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# A tale of two movements: parallels between labor and piqueteros in Argentina

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Thesis

**A TALE OF TWO MOVEMENTS:  
PARALLELS BETWEEN LABOR AND PIQUETEROS IN ARGENTINA**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

In the early 1900s, Argentina witnessed the emergence of the labor movement, whose eventual incorporation transformed the political landscape. By the end of the century, another watershed event, neoliberal reform, resulted in the emergence of a new social actor: piqueteros. This study outlines the parallels between the origins of the two movements and examines piqueteros' use of roadblocks, identity formation, linkage to the Peronist party, and relation with labor.

This project contributes primary data gathered through interviews with individuals close to the movement and conducts theoretically grounded analyses of secondary data. Piqueteros and organized labor are found to adhere to the same historical pattern of emergence and incorporation. The logic of roadblocks is traced to functional similarities to strikes and access to non-material benefits. These non-material benefits, in turn, became identity forming elements at very local levels in homogeneous communities. The organizational structure of these piquetero groups, coupled Kirchner's need for political support led to clientelistic

linkages. Lastly, the experience of labor unions and piquetero groups within an umbrella organization point to a rather collaborative relationship and suggest that inter-movement ties can be stronger than intra-movement ones.

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## INTRODUCTION

Labor incorporation was a critical element in the development of politics in Latin America. By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social question had largely been addressed in most of the continent, and countries had embarked in the path dependent journey that generally follows watershed political events. However, in recent years a modified version of the social question resurfaced. The 1980s debt crisis and its aftermath, neoliberal reform, resulted in a large number of unemployed and informally employed people. This sector fell outside the established labor-state terms of engagement; a new incorporation process seemed pertinent.

However, the unemployed only coalesced as a coherent movement in Argentina. There, they came to be known as *piqueteros*: victims of the neoliberal economic model, organized and politically active. As had been the case with organized labor, the emergence of *piqueteros* as a new social actor proved to be a transformative political experience. *Piqueteros* revolutionized social protest, catapulted the Kirchners to hegemony over Peronism, and facilitated the adaptive transformation of the *Partido Justicialista*. Accordingly, the movement's

relation to these changes, as well as its inherent characteristics, warrant careful academic attention.

Many scholars have risen to that challenge. For example, Benclowicz (2010), Alcañiz and Scheier (2007), and Epstein (2009) trace the peculiarities of particular piquetero groups. Medina (2010) more generally analyzes the piqueteros' struggle to achieve visibility within the neoliberal order, and Rojas (2014) surveys the social conditions of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Argentina to underscore the precarious conditions fueling protest from the popular classes. Svampa and Pereyra (2009) compile the piquetero's historical origins, highlighting spontaneous, grassroots organization, and outlining the transition from isolated groups to a movement. Nonetheless, several questions remain unanswered or underdeveloped.

Among the pending matters to be resolved in relation to the piquetero movement are its incorporation process, its relation to labor, and the reasons behind its use of roadblocks as a form of protest. Further, the literature has failed to develop a model to analyze the emergence of piqueteros and systematically compare it to the trajectory of other social movements such as organized labor. The failure to submit the data on piqueteros to established theoretical

frameworks has created a number of ambiguities, unexplained phenomena, and misconceptions.

This paper aims to remedy these shortcomings. It does so by presenting the history and principal features of the movement within a solidly grounded theoretical framework that highlights the parallels and areas of convergence between piqueteros and organized labor. In the process, I answer the following questions: What process and conditions gave rise to the labor and piquetero movements respectively, and how do those compare? How and why were piqueteros incorporated? Why do piqueteros engage in roadblocks specifically as their main form of protest? How was the piquetero identity consolidated, given the heterogeneity of the informal sector? What is the nature of the relation between labor and piqueteros?

Accordingly, I start by tracing the histories of the labor and piquetero movements, first individually and then side by side to underscore similarities. I frame the movements' historical trajectories in a model in which a change in the economic model triggers social conditions that give rise to a new class, which suffers state repression, and is finally incorporated with no small use of cooptation techniques.

Next, I focus on the features of the piquetero movement and make connections, whenever possible, to the labor movement. The use of roadblocks is analyzed taking into account the influence of labor unions and their protest techniques, as well as the incentives and disincentives that would motivate a rational actor to engage in that sort of collective activity. Closely related, a discussion follows regarding the formation of piquetero identity, the role of protest and group identity-forming elements.

Then, I turn to the linkages between the PJ and piqueteros to distinguish between programmatic and clientelistic relations. I consider the interests of Kirchner in incorporating piqueteros as well as the internal organization of piqueteros and the role of piquetero leaders as intermediaries between the party and the group members.

Lastly, I broach the subject of piquetero and labor relations, considering the experiences of piqueteros under an umbrella organization comprising groups from both movements.

## METHODS

In the first section, I develop a historical model based on a pattern to which both piqueteros and labor conform to compare the movements from origin to incorporation. In the second part, I perform a review of the relevant literature and fit it to the relevant theoretical model to achieve a more focused analysis. I also rely on primary and secondary data to enrich those discussions and contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic. Primary data was collected through interviews with leaders and members of piquetero groups and other relevant figures. The interviews were conducted during a two week field research trip to Buenos Aires in January 2014. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and any text reproduced here has been translated by me. Additionally, I will not identify the interview subjects by name to protect their identity, as we agreed that any comments reproduced in this paper would remain unattributed. Occasionally, I also draw on secondary data to create charts. Particularly, I use data from Nueva Mayoría, a sociopolitical research center, and figures published in Ponce (2007).

## HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES

### Brief History Of The Labor Movement

The first signs of industrialization in Argentina came in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but did not consolidate until well into the 1930s. Demographic factors, internal political pressures, and external economic influence shaped the country's delayed manufacturing evolution. An analysis of the pre-1930s nascent Argentine industry solves an apparent paradox whereby an organized working class, capable of collective action had emerged before the ubiquity of factories in the country. Although the early process of industrialization proved economically negligible, it did produce a remarkable social imprint in the form of the working class.

The demographic makeup of the country presented a challenge to early industrialization. Argentina was sparsely inhabited throughout the 1800s; by 1875, the national population stood at just over two million (Rocchi 2006, 18). Scientist Ricardo Napp explained the economic impact of this figure at the time: "No industry can prosper in a country with only one inhabitant for each two square kilometers, where the labor force is very expensive and there is no capital and technological knowledge" (qtd. in Rocchi 2006, 17). Low population signified an insufficient source of labor force, as well as a meager domestic

market for manufactured products. Lacking the means to create cost-effective supply and the necessary demand, Argentine industry had remained unviable.

However, national policy guided by the principle of “*gobernar es poblar*” (to govern is to populate) attracted a large number of European immigrants and ignited industrialization. Juan Bautista Alberdi, intellectual author of the 1853 National Constitution and author of the phrase explained its meaning:

To govern is to populate in the sense that to populate is to educate, improve, civilize, enrich and enlarge... but to civilize the population, it is necessary to populate with civilized populations; to educate our America in liberty and industry it is necessary to populate it with the populations of Europe most advanced in liberty and industry<sup>1</sup> (2003, 16).

