Dimensions of the *Piquetero* Experience: Organizations of the Unemployed in Argentina

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Introduction

The emergence of the unemployed movement is one of the richest and most novel experiences in the past decade in Argentina. The socioeconomic transformations that occurred in recent years form the context for this phenomenon, but, as we shall see, those transformations cannot explain its immense size or its peculiar characteristics.

This article aims to present the principal features of the organization and mobilization of the unemployed. The presentation has three parts. In the first, we examine the conditions under which the unemployed movement emerged, its origins and its fundamental trends. In the second, we turn to those common dimensions that cut across all organizations in question (the *piquete*, the "assembly" dynamic, work in communities) regardless of their heterogeneity. This analysis is significant for understanding the organizational success of the *piquetero* experience given the difficulties that generally accompany movements involving the unemployed.

Finally, we attempt to account for the organizations' conflictive relationship vis-à-vis the State as well as their different political positions. In this part, we reflect not only on the present-day dynamic of the movements, but also on the transformations that they have undergone during these volatile years in Argentine politics. Our analysis will outline both the current challenges confronting the *piquetero* organizations, as well as the political prospects they face in the future.

1. Brief genealogy and characteristics of the *piquetero* movement

1.1. The conditions behind the emergence of the organizations of the unemployed
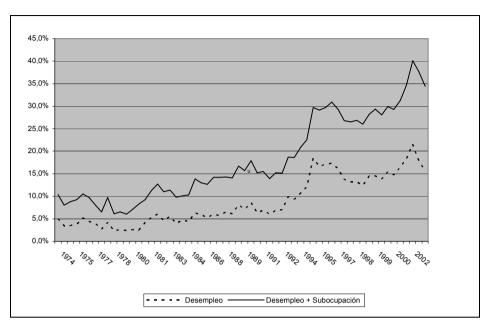
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[1] The present article is based on the authors' book, *Entre la ruta y el barrio. La experiencia de las organizaciones piqueteras* (*Between the Highway and the Neighborhood. The Experience of the* Piquetero *Organizations*), Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2003.

The mid-1990s in Argentina witnessed an explosion in the number of protest-driven roadblocks ("*cortes de ruta*") in the country's interior. The roadblocks, whose protagonists included entire communities, produced the now-popular label "*piquetero*" -- given to organizers of the "*piquetes*", or roadblocks. This label, besides being able to capture the attention of the media and the political system with its expressive force, represented an alternative for those who saw a denomination like "the unemployed" as intolerable. This marks the start of the story of the small, local organizations of unemployed individuals that would later, in most cases, comprise the national-level "federations".

In order to understand the origin of the new processes of organization and mobilization, it is necessary to trace the transformations in the economic, social and political context in Argentina over the last thirty years. These transformations –corollaries to the application of neoliberal policies—completely reconfigured the foundations of Argentine society. This process, marked by increasing poverty levels, vulnerability and social exclusion, began with the last military dictatorship in the 1970s. It deepened between 1989 and 1991 when Carlos Menem came to power, a time in which open-market policies and structural adjustment were vigorously pursued. Finally, the process accelerated after 1995 with the worsening of the economic recession and a drastic increase in unemployment levels.

Figure 1

Evolution of unemployment and hourly under-employment rates, 1974-2003

Source: *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos*. **All individuals covered in the Permanent Household Survey.**

Two important trends related to these transformations stand out in this period. First, the gap between rich and poor is the largest it has been in the last 30 years. Data from December 2003 indicate that, for the whole country, the richest 10% holds 38% of the wealth produced and earns 31 times more than the poorest 10%. Second, the change in the economic model generated a situation in which economic growth coexists alongside growing unemployment.

Table 1

Evolution of GDP and rates of economic activity, employment and unemployment, 1991-2003

Years	Evolution of GDP	Activity	Employment	Unemployment
1991	10,6	39,5	37,1	6,0
1992	9,6	40,2	37,4	7,0
1993	5,9	41,0	37,1	9,3
1994	5,8	40,8	35,8	12,1
1995	-2,9	41,4	34,5	16,6
1996	5,5	41,9	34,6	17,3
1997	8,0	42,3	35,3	13,7

1998	3,8	42,1	36,9	12,4
1999	-3,4	42,7	36,8	13,8
2000	-0,8	42,7	36,5	14,7
2001	-4,4	42,2	34,5	18,3
2002	-10,8	42,9	35,3	17,8
2003	7,3	42,8	36,2	15,6

Source; ECLAC Statistical Annual (Evolution of GDP, percentages based on 1995 prices) and INDEC Permanent Household Survey (values for October of each year except 2003 where data correspond to May, which does not include Greater Santa Fe due to technical problems).

