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Thomas Pfirsch, Consuelo Araos Bralic

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Urban Kinships

Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City

Thomas Pfirsch and Consuelo Araos

1 The social sciences were long dominated by the notion that cities are places where kinship ties are weakened. Since the seminal works of Emile Durkheim (1892) and Frederic Le Play (1884), followed by the theories of Talcott Parsons (Parsons and Bales 1955), a connection has been made between urbanization, the emergence of the nuclear family and the modernization of society. Sociologists of the Chicago School thus described the contemporary city as a place of individual emancipation and elective ties, as opposed to the inherited solidarities of traditional kinship-based rural communities (Park 1925). From this perspective, transition from rural *communities* to modern urban *societies* relies on the family's ability to form small independent nuclear units, distancing themselves spatially and relationally from the kin group, and increasingly relying on the solidarity of the State, individual rights and the labor market to manage their existence. Although they reversed the causality between modernization and nuclearization, Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group (Laslett and Wall 1973) helped solidify this association by refining the concept of household as an equivalent to family group.

2 Even if the so-called "nuclearization hypothesis" has been challenged since its very beginning, it is still deeply, sometimes implicitly, rooted in contemporary social sciences and academic institutions. A "great divide" (Weber and Dufy 2007) separates the study of kinship – reserved for anthropologists and "exotic" or rural societies – from the study of the city – the favored field site for sociologists and research on the family.

3 Paddling against this current, for several decades a variety of studies have tried to bring kinship back into the study of contemporary cities. They criticized making a direct connection between modernization, urbanization, and family nuclearization. As early as the 1950s, some urban ethnographies, mainly of old centrally located working-class or ethnic areas, showed that while nuclear families in many neighborhoods of European and Northern American cities did not live "with" their kin, they did live "very close" to their extended family, which provided daily mutual help and intense

contact and care (Bott 1957, Willmott and Young 1957, 1968, Gans 1962, Firth et al. 1968, Stack 1974, Segalen 1990, Schwartz 1990). In the 1970s-1990s, large-scale quantitative surveys showed the enduring importance of extra-household "family solidarity" in Northern American and European urban societies (Litwak 1960, Roussel 1976, Rogerson and al. 1993). More recently, qualitative and quantitative work on mobility (Dureau 2015), housing (Bonvalet 2003), ageing (Attias-Donfut and Renaut 1994, Tomassini, Wolf, and Rosina 2003, Hank 2005), and new family patterns including blended families, single-parent families, and families with same-sex parents (Le Gall 2005), have shown that high residential proximity, mutual help and frequent face-to-face contact among non-co-resident kin are not limited to disadvantaged groups and are widespread in contemporary urban societies. Contemporary households are often part of wider kinship configurations of changeable forms that are mobilized according to social needs, lifecycle changes and moral expectations. Kinship has not been marginalized in urban societies, but it has become less normative and is constantly renegotiated and reproduced through more fluid living arrangements. Consequently, several academic journals have produced special issues rethinking the relationship between family and space beyond the "household", "nuclear family" model, which is still the worldwide reference for housing and urban policies (Authier and Bidou 2005, Barou 2006, Gilbert 2016).

"Everyday kinship": bringing kinship back into urban studies

4 This special issue is in line with this recent research, but it focuses on the dimensions that kinship takes in an urban setting, which is still largely unexplored. Indeed, the terms "city" and "space" are rarely deconstructed in studies of the family in urban societies. When it is not used metaphorically, the notion of space is often reduced to the dimension of proximity/distance, especially in quantitative surveys on "family solidarity" (see for instance Rogerson et al. 1993), while its symbolic dimension, systemic character (center/periphery and power relations) and physical aspects are less frequently addressed. While cities are often considered mere contextual variables in the sociology or demography of the family, unchanged by the reconfiguration of the family and having no impact on it, the articles in this special issue explore the co-production of kinship and the city by analyzing them through everyday practices at a local level. They explore how kinship arrangements shape the urban fabric, new residential morphologies, everyday mobility within and outside the city, residential choices and urban social segregation. At the same time, they show how kinship is actually produced in contemporary cities and the key role urban space plays in shaping new patterns of kinship. At a time when cities are dissolving into "the urban" and blended families are re-defining kinship, it is in continuity with constructivist approaches that have recently renewed conceptions of kinship and space. Phenomenological and performative approaches to space from anthropology (Ingold 2000) and human geography (Lussault 2007) come especially to mind, as does socio-anthropological work on "practical" or "everyday kinship" (Carsten 2004, Weber 2005).