Politicians adhered to this philosophy and successfully promoted European immigration. Working class immigrants swarmed in attracted by the wages in Buenos Aires, which by 1914 surpassed those of Paris and Marseille in some professions (Collier and Collier 1991, 60). As a result, Argentina gained the human capital necessary for development through the immigrants’ numbers,

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<sup>1</sup> My translation; original Spanish text: Gobernar es poblar en el sentido que poblar es educar, mejorar, civilizar, enriquecer y engrandecer... pero para civilizar por la población es preciso poblar con poblaciones civilizadas; para educar a nuestra América en la libertad y en la industria es preciso poblarla con las poblaciones de la Europa más adelantada en libertad y en industria.

knowledge and skills. Additionally, the increase in population also strengthened the domestic market for Argentine products. By 1930, the country counted with over 12 million people (Rocchi 2006, 18). Then, a reshuffling of demographics favored industry again: rural to urban migration provided another large influx of industrial workers boosting their number from 467,000 in 1935 to 844,000 in 1943 (McGuire 1995, 208). The increase in population allowed for (an equally gradual) move toward industrialization.

A further obstacle to industrial development came from the economically and politically dominant landed elite. The *Partido Autonomista Nacional* (PAN), Argentina's first major political party, in power from 1880 to 1909, was a simply the "electoral vehicle of the landowners of the Pampas region" (McGuire 1995, 203). After 1909, the PAN split into regional parties, which remained beholden to local landowning elites (204). During this period, many politicians and all presidents were from land-owning families; and when in 1916, the executive power went to the middle class Radical Civic Union party, landowners' retained state power through control of the senate and positions in executive departments (Friedman 1989, 5). Moreover, at this point the Argentine middle class was not entrepreneurial, instead it depended on the export economy and so the new

government sought to preserve this model rather than cater to industrial interests (20).

The agro-export elite pursued economic policies that benefitted rural interests at the expense of industry. Free trade fomented the sale of Argentine beef, grain, and wool abroad, but also facilitated the import of manufactured products with which national industry struggled to compete. "Industrial protection and economic nationalism were time and time again sacrificed. Domestic manufacture seldom received an adequate stimulus" (Corradi 1985, 22). Governmental neglect of industry delayed this form of economic development. For instance, tariff policy was largely to generate revenue rather than to protect industry. One of the first records of the protectionist vs. free trade debate comes from the year 1953, when the legislature was considering the replacement of an earlier tariff law on the grounds of revenue production only without protectionist intent (Panettieri 1983, 7). Further, in the cases when protectionism was the aim of a tariff, the protection usually went to agro/pastoral sectors (Friedman 1989, 26). It was not until 1923, under the leadership of President Alvear, that industry received a substantially beneficial tariff (Villanueva 1972, 465). During this period, internal political pressures generally

disregarded the interests of the industrial class, favoring the export model instead.

A third reason that contributed to the slow development of Argentine industry is the mechanics of the world market, to which the country was fairly integrated by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. High demand for raw materials from more industrialized countries made exports a lucrative enterprise and discouraged divestment of resources for manufacture. To industrialize, Argentina would have had to abandon the traditional export model that had brought about the country's first economic bonanza. Thus, a late start on industrialization served as a self-perpetuating force delaying the process. Further, Argentina had little control over its role in this system of trade: its five main trading partners before the First World War, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, accounted for half the country's exports and one fourth of its imports while Argentina represented only 2.5 percent of their trade (Randall 1978, 214). International influence, thus, limited the country's ability to charter a new road based on a different economic model.

Foreign investment also factors in as a relevant molder of Argentine industrialization. Reliance on funds from abroad for nation-building projects

bound the country to the international market. "Saddled with vast foreign investment, Argentina was obliged to export or go bankrupt, and this meant concentration upon a limited range of exportable staple products with all the social, political, moral and intellectual consequences of acute dependency" (Corradi 1985, 24). Although most of this investment favored export and import trade (Peralta-Ramos 1992, 17), some of it did go towards industry. Indeed, by 1935 over 50 percent of industry belonged to foreigners (21). However, some foreign owned companies functioned more as importers of finished products than as industrial manufacturers, benefitting the parent firm more than the Argentine branch (Villanueva 1972, 465).

Argentine industrialization was both hindered and shaped by elements related to population, the internal distribution of political power, and external pressures emanating from the world market and foreign capital. In turn, these factors also mediated the emergence of the working class. The growth in population through European immigration "had a major impact on the emergence of national labor movements... the direct experience of many immigrants with labor movements in Europe played a central role in shaping labor movement development" (Collier and Collier 1991, 65). As it turned out, policies guided by Alberti's maxim not only populated Argentina with those

knowledgeable of industry, but also of labor unions and working class struggles. The internal distribution of political power also contributed to the emergence of a strong labor movement. The PAN's landed elite and the Radical's middle class, owing their condition to the export model rather than manufacture, had no particular interest in curtailing labor unionization. In the absence of a systematic negative state policy towards labor, the movement grew and strengthened, even achieving national organization through the founding of the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) in 1930 (Kenworthy 1972, 467). Lastly, foreign capital also facilitated the rise of the working class. Due to the immigrant status of early industrial company owners, they wielded very little political influence (467). Indeed, the early immigrant industrial sector was nonpolitical: they were motivated by profit, which did not require an Argentine citizenship (Corradi 1985, 33). Foreign-born Argentineans, who often did not become citizens, avoided not only the mandatory military service but also lacked suffrage and the political capital necessary to counter the worker movement (Randall 1978, 119). In addition, foreign capitalists fueled disgruntled workers' grievances by adding a component of nationalism to their struggle (Collier and Collier 1991, 64). The industrialists' political weakness, owing to their foreign origin, permitted the consolidation of the worker's movement.

Thus, although pre-1930's industrial development in Argentina was relatively meek in economic terms, the particularities of the process, which began as early as 1880, allowed for a significant social impact in the form of the rise of the working class. Additional characteristics relevant to the formation of labor movements in Latin America in general were also present in the Argentine case. Urbanization, grievances regarding work conditions, the concentration of production in large factories located in isolated enclaves contributed to favorable conditions for unionization and working class identity formation (Levitsky 2003, 38; Collier and Collier 1991, 63). However, the rise of the working class and its success as a social actor should not be conflated. Indeed, the early stages of the movement were rather unsatisfactory.

Prior to its incorporation in the 1940s, the labor movement faced harsh state repression and the inability to materialize its goals. The conservative government's response to the country's first general strike in 1902 was the enactment of the *Ley de Residencia* (Residency Law) allowing for the deportation of any foreigner who compromises national security or public order. Clashes between workers and the police in 1904 and 1909 left several dead and many more injured. In 1910, a political assassination prompted a state of siege, the closure of union locales, curtailment of the right to assembly, and a wave of

deportations (McGuire 1997, 36; Corradi 1985, 34). An apparent change came in the 1917-1919 period, when President Yrigoyen made a number of overtures to labor. In an effort to consolidate popular support for the Radicals, Yrigoyen sporadically intervened on some strikes, favoring unions. However, conservative backlash quickly set the government back on its repressive track (Epstein 7). One of the culminating points of the state's violent efforts to suppress collective action by labor movements was the *Semana Trágica* (Tragic Week) of 1919, when a strike by metal workers was met with violence from middle- and upper-class civilians recruited by Radical Party committees and organized by navy officers and the police (McGuire 1997, 40). The formation of the *Liga Patriótica Argentina* (Argentine Patriotic League), staffed by navy officers and whose main activities involved the repression of strikes further exemplifies this trend. The national army was also used as a tool of repression; between 1921 and 1922 it was responsible for the massacre of over 1000 workers (41). Systematic repression was part of the obstacles labor movements faced in the pre-incorporation period.