During this period of great change, Argentine society lacked unemployment safety-nets or centers for job training or placement. Just when they were most needed, state unemployment policies were notably absent. There were no policies to compensate the effects of labor "flexibilization" measures or massive firings that accompanied the privatization of state enterprises, not to mention these companies' adjustment to a new open-market context. On the other hand, we should recall that, like the government of Menem, the large unions included under the General Work Federation (CGT), associated with the Peronist party, did not oppose the very neoliberal reforms that virtually annihilated their main support bases. On the contrary, the unions negotiated with the government for their material and political survival and opted to reposition themselves in the new economic and social context. [2]

This combination of factors allows us to begin to respond to the question of why a movement of the unemployed exists in Argentina, a movement whose expansion and relevance has rendered it one of the central actors in Argentine society. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that the emergence of the unemployed movement can also be explained by the existence of a long tradition of organizational politics which were for the most part class-based. The (new) representatives of those bases chose to act and

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[2] During the decade of the 1990s, a new central syndicate was created which opposed the CGT: the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA: Argentine Workers Central), made up of syndicates of state employees and teachers. This union was the only one to opposed the economic reforms and the only one to completely break off ties to the Justicialist Party (the official name of the Peronist party).

construct outside of –and in opposition to—traditional union-based structures which were largely linked to the Justicialist party.[3]

Seen from this perspective, the emergence of the organizations of the unemployed has as its backdrop both the crisis and the weakening of Peronism among popular sectors.[4] This transformation did not have only one sequence, and furthermore, it is far from appearing irreversible. Indeed, during the first half of 1990s (Menem's presidency) the changes in popular sectors were complementary to Peronist political culture. Not until after 1996 did the new forms of organization and mobilization become confrontational and conflictive vis-à-vis Peronism. Starting in that period, the territory surrounding Buenos Aires (known as the "*conurbano bonaerense*") became the scene of confrontation --a "hand-to-hand" struggle between the incipient organizations of the unemployed on the one hand, and the structure of local governments and representatives of the Justicialist party on the other.

1.2 The dual origin of the piquetero *organizations and their principal alignments*

From its very beginning, the *piquetero* movement was never homogenous; rather, it represented different organizational traditions and political and ideological currents. In fact, the formation of the *piquetero* movement has two fundamental origins. On the one hand, it has roots in the disruptive, evanescent and at times unifying actions of the roadblocks and popular uprisings observed in the country's interior starting in 1996. These uprisings resulted from a new communitarian social experience that appears to be linked to the both the collapse of regional economies and the accelerated privatization of state enterprises in the 1990s. On the other hand, the emergence of the *piquetero* movement recalls the territorial and organizational actions carried out in Greater Buenos

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[3] In this sense, the *piquetero* movement, comprised of organizations that position themselves outside –and in opposition to—the Justicialist party structure, gets back to the roots of the sort of class-based syndicalism that developed mainly in industrial centers in the late 60s. These experiences were combated by Peronism itself from its position of power (1973-1976), before they were repressed and disjointed by the military dictatorship. For more on this subject, see James (1990) and Torre (1989). The leaders of the syndicate group *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (CCC), with links to the maoist-inspired Communist Revolutionary Party, inherited these kinds of experiences, and the CCC soon became the organization of the unemployed. Likewise, most leaders of autonomous or party-based union groups also claim to belong to this tradition.

[4] See Martucelli and Svampa (1997).

Aires. These actions were related to the slow, yet profound, societal transformations among popular sectors, which stemmed from a growing process of deindustrialization and impoverishment that began in the 1970s.

In other words, we cannot comprehend the genesis or the later development of the *piquetero* movement without first recognizing this dual origin. In the first place, the conflicts generated in the country's interior represent the initial point in which three factors became associated with each other, initiating an important transformation in the annals of mobilization in Argentine society: the new identity –the "*piqueteros*"--, a new format for protesting –roadblocks--, a new way of organizing –the assembly—and a new demand –the "*planes sociales*" (means-tested financial assistance programs). Secondly, the forms of collective action emanating from Greater Buenos Aires contributed decisively to the development of new models for organizing on a national scale. Likewise, they aided in the production of new forms of activism which were intimately associated with work in the neighborhoods. In sum, the movement represents the convergence between, on the one hand, disruptive forms of action and the *piquetero* identity, the assembly model and "*puebladas*" [5] coming out of the country's interior, and on the other hand, organizational frameworks and a territorial model of activism that were paradigmatic of certain regions, particularly La Matanza and the southern portions of Greater Buenos Aires. This convergence helps to explain not only the *piquetero* movement's richness and diversity, but also its inevitable fragmentation.

