology of lines, as developed by Tim Ingold.

¹ Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.), *La misère du monde*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1993, p.165.

- *El Pueblo*

El Pueblo is central to the way *Los Ñetas* view themselves. It is a polysemic term whose different uses allow us to grasp the evolution of *Los Ñetas*, both in their organization and in their relationship to the territory. Within the *Asociación*, *El Pueblo* simultaneously refers to the members of the *capítulo*/chapter—the basic organization of *Ñeta* community life—and to its constituting people, namely its assembled and sovereign members. By extension, it denotes the right to vote and the *Asociación*'s democratic principle. Yet the term “*Pueblo*” also designates the territory in which the *capítulo*/chapter is organized. As such, it refers to a space, a people and a political abstraction all at once. Ever since the mid-1990s, however, the imposition of a *Junta Central*—the chapters' controlling structure—in New York and later in Barcelona has deeply altered the way in which the term “*Pueblo*” is conceptualized among *Los Ñetas*—a transformation that has affected the structure of community life as much as the internal ideological apparatus.

In this paper, I describe the evolution of the *Pueblo* concept among *Los Ñetas*, from a notion specifically associated with the local territory and an organizational structure characteristic of *street corner gangs*² to the *Global Pueblo*. My aim is to highlight how changes in the uses of the city have influenced *Los Ñetas*'s understanding of political principles, but also how the centralization process that began in the 1990s has altered the reference territorial scale of the *Asociación*. I show that in the moment *Los Ñetas* transformed their organizational structure, their relationship to the territory and their use of the city also changed, giving birth to an imaginary of a world that would be common to *Los Ñetas* of New York, Barcelona and Guayaquil.

This proposal is based on four years of fieldwork with the *Ñetas* in New York, Barcelona and Guayaquil.

² The term gang is ambiguous. There is no agreement within the social science literature on how to define a gang, although it is largely used by scientist and media, often to categorize some groups and deny their political ground or their community work. Some sociologists have alternatively proposed the term of “Street Organization”, especially for the *Ñetas* or the Latin King. I use the qualification of “gang” only for the period of early 1990, when *Ñetas* members agree themselves that some part of their movement was evolving toward a more “criminal” path. See Brotherton, David, and Luis Barrios. *The Almighty*

1) The History of *Los Ñetas*

The history of *Los Ñetas*, or the *Asociación* as its members also call it, began in the 1980s inside the Puerto Rican prison system. Influenced by pro-independence and socialist prisoners who fell under their protection, *Los Ñetas* adopted the latter's political principles and developed as an informal, prison-based political organization.

Following successive waves of Puerto Rican immigration to the East Coast of the United States, *Los Ñetas* established themselves in the city of New York. The 1990s were marked by the decline of the group's political aspirations and its evolution towards street crime. It is during this period that the *Asociación* was labeled as a gang by public powers, by the media and by its members. Nevertheless, during the same period, some of the leaders of different *Ñeta* groups organized self-education workshops and journeys to Puerto Rico so as to reconnect with the principles and history of the movement. By reorienting themselves towards various political actions, the New York *Ñetas* reorganized themselves and centralized their structure under the auspices of the *Junta Central*.

Around 1993, following the expulsion from the US of two Ecuadorian prisoners who were members of *Los Ñetas*, the group began to spread to Latin America (Chile, Peru, Bolivia) from Ecuador, where it is firmly established today.

Having arrived in Spain via Ecuadorian immigration in the 2000s, *Los Ñetas* implanted themselves in Barcelona and Madrid. In 2006, the Barcelona group organized into a *Junta Central*—following the New York example—and its members went as far as agreeing to become a socio-cultural, sports and music association legally recognized by the Catalan government.

- A Multi-sited Organization

The history of *Los Ñetas* intersects with histories of migration and unfolds in different social, urban and political contexts. Thus, *Ñeta* reality is far from homogeneous, and is embedded in various dynamics. In these different sites, however, *Los Ñetas* present the same organization into chapters (in English), or *capítulos* (in Spanish), which

correspond to sub-groups.³ Several times in the history of the *Asociación*, chapters have met to form a *Junta Central*, namely a structure to centralize and supervise actions. In these chapters, or in the *Junta Central*, each position is filled via elections by all group members, who are called *guerreros*. Every *guerrero* has the right to speak at group meetings, as well as that of proposing to remove elected officials. There is no formal discrimination against women, as many have been *primero* (president) de chapters/*capítulos*, who are otherwise predominantly male.