A second impediment to workers was the inability to achieve their goals. Unions lacked institutional channels through which to negotiate their interests; the working class lacked any organization that would have allowed it to win a voice in political decision-making (Peralta-Ramos 1992, 26). Through strikes,

workers could expect violence and an astoundingly low success rate. Indeed, “with the exception of a 1935 strike... the majority of the strikes of the decade failed to achieve their objectives” (24). The infamous decade of the 1930s, marked by military rule, led to a number of anti-labor policies that included the fall of real wages, mass firing of government employees and overall worsening social indicators (Randall 1978, 132). Violently repressed and unable to channel its demands through political institutions, labor fared poorly in this period.

This changed in the 1940s and 50s, when the movement underwent incorporation at the hands of Perón. According to Collier and Collier, “the period of initial incorporation of the labor movement is defined as the first sustained and at least partially successful attempt by the state to legitimate and shape an institutionalized labor movement” (1991, 162). This included phasing out the state policy of repression and granting some of the movement’s demands for benefits and improved conditions. However, it did not lead to an institutionalized role for labor within the party; rather, Perón tied the movement’s gains and status to its relationship with him, establishing a symbiotic relationship where benefits were exchanged for political support.

Starting in 1943, when he rose to the position of secretary of labor, Perón initiated a sustained approach to workers' organizations. He met with union leaders, even getting some of them out of jail, ended the assault on the movement, and helped organize the *descamisados*, workers newly arrived to Buenos Aires from the countryside (Corradi 1985, 58). Accustomed to crackdowns, marginalization, and denials, workers responded extremely well to Perón. "When Perón began clandestine overtures to unions in August and September [of 1943], he encountered a highly organized bargaining partner desperate for maneuvering room" (Alderman 1992, 247). The union's valuable bargaining chip was, of course, mass popular support. This became manifest after Perón's arrest in 1945 when workers took over the city of Buenos Aires and the CGT declared a general strike in support of their benefactor, resulting in his release. Perón formed the *Partido Laborista* (Labor Party) as a mobilization vehicle to win the presidency in 1946. As president, he continued his favorable policies towards the working class, elevating employment and wages and granting the rights to an eight hour workday, unemployment compensation, a Christmas bonus, and paid vacation (Peralta-Ramos 1992, 31). Such was the impact of Perón's policies that he presided over the "largest redistribution of income in the history of the republic" (Pion-Berlin 1989, 65).

Perón was personally responsible for the vast improvement experienced by the working class through incorporation. By opportunistically rallying the previously untapped support of unions and labor in general, Perón secured his main political victories. Nevertheless, the benefits handed out were a means to an end and so cooption soon followed. The *Partido Laborista* was absorbed by the Peronist Party (the *Partido Justicialista*) in 1947, the CGT became dependent on the leader, and unions' political power remained informal (McGuire 1995, 210). The union leaders who resisted the party merger, fearing subordination and loss of independence, were promptly jailed (Corradi 1985, 67). Perón concentrated power in his hands and kept his namesake party weakly institutionalized (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 19), securing his personal dominance over the sectors that composed it. Labor derived its newly acquired status from Perón, but remained beholden to him according to the terms of their bargaining relation.

### **Brief History Of the Piquetero Movement**

The Import Substitution Industrialization model, on which Argentina had embarked as the manufacturing sector gradually developed, was undone by neoliberal reform in the 1990s. This economic shift resulted in a dramatic expansion of the informal sector along with a number of social conditions that

enabled the emergence of piqueteros, a new social actor, vis-à-vis the decline of organized labor.

Modernization exerted a number of pressures on the Argentine state resulting on steep inflation. Notably, urban population increase, a trend already under way at the turn of the century, continued as the decades advanced. By 1950, 64 percent of the country's inhabitants lived in urban centers. In 1965 the figure had escalated to 76 percent, and in 1987 it reached 85 percent. Public expenditures increased in response to the need for sanitation, services provision and supply, and other urban infrastructure. The growing industry sector also required improved infrastructure, which the state financed through budget deficits and tax concessions designed to attract private capital. Essentially, increased spending coupled with reduced revenues paved the path for inflation. Lastly, price controls –of food and public utility to benefit working class urban dwellers; of raw materials to benefit manufacturers—resulted in shortages, which in turn led to elevated prices and state subsidies (Baer 1991, 46-48). The government's failure to broker a compromise between the competing interests of the economic classes plunged the country into financial instability.

The aforementioned economic climate would only worsen with the progression of the following two decades. The oil shocks of the 1970s exacerbated the troubled economy as higher energy costs were passed along the economy. Meanwhile, foreign debt had been accumulating and the government, facing opposition to tax hikes and budget cuts from both labor and business, resorted to printing money to pay its dues (Baer 1991, 51; Manzetti 2009, 144). A number of heterodox programs, which combine fiscal and monetary austerity as orthodox elements with unorthodox price and wage freezes, were implemented in subsequent attempts to stabilize the economy (Beckerman 66). The failure of these plans prompted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to withdraw assistance to Argentina in 1988 (Manzetti 2009, 145). The Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) model, whereby the state provided protectionist policies to encourage the domestic manufacture of items which had previously been imported, had run out of steam and no stabilization program could reignite it.

The country needed decisive, radical action to address its economic woes; or so thought Carlos Menem upon his election to the presidency in 1989. Having campaigned on a platform promising increased government spending, rejection of structural reform, and job creation, Menem pursued diametrically

opposed policies while in office (Manzetti 2009, 144; Drake 1996, 179). Namely, he sought to replace ISI model with a neoliberal model.

In this context, the term neoliberalism is used as suggested by Boas and Gans-Morse, “to distinguish between the radical forms of market economies emerging in the developing world and the traditional liberal market economies of North America and Western Europe” (2009, 157). This radicalism is rooted in the fact that the emerging economies embraced the policies that traditional liberal countries and institutions advocated but did not necessarily subscribe to.

External pressures from advanced economies were one of the key factors for the spread of neoliberalism in Latin America. For instance, the political and technocratic bodies in Washington insisted on prudent macroeconomic policies, outward orientation and free market capitalism, which collectively came to be known as the Washington Consensus (WC). The WC was actively promoted abroad, even if the United States subscribed only to a select number of these principles rather than the complete package (Williamson 1990, 18). Another set of incentives relevant for Latin American countries but not for more advanced economies relate to the conditionality of IMF and World Bank assistance. These institutions extended loans only on the condition that the recipient country adopted a number of reforms regarding trade, privatizations, and financial

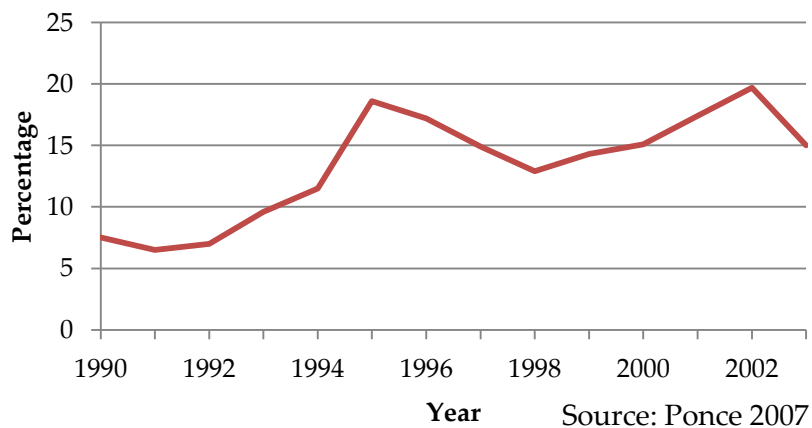
liberalization (Edwards 1995, 57). Ultimately, the developing world was encouraged to carry out a liberalization plan that exceeded the model in place in traditional liberal market countries. In the case of Argentina, Menem was particularly receptive to these external pressures; his steadfast adherence to neoliberal policies made him a poster child of the WC and earned him the praise of the IMF (Manzetti 2009, 147).