Within the *piquetero* movement there is growing heterogeneity and an increasing number of divergent currents. The different political orientations are evident by examining the most important organizations of unemployed. These orientations can be understood on the basis of three main strategies of organization and mobilization that are present in some form in all of the groups that were formed in recent years: a union-based strategy, strategies linked to political parties, and strategies based on territorial alliances. First, the organizational tactics of the *piqueteros* bear witness to the strong influence of unions, either via the direct intervention of the syndicates in the unemployed organizations –as in the case of the *Federacion de Tierra y Viviendo* (FTV, Land and Housing Federation), with

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[5] By "puebladas" we refer to the popular uprisings that followed the repression carried out by security forces (provincial police and gendarmerie) in order to do away with the roadblocks. In almost all cases, these episodes ended in the retreat of the security forces, which pulled back when challenged by the communities that choose to confront them.

links to the Argentine Workers Central—or simply by the presence of individuals who have a history of union activism.

A second organizational strategy is evident where political parties on the left have lent their resources to the *piquetero* movement. Groups of unemployed such as the *Polo Obrero* (dependent on the Trotskyist-based *Partido Obrero*), *Barrios de Pie* (linked to the *Patria Libre*, a leftist populist party), *Movimiento Territorial de Liberación* (part of the Argentine Communist Party) or the *Movimiento Teresa Vive* (with links to the Trotskyist *Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores*) are paradigmatic examples in which the unemployed organization is a subsidiary of a given party's political orientation. Here, institutional and electoral politics becomes a clear objective to be reached.

Third, many *piquetero* organizations were generated around territorial ties, usually neighborhood-based leadership structures, which, while they may have had activist antecedents, remained completely disconnected from the union- or party-based ties or influence. Here, some examples are the different *Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados* (MTD) that make up the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón* or even the different movements of unemployed that were formed in the country's interior but decided not to join any of the larger national groups –such as the emblematic *Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados de General Mosconi* (UTD) in Salta.

In many cases, the different strategies of political action are strongly intermingled within the organizations. Such is the case with the *Corriente Classista y Combativa* (CCC), which has a strong union influence with respect to its origins, but at the same time many of its members are also active in the maoist-affiliated *Partido Comunista Revolucionario* (PCR). The *Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez* (MTR), a Che Guevara-inspired independent group, or even the controversial *Movimiento de Jubilados y Desocupados* (MJD -- Movement of the Retired and Unemployed), both strong social movements with a high level of media exposure, also represent cases in which the territorial and political strains are intertwined and in permanent tension.

1.3. Key moments in the history of the mobilization of the unemployed

The history of the *piqueteros* has several different stages. The first organizations appeared between 1996 and 1997, initiating a conflictive relationship with the Peronist

government of C. Menem, and in many cases, they fought "hand-to-hand" against the party's local clientelist structures. They rapidly gained autonomy with the Alianza government and established themselves as a recognized political actor and an indisputable political pressure force.

It is necessary to take into account that the only systematic policy carried out by any government since the 1990s aimed at confronting the growing employment crisis was the *Plan Trabajar* (Work Plan), launched in 1996. Even after being reformulated in 2002 into what is now known as the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* (Heads of Household Plan), this policy was always ambiguous with respect to its objectives: it constituted neither unemployment insurance, nor targeted financial assistance, nor job relocation policies, but rather, it attempted all these at once. [6] The "*planes*" (subsidies) were the nucleus around which the government structured its policies aimed at containing social disruption, and over the years they became the centerpiece of the negotiations with the organizations to put an end to the roadblocks. Hence, by October of 2002, the average number of subsidies had grown from an initial count of approximately 140,000 active subsidies in 1997 (with a maximum of more than 200,000 beneficiaries in October of that same year) to 1,300,000. Current estimates indicate that the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* reaches some 1,700,000 people. It is important to note that only a small proportion of these social plans are directly controlled by the *piquetero* organizations.

Table 2
Number of Employment Program Beneficiaries in Argentina
Annual Average 1997-2002

Year	Beneficiaries
1997[*]	138,593
1998	112,076

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[6] The main characteristics of *Plan Trabajar* were the following: municipalities or NGOs were required to submit neighborhood improvement projects, whose only condition was that they be of "social relevance," aimed at improving residents' quality of life. The initial subsidy stood at 200 pesos per month (equivalent to 200 dollars at the time, but presently 76 dollars). In return, individuals committed to work for a period of up to six months, with a limited possibility for renewal. Lastly, the initiation of the projects was co-financed with resources provided at the local level (material, human resources, equipment).

1999	105,895
2000	85,665
2001	91,806
2002	1,398,129

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social.

Note: * Data start in May 1997.

The movement's founding stage begins with the first wave of mobilizations, that is, with the legendary roadblocks and *puebladas* in Neuquén, Salta and Jujuy during 1996, 1997, and ending in 1998. At this time, the two largest union-based currents of the *piquetero* movement were formed in the west of Greater Buenos Aires (especially in La Matanza) which would later on form the bulk of the nation-wide mobilizations. Here, we refer to the *Federación de Tierras y Viviendas* (FTV) and the CCC (*Corriente Classista y Combativa*), which from 1998 to 2003 constituted one unified block, characterized by a strong tendency toward negotiation and institutionalization. In this first period, the independent and autonomous groups (MTR and MTD) also emerged in the south of Greater Buenos Aires. These last groups, due to a lack of support, ended up bearing the brunt of the unequal confrontations with both the clientelistic structures of the Justicialist Party and with the police.