After a first period in which *Los Ñetas* emerged in Puerto Rico, two periods can be distinguished. The first one extends from the implantation of *Los Ñetas* in the streets of New York—from the late 1980s to the years 1993, 1994, and even 1995—while the second runs from 1994-1995 to the period of my investigation (2011-2015).

2) In Defense of the Turf: The Territorialization of *El Pueblo*

The first period is defined by the occupation of a specific territory—the turf,⁴ by gang wars around the defense of this territory, and by conflicts with the police. This period can be designated by the concept of “street politics” developed by Asaf Bayat⁵ to describe the conflicts that take place in the streets between individuals, or between groups and the authorities. In Bayat’s view, it is this battle for the control of public space that allows for the formation of collective identities and solidarities. *Los Ñetas* appeared in the streets of New York in the early 1990s, at a time when Hip Hop culture was rapidly expanding. Most members were immersed in this culture and helped to produce it. Having formed around Hip Hop, *Los Ñetas* have integrated some of its values and modes of organization. The question of the territory—the turf—is central to the Hip Hop movement, whether in the physical occupation of street corners during block parties, in the tagging of the territory, or in the abstract conception of the territory that prevails in cyphers—i.e., the dance circles. In the early 1990s, the *Ñeta* chapters

York: Columbia University Press, 2004. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10183495>.

³ In the rest of this paper, I will refer to *Ñeta* groups in New York as chapters, and to *Ñeta* groups in Spain or Ecuador as *capítulos*.

⁴ The Urban Dictionary defines the concept of turf as “An area (neighborhood) that a street gang calls its own.”

⁵ Bayat, Asef, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

were thus organized around highly specific territories. Some represented only a street corner, while others were larger and spread over several blocks. At this specific time in their history, *Los Ñetas* might well have corresponded to what W. F. Whyte defined as “street corner gangs” in his work on Boston in the early 1950s,⁶—i.e., gangs that are embedded in a particular locality and that protect their territory against other gangs. The notion of defensive space, which was developed by Hagedorn to describe spaces defended by gangs and in which an identity of resistance⁷ is formed, highlights the importance of these spaces.

This period was marked by great organizational fluidity, each chapter differing in its organization and mode of community life. It was also punctuated by turf wars between the Latin Kings and *Los Ñetas*. Affected by the crack epidemic and the repressive zero tolerance policies of the 1980s and 1990s, *Los Ñetas* oscillated between legality and illegality.

In 1992, several chapters had already emerged in the Bronx. A total of 33 chapters, bringing together between 500 and 700 members for the South Bronx alone, were created between 1990 and 1993. Scattered throughout the Bronx, these 33 chapters were identified with a specific territory, and members lived in the area of influence of the chapter that “held” a territory.

It was up to the people (*el pueblo*) to vote and to decide who would be its president. Elections were held at the level of each chapter independently of the others.

In the early 1990s, *Los Ñetas* were characterized by a particular use of urban space. Participating as they did in endless gang wars, chapters were linked to each other only through their common name or their personal connections. If there was any cohesion among *Los Ñetas* at the urban level, it was more linked to the name (I am *Ñeta*) and to a lifestyle than to a stated political ideology. “Being *Ñeta*” meant belonging to a group and showing its colors.

⁶ William Foote Whyte, a sociologist of the Chicago school, was the first to use this concept in his study of street gangs organized around a street corner in Boston. See: Whyte, William Foote. *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

⁷ Hagedorn, John. *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

3) From the Chapter to the *Junta Central*: Centralization and Circulation

In the mid 1990s, a second period began for the *Asociación*, one marked by centralization, a return to original political values, group legalization, and internationalization.

1994 saw the creation of a *Junta Central*. Under the name *Tri State*, the latter oversaw all two thousand New York *Ñetas*. Every member of the South Bronx *Junta* attended the meetings, but only a dozen held a position in the *comitiva ejecutiva*—i.e., the executive hierarchy. The latter were elected by a majority vote of all New York chapter members.