5 Indeed, by addressing "urban kinships" (instead of "urban families" or "urban households", for example), this special issue offers a critical review of analytical categories, starting with "family", which has become highly polysemic – referring both

to a domestic group based on co-residence (i.e., household) and a larger group of non-co-resident persons connected by blood and alliance (Yanagisako, 1979). The term "family" seems increasingly unsuitable for understanding contemporary kinship in all its diversity because it remains implicitly tied to the model of the nuclear family and the "urbanization-nuclearization" paradigm, since all new patterns of residential arrangements are described as "families" in reference to the nuclear family and household model. Most articles in this special issue thus speak of "kinship" rather than "family", and refer to anthropological studies of "practical" or "everyday kinship" (see contributions by Pina-Cabral, Léobal, Cortado, Kopper).

6 The approach goes beyond traditional structuralist definitions of kin as a group of persons connected by descent and alliance – blood and law – to focus on a third dimension of kinship: the everyday practical coexistence between persons, whether they live together in the same dwelling or not. "The sharing of everyday life creates a kinship not rooted in filiation or alliance, but in help with no expectations in return, pursuing a common cause, and sharing resources" (Weber 2013: 8). This work shows that the long-term sharing of daily life – especially during childhood and primary socialization – creates a mutualization of material resources for subsistence (Weber 2005) and a long-lasting "sense of mutual being" (Sahlins 2013), a common ontological "relatedness" (Carsten 2004) that *is* kinship. "Kinfolks are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another. Kinsmen are people who live each other's lives and die each other's death" (Sahlins 2013: 28).

7 Though work on everyday kinship is little known in urban studies, it holds promise for connecting the study of urban morphogenesis and practices with contemporary styles of kinship. While the first two dimensions of kinship – descent and alliance – are still strictly regulated by law, everyday living arrangements have become more fluid and free from the residential rules that may prevail in traditional societies (i.e. patrilocality, uxorilocality). The uses of space, in a dynamic interplay between distance and proximity, local rootedness, and large-scale mobility, make it easier for the "free individuals" of contemporary societies to renegotiate kinship rules. It is all the more true in cities, for urban space is highly dense and heterogeneous (Wirth 1938). The conditions of urban life, including the heterogeneity of housing, dense transportation networks and mobility systems, widespread use of digital media, as well as the convergence of highly varied cultural norms and social groups, foster more fluid living arrangements and allow people to be "near" their relatives and "far" from them at the same time. Kinship is thus not marginalized in cities, but more easily renegotiated and re-invented in spatial terms.

Conceptualizing kinship spatialization

8 When kinship relationships are analyzed in the study of urban life, however, they are often viewed as a residual category and conceptualized in negative terms, as unspecified "extra-household" or "extra-family" kin. It is necessary to build new concepts that capture the operational units of everyday kinship in contemporary cities. The articles assembled in this issue not only evidence the relevance of kin relationships that go beyond the boundary of the co-resident family, but conceptualize new categories to identify other levels of urban family organization, while overcoming the family-kinship dichotomy. In line with previous conceptual proposals like "local-family

circle" (Bonvalet 2003) and "*maisonnée*" (Weber 2003, 2005), they propose alternative units of analysis.

9 Combining anthropology and sociology, all of the articles use qualitative and/or ethnographic approaches. They analyze kinship from below, through the observation of everyday practices and special attention to emergent kinship terminologies and native categories referring to the spatial arrangements of kinship – see Clémence Léobal's work on the *bushinengé* words referring to kin spaces, or Thomas Cortado's description of the various words that the Rio de Janeiro working classes use to name the "house", including *meia-agua, comodo, casinha, casa*. The articles also use new academic concepts developed from fieldwork to theorize these urban kin arrangements. Natalia Cosacov uses the French concepts "*système résidentiel familial*" ("family residential systems", see Lebris et ali. 1987, Dureau 2002) and "*configuration résidentielle familiale*" ("family residential configuration", see Pfirsch 2008, Araos 2016, 2019) to describe the mobility of the Buenos Aires middle classes. Since most papers deal with Brazilian or lusophone cities, they widely use the Brazilian concept " *configuraçaõ de casas*" ("configuration of houses") proposed by Louis Marcelin (1999). The latter refers to a group of houses – often spatially close to each other, but not necessarily – inhabited by people connected by everyday cooperation, a sense of belonging and an ideology of mutual "consideration" (*consideraçaõ*), rather than blood ties (see also the papers of Thomas Cortado, João de Pina-Cabral and Clémence Léobal). *Configuraçao de casas* is in line with recent studies that used Elias's "configuration"to describe the spatiality of kinship (Widmer and Jallinoja 2008, Pfirsch 2008, Motta 2014, Araos 2019).