Also during this first stage, an established link with the State is consolidated. Faced with this new kind of protest for more jobs, the government responded, in different instances, either with repression or through the use of assistencialist social policies. On the one hand, repression was either direct or indirect (direct repression in the country's interior, and indirect repression in which leaders and protesters are held legally responsible for the crime of blocking streets and thoroughfares), and on the other hand, the government multiplied and focused its mechanisms for territorial intervention, mainly through the manipulation of targeted social policies (meaning that the distribution of subsidies was determined by the conflict and not by any technical criteria established in the policies themselves). The central importance of the assistencialist policies rendered the *piquetero* organizations dependent on the State. Acquiring and maintaining government funds ("*planes sociales*") continues to constitute the first and foremost resource with which mobilized actors are able to respond to the needs of their members

through work at the community level and, at the same time, to provide themselves with a minimal structure in order to act and develop at other levels. Therefore, aside from any divergence in terms of political strategies or ideological conceptions among the different groups of unemployed, dependence on the State remains a common and distinguishing factor.

The second stage is marked by the *piquetero* organizations' entrance onto the national political scene as a central social actor. This agitated period, characterized by an intense wave of protests, begins in 1999 during the last years of C. Menem's government and comes to a close at the end of 2001, just before the fall of the Alianza government (1999-2001). During this second stage of growth and visibility, the *piquetero* organizations became increasingly autonomous. However, unlike with the first rounds of social disruption in 1996 and 1997, the growing cycle of protest in 2000, 2001, and 2002 is concentrated to a much greater degree in the traditional national political spaces –the City of Buenos Aires, Greater Buenos Aires and the larger cities in the country's interior. At least in the beginning, the *piquetero*s demands were clearly heard. This stage comes to an end with two *piquetero* assemblies in La Matanza, one in July and the other in September of 2001, which for the two largest groups (the two union-based organizations, the FTV and the CCC) represented a possible unification of the movement and a consolidation of its leadership.[7] Nevertheless, the failure of these encounters brought to light the differences separating the various organizations, both in terms of expectations and objectives, and put an end to any possibility of forming a unified *piquetero* movement. Finally, once the fracture was consolidated, the *Bloque Piquetero Nacional* (National Piquetero Block) appeared on the scene in December of 2001. This block brought together all those independent groups and political and party-based organizations that would later confront successive national governments, especially after the fall of F. De la Rua.

2. The dimensions of the *piquetero* experience

2.1. The heterogeneity of the social bases

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[7] In this period, there was such an asymmetry between the different organizations and the rest –in terms of mobilization capacity and political influence—that it was critical for the assembly to be able to set itself up as a true forum for negotiation.

When analyzing the *piquetero* experience, the heterogeneity of the social bases that made up the movements of the unemployed is immediately apparent. The cleavages fall along three dimensions: social, generational, and gender-related.

In the first place, then, there is social heterogeneity. Even if it is indeed true that the unemployed share certain life conditions and basic common experiences, these individuals come from diverse backgrounds and capabilities, and they also possess different cultural and symbolic resources. In general, in Argentina the experience of unemployment is situated between two extremes. At one extreme, the experience can be long-term, meaning individuals may suffer permanent instability and precariousness (alternating erratically between periods of employment –formal or precarious—and periods of unemployment). At the other extreme, the unemployment experience can be more recent, associated with a stable job that is abruptly interrupted. In any case, whether from a short- or medium-term perspective, the erosion of the traditional social and cultural frameworks that made up the industrial workers' world –political (the Peronist identity), economic (access to consumption) and social (social rights, social protection, job stability)-- became inevitable. Nevertheless, one of the crucial elements of the experience is not so much the inescapability of the crisis and the disappearance of the "traditional" model, but rather the distance –both personal and collective—that forms between the "original" structure and the actors' life experiences.

A second facet of heterogeneity is the gender cleavage, as it is impossible to ignore that the majority of the members and activists in the *piquetero* organizations are women. Also, it is the women who hold the bulk of the administrative and staff duties, not to mention that many women play a fundamental role in other traditionally masculine areas, such as security. Still, besides the undeniable weight they have carried from the beginning, very few women have risen to national leadership positions; instead, they occupy roles in the "middle ranks" and/or as regional representatives. The fact that women are underrepresented in these positions is not only due to the patriarchal features characteristic of popular sectors, but also to the fact that most of those who come from activist circles, both political and syndical, are men. The most active women in the organizations, on the other hand, do not usually come from a political or syndical

background, although in certain cases they have experience in organizing at the neighborhood level.