Given the radical nature of these policies, it is striking that Menem managed to implement them in the first place. Three main factors permitted the shift of Argentina's economic model in the 1990s. First, the dire economic condition of the country and the failure of more modest heterodox programs provided a favorable domestic environment for reform. Second, the WC lent external validation and incentives for the implementation of a neoliberal agenda. And third, the political weakness of labor unions translated to their inability to oppose Menem's changes. Unions had been affected by a decline in membership, the government's delay in the restoration of full labor rights, and competition with the *Partido Justicialista* for control of Peronism (Drake 1996, 176-178). Together, these factors allowed for the adoption of the Convertibility Plan in 1991, the main vehicle for the neoliberal agenda in Argentina.

Through the Convertibility Plan, Menem's administration pursued a more flexible labor market where wages were tied to productivity, collective bargaining restricted to specific sectors and decentralized to the company level, and social security contributions reduced or waived (Novick, Lengyel, and Sarabia 2009, 239). Further, Menem "implemented the most radical privatization program in Latin America, slashed public employment and government spending, and opened many economic sectors to foreign competition" (Manzetti 2009, 146). The social effect of these policies was profound. The adjustments to the labor market further undermined unions and jeopardized workers' rights. Newly privatized enterprises laid off a large number of workers and paid lower wages. The reduction of the public sector led to increased levels of unemployment, lesser spending weakened the welfare state, and foreign competition starved off medium and small domestic businesses.

Of these reforms, the privatization program warrants particularly close attention given its important socioeconomic implications. Since the state owned mostly natural monopolies, the privatization of state-owned companies shook up entire industries. The total number of enterprises privatized was small but the companies themselves were large and represented a sizable sector. In economic terms, these firms generally fared better after privatization, reporting increases in

productivity, output, and revenue. Socially, the picture was bleaker. Privatizations translated to a society of displaced workers, which refers to “persons permanently separated from their jobs and connotes the disappearance of the job as well as the dislocation of the individual workers from the enterprise” (Evans-Klock, Richards and Vargha 1998, 21). A study by the Inter-American Development Bank revealed that employment decreased approximately 40 percent as a result of privatization in Argentina (Fig. 1), and that laid-off workers experienced more unemployment than non-displaced workers. This dynamic resulted in the emergence of the unemployed as the victims of the privatization program.



**Figure 1 Unemployment rate in Argentina, 1990-2003.**

The difficulty of these displaced workers was twofold. First, because they had been employed by monopolistic companies, their industry specific skills were not easily transferrable to other fields. For example, displaced workers received severance pay at the end of their employment and many used the money to establish their own businesses. However, they lacked the entrepreneurial skills necessary for success and most ventures failed within a year (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 111). A second hurdle unemployed people faced was a lack of advocacy. In this period, unions struggled just to limit the loss of workers' rights; they were in no condition to champion the interests of the unemployed. Thus, a large number of people found themselves, unemployed, unable to find new jobs, and without an organization to represent their interests.

On the aggregate, Menem's policies significantly changed the economic landscape of Argentina and resulted in a number of social conditions that set the state for the rise of piqueteros. A report by the International Labor Office summarizes the effects of neoliberal reform:

The effects of globalization and macroeconomic factors on the labor market during the 1990s were that: (i) greater flexibility reduced the proportion of workers with permanent contracts and job security and increased the proportion with temporary contracts or no contracts at all;

(ii) trade union coverage was reduced in many countries; (iii) high rates of inflation in some countries greatly reduced the real value of the minimum wage in comparison to its value in 1980; and (iv) underemployment was very high in many Latin American countries (Thomas 2002).

A brief case study of the privatization of *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales* (YPF) showcases the processes outlined above. YPF was a vertically integrated oil producer with a monopoly in the sector. Beyond oil production, YPF also provided a combination of material and social benefits to its thousands of employees in regions of Neuquén and Salta in the form of social, recreational, and residential services (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 105). It symbolized the passé role of the interventionist, protectionist, welfare state that Menem intended to reform. Menem's administration hoped to make the YPF more effective and internationally competitive through privatization. By the time the YPF's sale had been finalized in 1993, the decision proved an economic success and a social disaster.

According to World Bank estimates, "YPF's privatization generated \$5.1 billion in cash and incurred \$13.5 million in costs"(Welch and Mond 1998, 21). However, it also resulted in a reduction of the number of employees from 51,000

in 1990 to 8,000 in 1993. The 43,000 laid-off workers lost not only their income, but also the extensive benefits associated with government employment. When they tried to mobilize, they found that the union had “literally evaporated” and the traditional conflict resolution and mediation channels were no longer available (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 112). On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1996, a group of 20,000 marched out in the town of Cultural-Co and blocked national route 22 to pressure the political and economic leaders of the region to intercede in their favor. The foundations of the piquetero movement had been laid.

The experience of former YPF workers was repeated time and time again through the country. From Cultural-Co, Neuquén, the protests and roadblocks expanded to General Mosconi, Salta, another YPF oil town. Gradually, they spread throughout the provinces, eventually reaching Greater Buenos Aires and the federal capital. In small industrial towns, suburbs, and cities, hordes of displaced workers were joined by the retired, affected by the disintegration of the welfare state. They, in turn, were joined by those in the precarious, unstable informal sector, ranging from construction workers to domestic servants (Portes and Hoffman 2003). Lastly, lower class communities also joined to protest against increased prices for privatized public services. This heterogeneous group,

sharing little more than a number of grievances emanating from or worsened by neoliberal reforms, came to be known as piqueteros.

Despite internal differences, piquetero groups have displayed a striking level of organization, as exemplified by a number of successfully run national assemblies in the early 2000s. The First National Piquetero Assembly convened on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to coordinate goals and strategies. This assembly approved the practice of blocking roads to oppose structural reform, asked for the liberation of jailed protesters, and demanded the retreat of gendarmes from Salta (Kohan 2002 75). The Second National Piquetero Assembly took place in September 2001 and was quickly followed by The First National Assembly of Workers: Employed and Unemployed in February 2002. These assemblies highlighted the success accrued by piqueteros up to that moment and called for further mobilization. In June 2002, the Argentine newspaper La Nación reported that over 1,000 people from 15 out of the country's 23 provinces attended the piquetero assembly in session that month. By that time, the piquetero movement had achieved not only a large membership but also a degree of cohesion. Thus, in the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the country witnessed the emergence and consolidation of a new social actor.