10 In a major contribution, João de Pina Cabral proposes his own concept, "vicinage", to describe basic living arrangements and the "social primary units" of various settings. Drawn from the study of rural communities of South Africa in the 1960s, the author revives the neologism "vicinage" in order to describe practical kinship spatialization in two contemporary urban contexts: the disadvantaged groups of Salvador de Bahia, and the bourgeoisie of Oporto. According to Pina-Cabral, vicinage refers to a network of close and related houses and people, connected by a common "experience of pastness" (p. 2) rather than blood, alliance or mutual help. Indeed the sharing of everyday life creates something more than "care" or "solidarity", favoring the emergence of "continued identities" between the "partible houses" and "partible persons" that belong to the same vicinage. Vicinages are thus "spaces of personal ontogeny" that are not based on "defined groups with well determined boundaries" because "familial sociality is a process of fuzzy constitution" (p. 2). Vicinages "do not constitute areas wholly occupied by a set of relatives – which would be a neighborhood, a quarter or a compound. Rather, they are zones of residential dwelling where there is a greater density of occupation by houses of related people (which are also related houses). The borders of the vicinage are fuzzy and mobile but they are characteristically rooted around one or more central households of the older generation" (p. 21). Such vicinages can be found in many urban and cultural contexts, but often stay invisible to observers, since their moral justification and linguistic description vary from one culture to another and rarely refer to kinship. Thereby, in the upper classes of Oporto, relatedness to the "vicinage" is described as "territorial belonging", while in Bahia's poorer areas it is legitimized as elective friendship.

11 All these concepts are intended to rethink the spatial arrangements of kin beyond the confines of the household and the limits of the "neighborhood" and the "city". They refer to spatially produced groups of practical kinship that represent "intermediate" socio-spatial groups, between households on one hand and larger institutions such as class, unions, associations, communities on the other. The articles show that in many urban contexts, these "vicinages" or "configurations" of kin and houses are more relevant units of analysis than "individuals" or "households" in understanding the making of the city. Residential choices, everyday mobility, and territorial identities are embedded in these intermediate socio-spatial configurations.

How kinship practices shape the city

12 Indeed, while the space of contemporary cities allows the development of kinship, kin arrangements also contribute to shaping urban spaces in return. The articles of this special issue show that kinship produces distinctive urban residential morphologies, such as "semi-cohabitation" systems, similar to those that have been described in western African cities (so-called "family concessions", see Le Bris et al., 1987), southern European cities (Pfirsch 2008, 2009), and Latin American settings (Lomnitz and Lizaur 1987, Araos 2019). In such cities, people frequently do not live *with* their relatives (*co-residence*), but *next door* (*semi-* or *quasi-co-residence*), in independent dwellings located on the same plot or block and sharing common spaces. Several articles focus on the micro-scale of the plot to study how the city and kinship are both constructed from below.

13 Based on a 20-month ethnographic study in Jardim Maravilha, a housing development in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Thomas Cortado's paper analyses how poor families use and gradually reconfigure the plot of land they own to build their urban environment and manage their relationships to kin and neighbors. *Meia-aguas* – rectangular single-story backyard buildings with mono-pitched roofs that inhabitants do not consider "real houses" – play a key role in shaping the "architecture of possible", since they can easily be transformed and moved, allowing very fluid residential arrangements. They are usually built first at the rear of the plot, to leave space for the building of the "real house" at the front, facing the street. *Meia-aguas* may then be abandoned completely, turned into workshops, or given to married children or ageing parents, so that kindred can take care of one another without compromising each other's privacy. In this case, the plot of land becomes the center of a "configuration of houses", in the sense that "the mere fact of living on the same plot creates connections between *families*" (p.20). Those plot-level connections articulate logics of the division of labor according to gender, age and technical skills, as well as materializing the prevailing hierarchical order in the family. "While each house belongs to a different family, the land belongs to a single person, the owner (male or female) of the plot [...]. The owner is also the one who lives in the front, while the oldest son traditionally lives on the floor above and the youngest to the *rear*" (p. 21).