Thirdly, young people must be recognized as an important part of the organizations' social bases. In a powerful context of economic crisis and deinstitutionalization, young people are the object of triple exclusion. First, most of them have had scarce contact with educational and political institutions. Second, they are often victims of harassment and, in extreme cases, repression by security forces. Finally, the majority of young people have no work experience whatsoever. Given this lack of work experience, and hence the breakdown in the culture of work, the *piquetero* organizations offer alternative spaces in which to develop discipline and solidarity; on the one hand, through work in the community, intimately linked to the satisfaction of basic needs (community gardens, soup kitchens, used clothing distribution, among others); and on the other hand, through the assembly experience.

2.2. The piquetero *identity and common patterns of action*

Even in this context of sharp heterogeneity, and aside from any differences that might be present among the different *piquetero* organizations, they are united by a common element. That element can be defined as a *piquetero* identity, whose source is none other than a story –a narrative—started in 1996, in which the experience of the *piqueteros* is told. [8] Every testimony –not only interviews, but also journalistic reports— concurs that the narrative begins with the roadblock in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul, where the name *piqueteros* was first heard. The story links three fundamental concepts: first, the name –*piqueteros*— the principal agent of the actions; second, and most centrally, the precise action of actually blocking roads –*piquetes*—; and third, the motives and consequences of those actions, specifically, the link connecting the economic model and crisis, the generalized demand for dignified jobs, and the receipt and administration of government subsidies through *planes sociales*. This narrative is what gives meaning to the events surrounding the whole *piquetero* experience and which, in the end, explain the

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[8] On the use of the notion of narrative identity –originally Developer by Paul Ricoeur—as applied to the study of social movements: Polletta, F., "'It Was Like a Fever...' Narrative and Identity in Social Protest", in *Social Problems*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Mayo 1998 y Polleta, F., "Contending Sotories...", in *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1998.

emergence of the unemployed organizations as a consequence of the breakdown of the country's productive apparatus.

On the other hand, the *piquetero* experience is built upon a space in which a common pattern of action has been defined. From our perspective, this pattern is made up of, firstly, the *piquete* or roadblock, secondly, the *assembly* process, thirdly, references to the *pueblada*, and finally, *community-based work* developed once a demand was created (the *planes sociales*).

In the first place, we must remember that the *piquete*, as a new method of action, stretched the boundaries for social conflicts, essentially inserting them within a crude dimension that places material life conditions above all else. It is no coincidence that part of the *piquete*'s disruptive power comes from this radical demand, which is at the same time a demand resulting from a situation of urgency and desperation that links the problem of unemployment with the visible problem of hunger. As a direct action that occupies public space, the *piquete* has several different manifestations. It can be either partial or total, it can be directed at a specific business or entity ("*corte de acceso*"), it can take the form of a sit-in ("*acampe*") in front of governmental offices, or even a takeover or occupation.

It is necessary to point out that the assembly process, the second common element, is characteristic of the popular uprisings that have shaken Argentina during the '90s. Of course, the experience of the Cutra-Có in 1996 marked the start of a powerful assembly dynamic that would soon be incorporated into the practices of other large movements of the period (Tartagal-Mosconi, Jujuy, Corrientes). Later, it would be used in various organizational formats within the *piquetero* group structures. Finally, the dynamic would be manifest in the assembly process initiated in the City of Buenos Aires and in other parts of the country following December of 2001. A new political cycle opened later in the distant south, along National Highway 22, with one lone slogan, "¡Que venga Sapag!" ("Let Sapag come!")[9]. This same cycle came to a close, somehow, in the Plaza de Mayo and in the National Congress, in the very centers of the executive and legislative powers, with a multitude chanting the slogan "¡Que se vayan todos!" ("Leave! All of them!"). Although both assembly experiences start from the idea of distance or

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[9] Sapag was Governor of the Province of Neuquén at the time. He belonged to the *Movimiento Popular Neuquino* (Popular Movement of Neuquén), a provincial party with strong populist characteristics.

dislocation between the political system and society, they do not, however, share the same conceptions of political linkages. The dual experience of the assemblies in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul carried with them no demand other than that of inclusion by means of the reformulation of an integrative social and economic project. On the other hand, in December of 2001, the disenchanted multitude demanded separation from the representative political system, a claim which was, at its most extreme, an affirmation of the autonomy of social ties, and was expressed through a combination of "solidarity" networks comprised of different social and community organizations.