From 1994 onwards, the *Junta Central* gradually imposed itself among New York chapters by intervening directly in their organization and daily life, namely by unifying them. Thus, between 1994 and 1995, the number of chapters went from 33 to 26, then to 21, and eventually to no more than 13. Some of the smaller ones were closed. Members of these new chapters now came from all sectors of the Bronx, well beyond the group's original territory, as the chapters no longer belonged to a nearby territory. They were no longer restricted to one or several blocks and their activities were outsourced. The point was no longer to represent or even defend a territory, especially now that the *Junta Central* prevented the chapters from adopting the name of their own neighborhood. By coming together in this way, *Los Ñetas* deterritorialized and lost some form of territorial identity. The turf, which had to be defended against invaders, was no more. This centralization signaled a fundamental turn in the history of the New York *Ñetas*, as their structure shifted from being of the street corner type to being more centralized and hierarchical. While this shift led, among other things, to pacification, it mainly helped the group bond around the reaffirmation of political struggle.

Indeed, by removing themselves from turf wars, *Los Ñetas* were able to welcome the political reconfiguration proposed by their leaders. This new relationship to the territory transformed even the group's "gang" identity. The use of space itself was consequently transformed, as the point was no longer to "hold the block," but to hold educational meetings requiring a quiet and isolated space, one kept secret from police and other groups and in which members could sit in a circle.

With the organization of a *Junta Central*, it is also the democratic functioning of the

group that was transformed and institutionalized, as all New York members now came together to elect the president of the *Junta*. The point was no longer to let the members of each chapter do as they saw fit, but to set up a monitoring and formalization system through ensuring that all groups followed the same principles. Yet while democracy had up to now a substantial, existential dimension,⁸ which placed one's "way of being" at the heart of *Ñeta* identity, the need for clear elections so as to avoid conflict prompted the formalization of electoral procedures and of the organization's structure. As the *Junta Central* imposed itself, a new political culture was formed. Centralization led to the formalization and institutionalization of the *Asociación*'s democratic procedures. It also enabled the group to go from being a "street corner gang" to being a "political force." The loss of the turf allowed the *Asociación* to remove itself from the gang wars and forced it to reframe its internal identity. It is in fact at this moment that the *Junta Central* and its leaders pushed for a "return to the essence" and history of the group, framing the narrative built around it through a process of educational return.

4) Internationalization and Circulation

This rescaling and centralization paralleled the transplantation of *Los Ñetas* beyond New York. Even more importantly, the reformulation of the *Asociación*'s political principles helped put them into circulation. As early as 1993, *Los Ñetas* appeared in Ecuador via two former Ecuadorian prisoners who belonged to the group during their incarceration at Rikers Island. In the 2000s, the *Asociación* traveled again through massive Ecuadorian immigration to Spain, and more widely to Europe, with *capítulos* opening in Barcelona and later in Madrid.

The circulation of concepts, values and modes of organization was strongly facilitated by the twin process of deterritorialization and centralization initiated a few years earlier in New York. The latter enabled the standardization of *Ñeta* values and their "applicability" in contexts as diverse as Guayaquil in Ecuador and Barcelona in Spain,

⁸ On this topic, see the works of Cornel West on substantial democracy: West, Cornel, *Race Matters*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

--- *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.

--- *Tragicomique Amérique: démocratie et impérialisme*, Paris: Payot, 2005.

and by a variety of people, mostly Ecuadorians. The progressive deterritorialization of the *Asociación*'s political principles and the disappearance of the turf helped to unmoor these principles from local specificities,⁹ thus paving the way for their dissemination in other contexts. This was the case for the values of democracy, education, or, even more deeply, the notion of “being *Ñeta*.”

In 2006, during a trip to Barcelona, the spokesperson for *Los Ñetas* conveyed to the leaders of *Los Ñetas* in Spain his experience of normalization—of rules, of the organization—as well as a whole political apparatus—anti-imperialism, socialism, anti-colonialism—that was no longer tagged to the territory of South Bronx, nor even that of New York. It could thus be easily readapted according to local specificities, thanks to the efforts of a *Junta Central* that was able to carry out a new way. *Los Ñetas* of Barcelona then followed the same path of centralization and legalization as those of New York.