14 However, these "semi-co-residence" arrangements on a single plot are not enclosed or isolated from the rest of the city. While urban ethnographies of the 1950s described kinship as a centripetal force, producing deep local rootedness in "closed", introverted working-class neighborhoods, the articles gathered in this special issue demonstrate that kin spaces are shaped by multi-scalar mobility. They show that ongoing kinship-based residential configurations are also centrifugal forces that produce and orient

residential and everyday mobilities and shape multi-local living arrangements at various scales, within the city (see Natalia Cosacov) and connecting urban zones with their rural peripheries (see Clémence Léobal and Thomas Cortado).

15 Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, Clémence Léobal analyzes the different kinds of mobility linking urban residents of Saint Laurent du Maroni, in French Guyana, to the rural territories from which they came. The author shows that many people in Saint Laurent do not live in a single house. They are part of wider "configurations of houses" that can encompass both sides of the Maroni River and connect coastal cities with rural areas upriver. Within the city, kin do not always live near one another, since they are highly dependent on social housing policy and removals, but they do maintain close ties and a strong common sense of belonging thanks to intense mobility by boat to their rural home villages upriver, called *kampus* (pieces of land with several houses of the same matrilineal kin group located close to the city) and *kondés* (more remote places where they often maintain an ancestral house and graveyard). This regular mobility between old and new residences plays a role in remembering genealogy and rural traditions, and it cannot be understood merely as a transitional pattern for rural migrants adapting to the city, since such multi-local arrangements can be maintained for several generations. They also foster new kinship ties around common building projects and ultimately shape broader collective identities such as that of urban Maroons, "thus calling into question the strict distinction between town and country" (p. 1).

16 Natalia Cosacov's work also focuses on mobility, but among the middle classes of a large metropolis. Based on biographical interviews conducted in Caballito, a middle-class neighborhood in central Buenos Aires, her paper shows that the Argentinian middle classes seek to live close to their relatives so they can see them every day. Residential and daily mobilities are connected, and "even though we are not in the presence of extremely local forms of family proximity on the scale of a street or building" (p. 8), around 40 % of households live in the same neighborhood as some close relatives. Although a norm of neolocality is highly valued by the middle-class groups Cosacov studied, their "residential rationale prioritizes living 'nearby' rather than living 'together'" (p. 1). Focusing on an urban middle-class allows us to break with the well-established idea that residential proximity and intense daily contact of kin is a distinctive feature of disadvantaged groups at one extreme – a "strategy of survival" of the poor (Stack 1974, Meert, Mistiaen and Kesteloot 1997, Hintze 2004) – and highly privileged groups at the other, where powerful kin networks play a key role in the reproduction of the élite (Pfirsch 2009). In most studies, the socially mobile world of the middle class is said to be more dependent on the market and official institutions than on informal support networks in managing its existence (Segalen 2006). On the contrary, the articles in this issue (as well as some previous research: Lomnitz and Lizaur 1978, Araos 2019, 2016) demonstrate that "vicinages", "configurations of houses", and "kin residential systems" can be found in upper class areas (De Pina-Cabral), disadvantaged neighborhoods (Cortado, Kopper) and middle-class districts (Cosacov). Proximity with kin is widespread in urban society, even though actual spatial kin arrangements can vary according to class and neighborhood: "quasi-co-residence" on the same plot seems to be less frequent among the middle class, for which proximity at the neighborhood scale is more common (an observation also made by Araos, 2019).

17 Through this cross-class approach, the articles of the special issue also explore the role of kinship living arrangements in the production of urban social segregation. Recent studies have shown that urban segregation is due not only to housing market factors and public policies, but also to informal kin aggregation strategies that allow urban residents to stay in or return to their original neighborhoods through family channels. Social mobility can thus be "spatially entrapped" thanks to family networks (Maloutas 2004). As Natalia Cosacov implicitly shows in her article on Buenos Aires, kinship configurations can allow residential stability even in cases of social mobility, producing clusters of counter-segregation among macro-trends toward segregation.