Thirdly, a fundamental element of the common patterns of action within the *piquetero* movement has to do with the dual role placed by the *puebladas*. From the beginning of the mobilizations in the country's interior, for the organizations of unemployed, the *puebladas* represented a sort of guarantee with which to confront the repression that awaited them in response to the roadblocks. In this sense, the experience in the locality of General E. Mosconi (in the Province of Salta) is paradigmatic. There, the political emergence of the Union of Unemployed Workers (UTD) was directly related to the capacity to mobilize the entire town in response to the repression of the roadblocks. As in times of war, time and again the people of Mosconi were awakened by sounds of sirens and bells whenever the highways began to be cleared. For many organizations and committees of unemployed (at least in the cases of Salta, Neuquén and Jujuy), these situations of mass mobilization –"the whole town is blocking the highway," as a federal judge put it—represented a possibility to confront the repression by the State. In this way, they were able to add weight to their negotiation capacity. On the other hand, even in the places where the organization processes of groups of unemployed did not share the same characteristics as in Mosconi, the *pueblada* was still a clear sign of a new kind of relationship among the inhabitants.

Finally, the fourth element involves the different kinds of *planes asistencial-laborales* (government programs including subsidies and/or jobs, whose paradigmatic example is the aforementioned *Plan Trabajar*), which make possible the existence of many *piquetero* organizations. Historically, all of the roadblocks were lifted in exchange for "packages of plans" (provincial or national), or in some cases, goods. Hence, the "plans" represented a compromise solution, a sort of weak equilibrium achieved in the context of necessity, given the significant relative weakness of the organizations. Nevertheless, even

if the mobilization was initially sporadic, it became more and more massive and recurrent with time, making it possible for some groups to manage to consolidate large volumes of plans in the second half of the nineties. On the other hand, the organizations –and especially their bases—began to perceive these plans as rights or entitlements rather than as government assistance.

That said, since 1999, once the organizations achieved direct control of the *planes sociales*, the work required in exchange for subsidies (4 hours of work per day) became oriented toward community work in the neighborhoods. After that, the plans began to be discussed in relation to another fundamental problem: what, in this context, constitutes dignified and legitimate, or "genuine" work? Without a doubt, the answer to this important question began to reveal, from another point of view, the enormous strategic differences that cut across the *piquetero* organizations.

In the country's interior, the mass distribution of plans mitigated situations in which individuals lacked any sort of protection or safety-net. However, in many cases the plans were accepted as salaries and the obligation to fulfill the work requirement was rapidly recognized. Thus, the situation was paradoxical, since the same organizations were creating the frameworks necessary for carrying out the projects, paving the way for truly autonomous management. In many cases, municipalities not only refused to grant the materials for carrying out the projects, but they also tried to impede their execution.

The important point here is that in managing these projects on their own, many organizations found a substitute for "genuine" work. This substitute opened up the possibility for them to consider themselves, once again, as workers, and thereby rediscover their dignity. In addition, in many cases the development of those projects – specifically the community gardens and bakeries—enabled the (re)construction of mini subsistence economies to help them ward off situations of hunger. Finally, the development of services –cleaning public spaces and, in some cases, repairing buildings— also legitimized the organizations within their communities.

In all cases, the inclusion of the plans among their political strategies was less a decision by the organizations themselves; rather, it was the result of pressure from their members in contexts of urgency and necessity. However, accepting the plans meant that each group had to, implicitly or explicitly, debate or make decisions regarding their organizational forms, the main aspects of their territorial membership, and most

fundamentally, how best to conceptualize or re-conceptualize the notion of work. For the most part, the concept of "genuine" or legitimate work and how it might be reconstructed in the future was heavily guided by the legacy of salaried employment found in manufacturing sectors.

3. The *piquteros* today

3.1. Between co-optation and discipline

The relationships that successive governments have maintained with the *piquetero* movements have taken different paths. From the start, the relationships have combined various strategies, alternating between negotiation and co-optation, not to mention a significant dose of repression. Thus, the negotiation mechanisms gradually became institutionalized through the process of distributing social plans and food aid, and most recently, tools and subsidies to be used for productive projects. Negotiation was accompanied by a heightened use of repression, evident in numerous episodes throughout the *piquetero* movement. Since 1996, these strategies have been conveniently accompanied by the sustained policy of "judicialization" of the social conflict, both nationally and in the respective provincial jurisdictions. Today, this phenomenon translates into more than 3,000 cases brought against leaders and activists. [10]

In any case, a new stage opened up with the events of December of 2001. We should recall that December 19th and 20th initiated the aperture of a new political scene marked by the mobilization of different social actors. This new cycle of mobilizations catapulted the *piqutero* organizations into the center of the political and social scene, while at the same time enabling them to develop links with other social sectors, particularly the mobilized middle classes. At the same time, this period was also characterized by the mass utilization of government subsidies or social plans. In the context of post-devaluation, economic crisis and growing unemployment, the short-term objective of these policies was to palliate the serious social situation. In June of 2002, an

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[10] It is worth clarifying that the new protests brought forth a conflict of rights (between the right to protest and make demands and the right to the free circulation). In this sense, the judiciary has been developing a policy that rejects the new forms of protest, establishing very questionable judgments and pronouncing themselves in favor of the right to free circulation, without much reflection (Gargarella: 2003 y 2004, CELS: 2003).

act of repression that culminated in the killing of two young *piqueteros* moved Argentine society, generating mass protests in repudiation of the repression. This episode produced a reorientation in government policy. The government was not only forced to call for general elections earlier than planned, but it also found it necessary to adopt a more legalistic treatment of the *piquetero* issue. Without a doubt, the general elections both confirmed the persistent presence of Peronism among popular sectors –especially given the collapse of other traditional parties—and alerted the government to the possible risks of isolating the new social mobilizations.