Conclusion: a *Global Pueblo*

- The *Ñeta World*

The process described above accounts for the constitution of a *Global Pueblo*, a transnational entity built on a global common which is emerging from this twin process of deterritorialization and internationalization. Thus, *Los Ñetas* in Spain or in Ecuador consider that they belong to the same *Pueblo* as *Los Ñetas* in New York. Together yet living in their respective cities, they contribute to the global existence and destiny of the *Asociación*, thereby renewing the sense of belonging to a *Pueblo*. This circulation of values, practices and political principles, as well as their adaptation in different contexts, is a central step in the rescaling of the *Pueblo* concept and the establishment of a *Global Pueblo*. This concept has, in fact, undergone the same series of processes—

⁹ In an article dealing with mechanisms for the transnational transfer of public policies and the circulation of social movements, Ancelovici and Jenson describe the process of standardization that allows for transnational transfers. See Ancelovici Marcos, and Jane Jenson, “La standardisation et les mécanismes

centralization, deterritorialization, circulation—as the *Asociación*, shifting from a strong and exclusive identification with the turf to a deterritorialized and hence unmoored conceptualization of the specificities of the South Bronx and of life in the New York ghetto. Yet the relationship to the territory remains, because the *Global Pueblo* participates every time in the *here* and *now*. The life and identity of the *Asociación* no longer depends on a specific space, but on several interrelated spaces—what I have called the *Ñeta World*.

Ultimately, our examination of the *Pueblo* concept brings us to the understanding of a particular world. This concept circulates, mutates and adapts in function of places, creating as it deploys itself an imaginary and a topography specific to *Los Ñetas*.

Here I use the metaphor of the world, drawing on the interactionist approach developed by the American sociologist Howard Becker in his book *Art Worlds*.¹⁰ According to Becker, the world is expandable and founded on different actors' awareness of the existence of others.¹¹ The world “is” not, but fabricates itself, as the American philosopher Nelson Goodman¹² observes. Thus the world is apprehended as a construction—or rather, a perpetual reconstruction—and not as a given.

The metaphor of the world, and of the worlds, only hold up when these are apprehended as a situation, in the sense that something common is created and parties agree that something common is occurring. The world is the situation of awareness of the existence of others, and of the formation of a common (shared meanings¹³). Thus the *Ñeta World* is a global situation of co-presence wherein a common is created across multiple sites. This situation does not imply stable spatial coordinates, but imaginary and temporal ones that are comprehensible for the actors involved.

What is needed here is not so much a term-to-term comparison between my research

du transfert transnational,” *Gouvernement et action publique* 1, no 1 (2012): p. 37-58.

¹⁰ Becker, Howard Saul, Pierre-Michel Menger, and Jeanne Bouniort. *Les mondes de l'art*. Paris: Flammarion, 1988.

¹¹ In the work of Becker, the metaphor of the World is neither spatial nor cultural. Rather, it concerns collective action, namely that which people do together.

¹² Goodman, Nelson, *Manières de faire des mondes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2006.

¹³ Mitchell, J. Clyde, and Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, *The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relationships Among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia*, Manchester: Published on Behalf of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute by the Manchester University Press, 1956.

fields, but a framing of issues on a global scale that makes use of interdisciplinarity.¹⁴ Following Roy,¹⁵ I argue that globalization is at once a technique of interrogation and an object of study. This is why I chose to give priority to the comparison of processes. This program echoes that of Romain Bertrand,¹⁶ for whom studying contact situations requires developing a “flexible thematic exploration” that goes beyond a rigid, overlooking structural comparison to understand and trace universes of meanings and practices. I draw on the astronomical description approach,¹⁷ which tries to map movement and to describe the gravitational forces involved.

- Concluding remarks and prospects

The shift to the *Junta Central* in New York has led to the greater mobility of *Ñeta* members, who are now accustomed to considering the entire metropolis as their field of struggle. This challenges depictions of immobility and confinement that characterize studies of marginalized ghetto populations.

On the one hand, in their current state, analyses of gangs, ghettos and marginalities do not enable us to see the circulations inside and outside those social worlds. Centered on explaining anomie and the lack of capacity, these theories have spread to explain all spaces of relegation without taking into account the experiences of those who live in these neighborhoods. On the other hand, analyses of globalization in terms of networks (Action Network Theory) paint a picture of the world as a series of connected points. Thus, while they criticize a highly areolar depictions of the city (linked to a pre-defined geographic space), they remain attached to segmented, even micro spaces¹⁸.

I argue here that the focus should be not so much on spaces of relegation, but on

¹⁴ Peter John, Karen Mossberger, Susan E. Clarke, Margit Mayer, and Julie-Anne Boudreau, “Social Movements in Urban Politics: Trends in Research and Practice,” in Karen Mossberger, Susan E. Clarke, and Peter John, *The Oxford Handbook of Urban Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁵ In his text, Roy refers to “transnationalism,” whereas I use the term “globalization.” See Roy, Ananya, “Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship: Transnational Techniques of Analysis,” *Urban Affairs Review* 38, no. 4 (2003): 463-91; Roy, Ananya and Aihwa Ong. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

¹⁶ Bertrand, Romain, *L'histoire à parts égales: récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident, XVIe-XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Éd. Du Seuil, 2011.