Though privatizations, the growth of the informal sector, and other ramifications of neoliberalism contributed to the rise of piqueteros, their persistence and success may not be solely attributed to economic factors. After all, these conditions were present in other Latin American countries at the time, yet only Argentina witnessed the emergence of piqueteros. Rising unemployment and lack of policy benefits for the informal sector set up the stage for a protest movement but other elements also facilitated the strengthening of piqueteros. The federal nature of the state, calling for support networks throughout the country, as well as divisions within the *Partido Justicialista* provided important structural advantages to the movement (Ponce 2007, 7). Additionally, the tradition of strong sociopolitical organization established by labor provided an environment prone to the consolidation of such a group as well as the leadership and experience necessary to launch the movement, given that many of the initial piquetero organizers had previously been union organizers (Alcañiz and Scheier 2007, 160).

The rise of piqueteros represented a historical déjà vu of sorts in Argentina. For the second time in the century, the lower urban class coalesced to channel its demands through mass protests. The social question, originally posed by the labor movement as it channeled the grievances of early industrial

workers, seemed to resurface in relation to the struggles of the unemployed. Unfortunately, the state's initial response to this new social actor was not any better the second time around. Repression became the preferred policy, just as it had been in dealing with labor.

The state violently confronted piqueteros from their emergence to their incorporation. Teresa Fernandez, 25, a domestic servant and mother of two, became one of the first victims when she was shot in 1997 as gendarmerie and police officials forcibly dispersed a roadblock in Cultural-Co. From that point onwards, the gendarmerie would often be called on to suppress piqueteros. In 1999, 500 gendarmes clashed with piqueteros blocking an interprovincial bridge joining Chaco and Corrientes; two piqueteros were killed by gunshot. In 2000, Aníbal Verón, a father of five, was shot in the face and killed in Salta as he protested against his former employer, who owed him 8 months of salary. In 2002, violence reached the federal capital as police officers fatally shot two piqueteros in Buenos Aires during the "Avellaneda Massacre." Alfredo Atanasof, Head of Cabinet at the time, qualified the relation between the government and piqueteros as a "kind of war." (Sain 2006, 52).

The state's war against piqueteros was not without temporary ceasefires. The state alternated between violence and minor concessions to quell the movement. From 1990 to 1996, the Menem administration increased unemployment benefits by 22 percent. However, because unemployment tripled during the same period, that gesture proved insufficient (Lodola 2005, 521). After the piquetero demonstrations of 1996 and 1997, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security implemented a more promising program: the *Plan Trabajar* (Plan to Work). Lasting until 2001, the plan benefitted about 20 percent of the unemployed population by providing monthly cash payments for community service. The clientelistic manner of resource management, whereby Peronist officials received more funds to distribute than did officials of the opposite party, UCR-*Alianza*, betrayed the plan's ulterior motive of strengthening the Peronist party machine (Lodola 2005).

President Fernando de la Rúa, elected in 1999, unsuccessfully tried to appease piqueteros by reforming the clientelistic aspect of the *Plan Trabajar*. Rather than distribute resources according to party loyalties or even regional unemployment levels, De la Rúa allocated money in proportion to the number of protests in a particular place. During his presidency, each piquetero protest was associated with an increase in 5,000 Argentine pesos for plans in the province

where it took place (Londola 2005, 529). Additionally, he tried to institutionalize the movement. In an attempt to channel piqueteros' momentum, he encouraged them to organize as NGOs. Both initiatives failed to tame down piqueteros' impetus. De la Rúa's management of the *Plan Trabajar* program encouraged the groups to protest even more to secure more benefits. It reinforced piqueteros' idea that social plans were not granted by the government but won and maintained through social struggle (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 95). Likewise, De la Rúa's push for piqueteros to form NGOs strengthened the groups' ability to lobby for benefits while maintaining their propensity for conflict intact.

After Menem's and De la Rúa's failed overtures to piqueteros, President Eduardo Duhalde, appointed in 2002, attempted more extensive action. In policy terms, this meant the implementation of the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* (Heads of Household Plan) which remains in place to this day. The plan aims to promote work culture, improve employability, and access to the formal sector among its beneficiaries according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security's webpage. The program consists of cash transfers to families with children which are not receiving other types of government aid. *Plan Jefes y Jefas* consolidated several other social programs and extended coverage to more Argentines than either Menem's or De la Rúa's plans (CELS 2003; Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 101). In

this case, incorporation was truncated not by the end of the program, but that of Duhalde's presidency in 2003.

Ultimately, the policies adopted by the Menem and De la Rúa administrations were short-term and small scale efforts that would not satisfy the piquetero movement's demands. Duhalde took more significant steps to satisfy the unemployed in terms of benefits, but his 17 month long presidency did not allow enough time for a full-blown incorporation. Moreover, the larger context of broken promises and police brutality during the three presidents' tenure negated their timid approaches to piqueteros. Nothing short of a comprehensive incorporation process could redefine piquetero-state relations.

In the eyes of many piqueteros, the potential for such a process depended on the results of the 2003 presidential elections. Néstor Kirchner's victory was welcomed by many piqueteros, mostly because the alternative would have been yet another Menem presidency along with his anti-labor policies and his promise to crack down on protesters (Schneider and Conti 2003, 16). Soon afterwards, Kirchner gave them better reason to celebrate.

Kirchner approached the incorporation of the piqueteros by putting an end to their indiscriminate repression, legitimizing some groups and establishing

formal ties through appointments, meeting their demands with increased benefits, and using a carrot-and-stick method to reward supporters and punish opponents. He managed to reduce the number of protests and establish a symbiotic relationship in which he wields the state's resources in the piqueteros' favor as long as they wield their convening power to his advantage.

Kirchner endeavored to curb state repression of piqueteros through three main policies. First, he forbade police officers from taking any weapons to protests, including guns and batons. Second, mutual agreements between piqueteros and the police were established so that as long as piquetero leaders keep the protest peaceful, the police may not break it up. Third, all police officers were required to wear fluorescent vests over their uniforms to make themselves easily identifiable and locatable to protesters (Mayekar 2006, 54). Watching over a roadblock in January 2014, a policeman commented: "before, we would have broken up the protest with tear gas to reestablish normal traffic, but for some time now, we have to just let them stand there in the middle of the street. We can't do anything more than just watch them and make sure they are not getting violent." Asked about the reason for this change in procedure, the officer responded: "the protesters were accusing us of using excessive force and some policemen even got in trouble some years ago when two piqueteros died in a

protest. That, and the fact that we live in a democratic country and everyone can protest what they want. But really, it comes down to orders from the higher-ups; someone changed their mind about how to deal with the piqueteros and we were instructed to leave them alone” (Interview 2014, Buenos Aires). Informally, these provisions served to decriminalize piquetero activity, a first step towards political inclusion.

Another way Kirchner sought to incorporate piqueteros was through closer ties between the groups and government. For example, as newly elected president, he attended a piquetero rally in suburban Buenos Aires along with his Minister of Labor, Minister of Social Development, and secretary general of the presidency. There, the Kirchner administration received the piqueteros’ support and the piqueteros obtained the government’s symbolic blessing. This close relation was made much more official when Luis D’Elía, leader of *Federación de Tierra y Vivienda* (Federation for Land and Housing), one of the organizations that vowed its support to Kirchner, was appointed director of the Undersecretariat of Lands for Social Housing. The five groups in attendance at the rally, comprising 5 different organizations and representing a combined 80,000 members, were among the so-called soft piqueteros (Shigetomi 151).

Because of their positive reception to the president's gestures, these soft piqueteros were the first to be incorporated.