Finally, the arrival of the government of N. Kirchner opened up a new scenario. Kirchner's first political gestures generated grand expectations for ample social sectors, while also initiating a series of realignments within the diversified *piquetero* movement. Despite the fact that President Kirchner faced a very consistent *piquetero* movement, especially following the huge mobilizations of 2002, the change in the political scene granted him a relatively wide margin for action when compared with earlier governments. On this basis, Kirchner has developed different strategies, which include everything from co-opting those organizations closest to the government to attempts to control and discipline the most mobilized groups.

After Kirchner's election, the idea of integration and institutionalization emerged as an important tendency. These tendencies were fueled by the actions of certain social organizations that saw in the new president a possibility to return to Justicialism's "historical bases." Lastly, in addition to integration and institutionalization, the new government used control and discipline when dealing with the most mobilized groups, such as the *Bloque Piquetero Nacional* and the MIJD.

In sum, Kirchner's policies consisted of simultaneously implementing an array of available strategies aimed at integrating, co-opting, disciplining and/or isolating the *piquetero* movement, distinguishing among the different currents and organizations. One year after he took office, these policies can be evaluated as temporarily "successful," both in terms of integrating and institutionalizing those sectors of the movement closest to the government, as well as isolating those who most oppose it. In order to carry out such a goal, the national government sought support in public opinion --which was strongly oriented toward sectors on the right-- through the large media outlets. In this sense, besides its –up until now-- sustained promise of "no repression," the government did not

hesitate to stigmatize the protest, juxtaposing street mobilizations with the demand for "institutional normalcy." In this way, the government actively diffused an image of democracy being supposedly "harassed" by the *piquetero* groups. Moreover, the tendency to criminalize the *piquetero*'s claims has arisen.

3.2. Ideological Reconfigurations

What happened on the side of the *piquetero* organizations? In other words, how did they interpret the new Peronist government? The change in political opportunities and in their analyses of them updated and brought to light the movement's different ideological matrices. Accordingly, today we can more clearly distinguish the three primary configurations: the populist groups, those linked to leftist parties, and lastly, what we can call the space occupied by the new left.

From the beginning, the groups belonging to the populist strain[11] developed a strong expectation for (re)integration. They hoped for the reconstruction of the national state under a new leadership, embodied by President N. Kirchner. This wing of the *piquetero* movement is situated in a new ideological climate that cuts across the whole continent, fueling the idea of constructing a Latin American pole (including experiences like those of Chávez in Venezuela, Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina, what is soon to be the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay, and eventually the leader of the coca farmers, Evo Morales, in Bolivia). These organizations include the already institutionalized FTV, as well as the organization *Barrios de Pie* and various other small, recently formed groups that came together in June 2004 to form a *Frente piquetero oficialista* in support of the president's policies. Today, these organizations receive privileged treatment from the national government, benefiting

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[11] It should be noted that populism is rests on three principles: first, the principle of direction by a leader (a personalistic leadership, with strong nationalist rhetoric), second, the principle of organized social bases (the concept of a People-Nation), and third, an interclass coalition, a necessary condition for a more equitable redistribution of wealth (an integrative socioeconomic model). While in the present experience the first two principles are present (a personalistic leader and organized social bases), there are no indicators pointing to the implementation of a new redistributive socioeconomic model. That the populist groups expect reintegration is even more problematic, due to the absence of one of the major principles of the model to which they adhere. This absence raises the risk that the community-based organizations will end up as mere instruments of the Justicialist Party (and of its current internal disputes), or will simply be absorbed and neutralized by the party's more conservative and reactionary currents, as has tragically happened in other moments of Argentina's history.

from new social programs including housing construction and credit for productive enterprises.

In contrast, the groups linked to leftist parties (which include an independent movement-like group, like the MIJD), labeled Kirchner's government as a continuation of earlier governments ("more of the same"). These organizations continued using a strategy centered in street mobilization, aimed primarily at building political awareness. This decision was primarily due to the serious difficulties associated with recognizing the end of a former situation and the subsequent change in political opportunities. In the end, these strategies had negative consequences, both in terms of the capacity to pressure the government and in terms of mobilization (given the inevitable wearing out of the social bases).