¹⁷ Anderson, Benedict R. O'G, *Les bannières de la révolte: anarchisme, littérature et imaginaire anticolonial: la naissance d'une autre mondialisation*, Paris: La Découverte, 2009.

experiences in the margins. In other words, the point is no longer to grasp how space creates margins, but to describe experiences of (social, administrative, political) marginality in the city. It is this focus on experience that allows for the emergence of the possible. The investigation of experience—both lived and apprehended—helps to avoid the essentialization that has often characterized studies of urban margins (the theory of the culture of poverty being one of the most glaring examples), by describing a process of exclusion that cannot be referred to the category of a marginal being. The example of the *Global Pueblo* I have just described shows what type of circulation exists, as well as what this creates in terms of imaginary and escape from anomie.

Indeed, the question is not only one of circulation between spaces of relegation, a circulation that would merely connect at the global level of ghettos. The point is, more importantly, to create a world in its own right—a world linked to an experience, shared meanings, a propositional capacity and a topography.

To account for this, the aerolar conception of space—whereby space is pre-circumscribed in both its form and content—no longer suffices. Instead, we ought to trace the lines of wayfaring, the processes and the developments. Tim Ingold specifically calls for this anthropology of lines, one that can be used in both urban anthropology and the anthropology of globalization.

According to Ingold, modernity has conditioned us to reflect in terms of inside and outside. Individuals, houses, cities and nations, he notes, are separated between an inside and an outside, and then reconnected. When thinking about the city or the nation state, we are led to trace circles and then to connect them together. According to Ingold, however, the study of lines allows us to reverse this vision by starting not from membranes, but from paths and routes. The point is not to erase the city as a conceptual object, but to disclose it via another image, namely that of the knot. Yet, knots exist through the proliferation of trajectories that bring them to life; as such, they are constantly multiplying. This conception in terms of lines comes with that of an environment. The environment is the area of interpretation in which “our lives and those

¹⁸ Boudreau, JA. (forthcoming), *Global Urban Politics: Informalisation of the State*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

of others are intertwined.”¹⁹ Viewed in this way, neighborhoods are no longer simply the surroundings of individuals who dwell in them, but “a domain of entanglement.”

According to Citton and Walentowitz, who devoted a study to Ingold’s anthropology, “within this entanglement of intertwined paths that are continuously stretched in one place and mended in another, beings develop and push along the lines of their relations. This entanglement is the texture of the world.”²⁰ This anthropology of lines echoes the sociology of Julie-Anne Boudreau, who proposes to think about urbanity in a reticular fashion: “Instead of a hierarchical (scalar) or a flat (assemblage) conception of global connections, I would propose emphasizing reticular relations as being spatially and temporally continuous. This global network is constituted of more or less dense nodes (cities). The microscopic or macroscopic vantage points provided in these cities not only provide a framework for reading the world, they also offer a physical and existential sense of location.”²¹

As Ingold explains, this reversal of our way of thinking about circulations and territories allows us to return to more general questions: What does it mean to dwell in a place? What does producing a place entail?

What I have tried to show by tracing the evolution of the term “*Pueblo*” among *Los Ñetas*, and this up to the emergence of a *Ñeta World*, is the way in which *Los Ñetas* inhabit their territory by weaving it through their wayfaring. These lines are not only those of people. They are also those of ideas—for instance, the notion of *Pueblo*—history, imaginaries, agents, matter, etc. Taking these lines into account helps not only to understand how individuals produce and dwell in their environments, but also allows for the emergence of the possible in our studies of space.

¹⁹ p19, Ingold, Tim, Philippe Descola, Michel Lussault, and Benjamin Fau., (2014). *Être au monde, quelle expérience commune ? Débat*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon. See also: Ingold, Tim, and Routledge, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011; Ingold, Tim, and Pierre Madelin. *Marcher avec les dragons*. Bruxelles: Zones sensibles, 2013.

²⁰ Citton Yves, « Pour une écologie des lignes et des tissages », en collaboration avec Saskia Walentowitz, *Revue des Livres*, n° 4, mars 2012, p. 28-39.

²¹ Boudreau, JA. (forthcoming), *Op. Cit.*