Paradoxically, the division between soft piqueteros and hard piqueteros also contributed to Kirchner's incorporation method. To supporters, Kirchner granted preferential treatment, especially in terms of access to resources. Soft piqueteros benefit from more social programs, such as the Plan Arraigo (Rooting Plan) and the Plan Manos a la Obra (Let's Get to Work Plan), which support the building of housing and the financing of small businesses respectively (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 213). Soft piquetero leaders themselves, such as Juan Carlos Alderete, acknowledge the government's double standard in the distribution of social assistance (Shigetomi 152). Hard piqueteros have not fared so well. Given these groups' reluctance to stop protesting, Kirchner responded not with carrots, but with sticks –the police was called on to prevent a hard piquetero group from entering the center of Buenos Aires in 2005, Raúl Castells, leader of an opposing group, was jailed numerous times between 2005 and 2006, social programs are denied, etc. (152). A member of Castells' anti-Kirchner piqueteros lamented the treatment the group receives: "Because we do not support the government, we do not get benefits like the other groups do. [Kirchner and his administration] don't give us as many social plans, they refuse to talk to us when we come

seeking dialogue, and they still treat us as criminals.” Through these tactics, Kirchner strengthened supporting groups, weakened opposing ones, and promoted internal divisions within the movement. The division within the piquetero movement along with the differential treatment each faction received furthered Kirchner’s incorporation strategy because they underscored the quid pro quo on which such incorporation was based.

Quid pro quo, bargaining, or cooptation was a key feature of the Kirchner style of incorporation. The president stood to gain on two counts from piquetero incorporation: on the one hand, he would avoid the disruptive protests that jeopardized the country’s governability in the past; on the other, he could bolster his dominance within the PJ by harnessing the piqueteros’ masses and networks to his advantage. Kirchner succeeded on both. In terms of protests, the number of roadblocks decreased from 2336 in 2002 to 1278 in 2003 and remained at that lower level in following years (Nueva Mayoría). In terms of strengthening his position within the PJ, Kirchner relied on the piqueteros’ ability to coordinate locally and mobilize to achieve policy and electoral victories. For example, after he called for a national boycott of the Royal Dutch/Shell group, piqueteros blocked access to more than 30 gas stations, ultimately coercing the company to accept Kirchner’s terms (Reel). Likewise, Kirchner relied on piqueteros in the

2005 national parliamentary elections to campaign for his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The Kirchner victory in these elections not only represented the advancement of Cristina's career, but also the consolidation of Kirchner's preponderance within Peronism after defeating Duhalde (Ponce 2007, 15). The mutual compromise between Kirchner and piqueteros involved the exchange of benefits and improved treatment for political support and mobilization.

A skillful politician, Kirchner used this relationship not only to advance his administration's policy goals, but also his personal political ambitions. This suggests that the piqueteros' loyalty (at least in the case of *oficialista* or soft piqueteros) lies with Kirchnerism rather than Peronism as a whole. Indeed, after Néstor's death in 2010, Cristina inherited the piqueteros' support and maintained the arrangement established by her late husband. This "marriage of convenience," as it was called by the American embassy in Buenos Aires has gone through difficult times as the composition of the pro-Kirchner piquetero faction changes with the defection of some groups and the addition of others (Aznárez). Regardless, the system of incentives binding the piqueteros to Kirchnerism, within the framework established through institutionalization remains in place.

### Mirror-Image Historical Trajectories

The historical trajectories of the labor and piquetero movements exhibit remarkable similarities. Generally, the path of either group can be described in the following manner: a change in the economic model reshuffled class relations and gave rise to new economic and social conditions. As a result, a new social class emerged and organized to champion its interests. Given the novelty and perceived extremism in the movement's methods, the state responded with repression, resulting in violent clashes. Timid overtures were attempted, but ultimately failed to establish a *modus vivendi*. Finally, the movement underwent incorporation thanks to the efforts of a personalistic leader seeking mass support to consolidate his position. Figure 2 depicts this model.



**Figure 2 Historical Evolution of New Social Actors**

In the case of labor, the agro-export economic model was slowly supplanted by industrialization. As factories and manufacture gradually took hold in the country, social factors like immigration, urbanization, and poor working conditions gave rise to class-conscious labor force. As the working class organized, it staged protests and strikes to channel demands for better

conditions. In response, the government deported, jailed, and killed union leaders and members. President Yrigoyen briefly interceded in the unions' favor, but quickly retreated and repression continued. In the end, labor was incorporated by Juan Domingo Perón, who stopped the persecution of union leaders, granted significant benefits to the working class, and established political ties through appointments and inclusion of labor in his *Partido Justicialista*. Perón benefitted from the incorporation of labor by harnessing their support for his political aims.

Piqueteros' history is similar. In the 1990s, the switch from an import substitution model to neoliberalism led to high unemployment, the expansion of the informal sector, and the impoverishment of the lower classes. The unemployed masses, joined by other marginalized sectors of society, adopted the piquetero identity and protested by blocking roads, taking to the streets, etc. President Duhalde attempted to meet piqueteros' demands through an updated social program, but the short length of his tenure and the sustained state repression thwarted his efforts. His successor, President Kirchner, fully incorporated piqueteros by ending repression by the police, extending benefits, and making strategic appointments. He relied on piqueteros' ability to mobilize

to secure his political objectives. Table 1 summarizes the main developments in each stage of the movements' history.

The commonality in the pattern of emergence and incorporation between piqueteros and labor produces interesting insights. First, it suggests that piqueteros are deeply rooted in the social and historical conditions of Argentina, and are thus not an ephemeral movement. Rather, piqueteros came to occupy a social niche as important as that in which labor had long ago established itself. Likewise, the unemployed movement offered Kirchner a resource as indispensable as unions had offered Perón. Through this frame, many of the apparent contradictions posed by the persistence of piqueteros appear less unlikely. For instance, if labor unions did not disappear during deindustrialization, why should piqueteros run that fate after the improvement of economic conditions, as suggested by Ponce (2008) and Perez (2011)? As highlighted by their analogous histories, comparisons between labor and piqueteros are extremely pertinent.

Change in Economic Model	Emergence of New Social Actor	Repression	Failed Overtures	Incorporation and Cooptation
<p>Agro-Export → Industrialization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration</li> <li>• Urbanization</li> <li>• Poor working conditions</li> </ul>	<p>Labor, which organized in unions and protested through strikes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1902 Residency Law</li> <li>• Many dead and injured in police clashes</li> <li>• Tragic Week of 1919</li> <li>• Argentine Patriotic League</li> </ul>	<p>Yrigoyen interceded in unions' favor, but quickly retreated</p>	<p>Incorporation by Perón, exchanging benefits for mass support</p>
<p>Import Substitution Industrialization → Neoliberalism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privatizations</li> <li>• Unemployment</li> <li>• Expanded informal sector</li> </ul>	<p>The unemployed, which joined by other marginalized sectors, organized as piqueteros and protested through roadblocks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Killing of Teresa Rodríguez</li> <li>• Repurposing of Gendarmerie from border control to social repression</li> <li>• Avellaneda Massacre</li> </ul>	<p>Duhalde extended benefits, but continued repression and his short presidency thwarted incorporation</p>	<p>Incorporation by Kirchner, exchanging benefits for mass support</p>

**Table 1 Stages in Labor and Piquetero Movements' History**

## FEATURES OF PIQUETERO MOVEMENT

### **Roadblocks: A New Form of Protest**

Piqueteros derive their name from the Spanish word "*piquete*," meaning a group of people who gather to protest, violently or peacefully. In Argentina, this protest has taken the particular form of roadblocks. This tactic is associated to piqueteros, gaining popularity concurrently with the rise of that new social actor in the mid-1990s. In recent times, however, it has become increasingly widespread, as even labor unions have come to employ it to express their discontent.