In essence, while the first two tendencies demonstrate an increasing orientation of *piquetero* organizations toward political parties, there is a third tendency under which we can also place the independent organizations. This tendency is less visible in the media, more innovative in terms of political practices, and associated with the spaces occupied by the new left. This heterogeneous frame, which contains organizations with long histories such as the MTR, the UTD from Mosconi, and the MTDs from A. Verón, includes an ideological spectrum ranging from "guevarism," the radical left and its variants, all the way to the current forms of "autonomism." Beyond the differences that separate them, all of these groups managed to resist falling prey to the simplifying position in which, once again, Justicialism's historical strength threatened to place them. Therefore, they gave priority to more manageable neighborhood issues, without renouncing mobilization or the production of new strategies for action. Rather than dedicating resources to an unequal political struggle against a government backed by public opinion, these organizations chose to concern themselves with developing political awareness and training and producing new social relationships ("new power," "popular power" or "counterpower," depending on the various formulations).

In sum, the most notable events and tendencies of the current period are, on the one hand, the recent emergence of a *piquetero* current, made up of groups supporting populism, which is linked to the government in power; and, on the other hand, the separation of the block from La Matanza and the search for new strategies for action.

Within an increasingly polarized political scenario, these strategies aim to coordinate with other social actors, diversify organizational forms, patterns and discourses.

Conclusions

Like their achievements, the difficulties facing the *piquetero* organizations are numerous and complex. We cannot close this article without highlighting some of the challenges that continue to burden the *piquetero* movement.

The first challenge concerns the necessity to create instances of political coordination that will mitigate the effects of the fragmentation of the *piquetero* movement, given the context of co-optation and society's objection to mobilization. In contrast with earlier years and given last year's events, coordination among the groups is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in order to break with the informative and interpretive framework. It will be even more difficult for them to overcome the "negative common sense" that the media and current government have actively installed with regards to the *piquetero* phenomenon in the context of its growing criminalization. The current situation poses an even greater challenge to political innovation, one that requires the production of new discourses capable of shifting the axes of political discussion and debate. Only once this occurs can new links and bridges with other actors --especially with unions and political parties-- become productive.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account just how rapid and dynamic social processes are when dealing with social movements. Even though the aforementioned continues to represent a reality that characterizes the majority of the organizations, many organizations presently seek to respond to new problems and challenges by reformulating and extending their discursive platforms. For example, it is significant that some established independent organizations have begun to promote actions and initiatives of a highly symbolic and political nature when dealing with the State. Their objective is to alter the current debate, placing at its center the fulfillment of constitutionally guaranteed social rights, and calling attention to the violation of environmental rights by multinational companies. Still other organizations aim to broaden the strategies available for action, carrying out so-called "*piquetes a las ganancias*" (pickets against profits), where organizations demanding more jobs block the ticket windows or entrances to private

companies (trains, subways). Finally, most recent mobilizations indicate a tendency toward coordination given the challenging political scene. Large economic groups–represented by the political right and their respective media outlets— have carried out a powerful anti-*piquetero* campaign, and their level of simplification and intolerance is directly proportional to the amount of media power they hold.

In conclusion, we must remember that in Argentina there are close to two million three hundred thousand unemployed (approximately five million including the under-employed), of which only a scarce portion is organized. However, despite representing far from a statistical majority, the *piquetero* organizations have emerged as major social and political players. This undeniable weight, as bothersome as it is irritating, demonstrates time and again that no society that aspires toward integration and social justice can be built upon a foundation of exclusion. As a corollary to what has already been said, we should add that few social movements in our country –Peronism and, in part, Radicalism in its early stages—have incited such sharp criticism and discrimination, which reminds us of Sarmiento's vision of history (the return of "*barbarie*"). What is more, few social movements have produced such ambiguous political positions, disguised under a false rhetoric of progressivism. This rhetoric is most clearly evident in those critiques based on the idea of the "manipulation" of the social bases or in those supposedly more sophisticated ideas based on the misery of popular sectors. Between the two extremes, which range from a class-based vision to normative critiques, each and every position contributes to the increasing isolation of the organizations, reinforcing the criminalization of their demands and, of course, facilitating the possibility of repression.

It is true that the *piquetero* organizations contain a powerful set of pragmatic components. At times, rather than categorize the *piquetero* movement as a antagonistic social movement that seeks new socio-cultural orientations or that presents a societal counter-project, these groups might be better classified as an "urban social movement" which seeks to gain back what was lost. Nevertheless, despite enormous difficulties and in the midst of serious isolation, many groups continue the unequal fight –every day, on the highways and in the neighborhoods-- generating new and disruptive practices, new forms of subjectivity, and recreating social ties in the name of an emancipatory future. All of these processes lead us to reaffirm that we will not be able to comprehend such a complex social dynamic based on a unilateral analysis. Instead, we must begin by

recognizing complexities and ambiguities, transcending the hidden stories and reaching the most visible conjunctural features of the *piquetero* organizations.

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