Hidden kinship sensibilities

18 Despite their great importance in a variety of social groups, "vicinages" and other urban kinship arrangements are often invisible in official statistics and public policies, and negatively valued by city dwellers themselves. The papers gathered in this issue highlight the prevalence of the nuclear-family ideology that permeates native language, from the profane to the legal and political-institutional. Pina-Cabral notes that this nuclear-family model is so powerful that socio-spatial formations of practical kinship often elude observation and are difficult to describe for researchers and research subjects alike. This "favoured narrative tool" (Pina-Cabral, p. 17) presents kinship relationships using the norms and language of the nuclear co-resident family, partially hiding and keeping implicit other, non-nuclear, non-co-resident sensibilities and forms of practical kinship that do not fit this "official" normative frame (Vignato 2012). In other words, people may express an ideology that they do not necessarily practice. They value the nuclear family, while actually living in and relying on large "configurations of houses" in their everyday lives.

19 As the Cortado and Kopper papers show for Brazil, such a disconnection between two levels of native kinship norms is particularly relevant to urban housing policies that are exclusively oriented according to nuclear-family models. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research conducted among beneficiaries of *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, Brazil's largest housing policy, in Porto Alegre, Moises Kopper analyses how social housing policies try to reshape stigmatized working-class extended families into "decent" nuclear families. Even though they are often part of broad kin-based "configurations of houses", social programs offer poor Porto Alegran households small dwelling units with no regard to the location of their kin. "As a result of Codespa's screening, large households with co-habiting families gave way to smaller kernels of young couples with kids, as well as elderly; only exceptionally were households composed by members of the extended family, such as sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, *padrinhos* and *afilhados*" (p. 16). Neighborhood residents, municipal officials and social workers all share this nuclear family idiom, even though they use large kin networks in their everyday lives and mobilize them to get access to social housing.

The 'Southern turn' in urban kinships studies

20 The special issue addresses various urban contexts, ranging from small towns (Saint Laurent du Maroni) to mid-sized cities (Oporto, Porto Allegre) and global metropolises (Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires), but its major limitation is geographical. Though the call

for papers mentioned no geographical boundaries, all the articles that were received and accepted by the editors, with the exception of Pina-Cabral's work on Oporto, focus on cities of the Global South, or more precisely Southern American cities. This geographical bias may reflect the vitality of recent Latin American research on urban kinship, which produced useful new concepts such as "configuration of houses" or "vicinages". But it is also probably due to the everlasting "great divide" that still opposes Southern cities with strong kinship and Northern cities with weak kinship in academic mainstream (Reher 1998). Kinship is considered relevant only in cities in countries of the Global South, marked by late urbanization, or in particular cultural areas of the Global North characterized by familialistic traditions such as the Mediterranean and "southern" Europe, or ethnic areas of western metropolises. Kinship's return to urban studies thus mainly concerns the Global South, while kinship in cities of the Global North is still considered highly nuclearized. Such culturalist and ethnocentric conceptions must be challenged. As mentioned earlier, while the importance of "extended family" solidarity in Northern America or Europe has been widely studied, the role of kinship in the making of the city is still largely unexplored. We argue that the reason for that is not the marginalization of kinship in cities of the Global North, but rather its invisibilization by a powerful "nuclear family" idiom that orients statistical institutions and public policies. For instance, many surveys on kinship solidarity in Western countries do not include questions about the floor upon which respondents live, thus leaving "quasi-co-residence" invisible. Thus most studies on cities of the Global North are "kinship blind", just as academic research has long been "gender blind". In line with the Southern turn of research, we argue that Northern cities must be reconsidered "from the South", and that the South-North divide is no longer relevant in the context of rapidly emerging "worlding cities" (Roy and Ong 2012) in the so-called Global South, exemplified by Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires in this issue. The Latin American perspective presented in this special issue proposes useful concepts and methods for rethinking the role of kinship in North American and European cities, especially given their current contexts of ageing, Welfare-State restructuring, and "re-familialization" processes (Lister 1994).

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AUTHORS

THOMAS PFIRSCH

Université Polytechnique des Hauts-de-France, UMR Géographie-Cités.

CONSUELO ARAOS

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Instituto de Sociología, CMH France.