Roadblocks made a debut in Argentina in the province of Santa Fé in 1992 when a local union restricted access to the factory by occupying the surrounding streets. The practice was repeated in the province of Santiago de Estero in 1993 when people took to the street to protest the layoff of 10,000 state employees and the reduction in salary by 50% to the remaining workers (Schneider and Conti 2003, 41). However, it was not until the events in Salta and Neuquén that roadblocks became an established form of social protest and the tactic of choice of the unemployed.

The reasons behind piqueteros' adoption of roadblocks as their signature form of protest are varied. First, there is the logical inability to implement the

traditional mode of working class protest –strikes—given the protesters' condition as unemployed. Because strikes involve the refusal to work in order to decrease or halt economic activity, having a job is a prerequisite. Deprived of this type of demonstration, piqueteros had to find a different viable avenue to express their grievances.

Roadblocks were one such alternative. Because this technique was first used to impede access to factories, it served a purpose similar to that of strikes: to interrupt economic activity. In this case, even if production was taking place within the premises of the workplace, the output could not reach the market and be sold. As a piquetero leader remarked, "there was nothing else for [the first piqueteros] to do. Strikes were out of the question but it is what they knew how to do. So they found a way to still disrupt production but from the outside. The point [of roadblocks] was not to let anyone or anything come in or out of the factory." Blocking national routes and bridges served the same purpose on a larger scale. Products originating in the provinces needed to reach Buenos Aires, the country's economic hub, for both national consumption and export. By imposing roadblocks on national routes, piqueteros could suspend the supply chain of many industries, as well as deprive the capital of commodities to exert political pressure on the federal and provincial governments. Roadblocks were

the functional equivalent of strikes, with the necessary modifications to fit the condition of unemployed protesters.

Though functionally similar, the legal status of these strikes and roadblocks is markedly different. While strikes are a constitutional right, imposing a roadblock is considered a crime punishable by imprisonment. The Constitution for the Argentine Nation guarantees the right of labor unions to strike in article 14bis: "Trade unions are hereby guaranteed: the right to enter into collective labor bargains; to resort to conciliation and arbitration; the right to strike." In contrast, article 194 in the Argentine Penal Code states:

He or she who, without creating a situation of public danger, impedes, obstructs, or hinders the normal functioning of transport by land, water or air, or the public services of communication, of water provision, of electricity or energetic substances, will be punished with a prison sentence ranging from three months to two years.<sup>2</sup>

Operating within this legal framework proved difficult for piqueteros because it delegitimized their protests, reducing them to criminal acts. Prior to

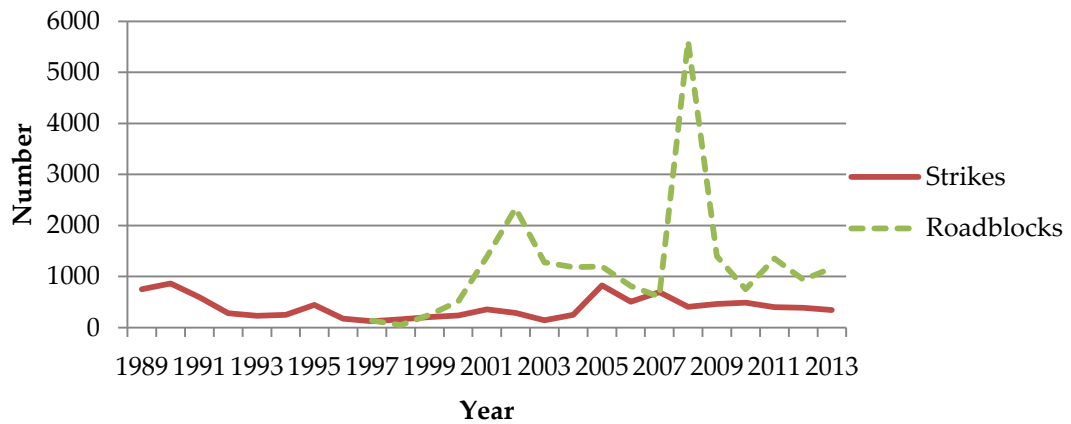
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<sup>2</sup> My translation; original text: El que, sin crear una situación de peligro común, impidiere, estorbare o entorpeciere el normal funcionamiento de los transportes por tierra, agua o aire o los servicios públicos de comunicaciones, de provisión de agua, de electricidad o de sustancias energéticas, será reprimido con prisión de tres meses a dos años.

incorporation, article 194 provided the basis for the repression of piqueteros. Per Kirchner's directives, law enforcement has turned a blind eye to roadblocks for the most part, but the article in question remains in effect. In 2003 an anti-Kirchner senator unsuccessfully attempted to amend this article to provide for the creation of a commission that would pursue the peaceful resolution of roadblocks as an alternative to legal action. The failure to institutionalize piqueteros rights is consistent with Kirchner's personalistic approach to piquetero incorporation: the movement's rights are guaranteed not by law, but Kirchner himself (and by his wife after his death).

Outside the courts, roadblocks are not any more popular. In fact, an overwhelming majority of Argentines disapprove of roadblocks as a form of protest. A survey conducted in May 2014 suggests that 4 out of 5 Buenos Aires residents disagree with the piqueteros' practice (Lanusse 2014). As many as 64% of those interviewed reported that roadblocks affect their daily livelihood to a large or very large extent. These results are likely to be less pronounced in the provinces, where roadblocks are less frequent, but they are indicative of the high level of popular opposition to this particular method of protest.

The general public's opposition notwithstanding, roadblocks have become ubiquitous. Since the late 1990s, roadblocks have become the most common type of social protest in Argentina, surpassing even strikes (Figure 3). Though it is tempting to attribute this trend to the decline of labor unions and concurrent rise to prominence of the piqueteros, such assessment would be misleading. Roadblocks were pioneered by labor unions even if they were later popularized by piqueteros. Once the unemployed made roadblocks commonplace, workers readopted the practice. As Kozloff (2008) remarks, "psychologically, the country is now a *'piquetero'* nation; for example, rather than carry out conventional strikes, workers now conduct pickets of their own and block roads" (174). Thus, though roadblocks are a technique mostly utilized by piqueteros, other sectors of civil society have also embraced the practice (Schuster et al. 2006 ). Just like traffic congestion or road maintenance, roadblocks are a permanent feature of Buenos Aires' streets; so much so that the city has developed a website and mobile app that map out roads blocked by piqueteros to help commuters plan alternate routes. In short, the rise of the piqueteros has meant not just the entry of a new social actor to the Argentine political landscape, but also the introduction and popularization of a new form of social protest: roadblocks.



Source: Nueva Mayoría 2013 and 2014

**Figure 3 Number of Strikes vs. Roadblocks, 1989-2013**

### Identity

Embracing roadblocks as a modified form of protest was part of the newly unemployed workers' evolving identities. As a matter of fact, analyzing identity and protest together helps solve two lingering questions in the literature about piqueteros: (i) why did piqueteros insist on a seemingly fruitless, high risk form of protest; and (ii) given the group's heterogeneity and the recent decrease in class salience despite growing inequality, why did piqueteros develop a common identity at all?

Roadblocks are a puzzling choice in terms of protest methods. Although this type of demonstration served a similar purpose to strikes and was a feasible alternative for the unemployed, the costs of participation seemed to outweigh the

benefits for most of the pre-incorporation period. Protesters who engaged in roadblocks were subject to violence at the hands of gendarmerie and the police until Kirchner's ascent to power. Moreover, only under De la Rúa's presidency was there a clear cause-and-effect relation between roadblocks and increased access to material benefits in the form of social plans. The rational actor model would not seem to account for this form of collective action given the substantial costs and minimal material benefits associated.

Material benefits, however, are not the only incentive to engage in political participation. As Rosenstone and Hansen explain,

Those who are active in politics can also receive *solidary benefits*, intangible rewards that stem from social interaction, like status, deference, and friendship. And participation can also yield *purposive benefits*, intrinsic rewards that derive from the act of participation itself, such as a sense of satisfaction from having contributed to a worthy cause (16).

Piqueteros received social benefits as they learned about the effects of structural reform on their peers, warned each other of the approaching gendarmes, and formed personal relationships while holding roadblocks. They also received purposive benefits because they valued their participation in roadblocks as efforts to right a wrong. For example, early piqueteros in Neuquén demanded to

be granted rights to exploit El Mangrullo gas field on the grounds of historical reparation rather than poverty alleviation (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 117). Hence, despite the low likelihood of roadblocks to result in increased material benefits, participants were rewarded in different ways that incentivized collective action.

But are these rewards substantive enough to offset the high costs of roadblocks, ascending in some cases to physical injury or loss of life? As it turns out, that might not be necessary. Though threats to one's physical integrity are usually construed as obstacles to collective action, in some cases, they may actually incentivize it. "Contrary to sociological and commonsensical expectations... the onset of severe state repression, that increases dramatically both the potential risks and costs of collective action, may itself stimulate certain types of social movements" (Loveman 1998, 516). In the case of piqueteros, this paradoxical process is more clearly exemplified by analyzing the role of martyrs. For instance, the killing of Teresa Rodríguez in Neuquén had a profound effect on the movement. The young mother came to symbolize the struggle of an unwavering people and her name became a rallying cry in later protests (Schneider and Conti 2003, 25). Likewise, some movements bear the names of piqueteros killed in protest, as is the case of Coordinadora de Trabajadores

Desocupados Aníbal Verón. As explained by a piquetero leader, “[the authorities] thought we would retreat if they killed a few of us, that we would take it as a lesson. But it only made us want to protest more because we started protesting not only for our original demands but also for those who had been killed or abused. We wanted to reassert ourselves and show that we would not be intimidated, that they would have to deal with us because we would not go away.” The killing of piqueteros did not discourage further protests but rather fueled the movement by providing them with yet another grievance to organize around.

Concurrently, the types of benefits obtained from roadblocks and the risks involved contributed to the formation of a piquetero identity. The physical proximity associated with solidary benefits and the shared threat of state repression have been identified as unit-forming factors which lead people to identify as members of a group (Tajfel 27). Their mode of protest, then, is an integral part of piqueteros’ self-conceptualization as a group. In fact, the definition of the word piquetero itself refers to people who picket or perform a blockade, meaning that the movement derives its name from the type of protest in which it engages: roadblocks. During the period of piqueteros’ identity formation, roadblocks were cathartic experiences that provided a communal

space for people to voice their complaints, collaborate towards a common objective, and find a new identity (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 111). Roadblocks provided non-material benefits and physical proximity and also reversed the role of repression from a cost to an incentive, providing members with a shared threat and making for a very favorable recipe for identity formation.

However, these elements do not exhaust all explanations for piquetero identity. Heterogeneity and the decrease of class salience are often cited as formidable hindrances to piquetero identity formation. Given that similarity among members is another important condition for group identity, people with such varied backgrounds as piqueteros are not likely to identify with each other (Turner 1982, 27). What similarity is there between an informal sector worker, such as a nanny or a street vendor, and a laid off bureaucrat? Or between a retired man and a young girl who has never been able to find a job? Roberts (2002) succinctly summarizes this argument as follows:

The dispersion and segmentation of the labor market [product of the transition from ISI to neoliberalism], both functionally and legally, make it increasingly difficult to identify a harmony of interest between formal, informal, temporary contract, and non-contract employees. There is wide variation in the wages, work conditions, job security, social benefits, and

relations with capital across these different categories of workers, and little to provide a sense of collective identity (22).

The solution to this dilemma lies in the early history of piqueteros. Though today the movement expands throughout the Argentine geography and society, it emerged in fairly homogenous contexts. For example, participants in the first piquetero uprisings in Salta and Neuquén were all former YPF workers, with similar socioeconomic status and even line of work. Thus, although piqueteros as a whole are a varied group, locally (where identity forming events take place) they were fairly similar amongst themselves. Likewise, different social groups were absorbed at different stages in the different piquetero organizations. As remarked by a member of the *Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados* (Independent Movement of Retirees and Unemployed), “we started out working only with retirees, fighting for their pensions, for better conditions. The unemployed came later and so we started working with both groups.” Rather than consolidate a common identity for all demographics from the start, many groups were formed by a homogenous base that diversified as time went by. Heterogeneity presents a problem when looking at the current state of the movement, but a chronological perspective reveals the formation of piquetero

identity took place in local, homogeneous settings where single demographic sectors coalesced.

Shifting the focus from group to individual level analysis reveals interesting insight about piqueteros' conceptualization of themselves within the movement. The popular nomenclature, *piqueteros*, is somewhat contested by members perceptive to the disdain that usually accompanies the word. Expressing his reservations on being called *piquetero*, the leader of an unemployed group remarked, "people call us *piqueteros* because that is what they see us do –picketing, blocking roads. They give us that name disparagingly because it bothers them that we protest that way. But that is not all we do –we have soup kitchens, we do community work—the roadblocks are just a small part of our activities so I find the name reductive. At first I was more opposed to it and tried to rebrand [our group] but the name had already stuck so I think the task now is to give it a more positive connotation" (Interview 2014, Buenos Aires). Others do not share that concern and find the name empowering. Being jobless or unemployed seems passive and shameful; being a *piquetero* implies taking action and working towards a goal (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 137). Hence, the pride some *piqueteros* derive from that identity, incomprehensible as it may be from other perspectives (Schneider and Conti 2003, 19).

Another commonly misunderstood link is that between the identity of piqueteros and that of workers. Workers and the unemployed seem, by definition, diametrical opposites and as such, these identities are thought to be mutually exclusive. However, the boundaries of these identities are much more porous and flexible than would appear at first. Firstly, because piqueteros also represent those in the informal sector, workers (albeit non-traditional ones) have always been part of the movement. Secondly, the flexible labor market created by structural reform results in people repeatedly transitioning from employment to unemployment. As a result, self-identified workers often find themselves temporarily without a job and their experience expands the worker identity. Thirdly, because the pioneer piqueteros were lifetime workers, through their leadership they infused the piquetero movement with a work culture that further bridges the two identities (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 138). Lastly, piquetero recipients of social plans that include a work component or members of groups that have formed cooperatives also have legitimate reasons to identify as workers in addition to being piqueteros. Consequently, there exists great overlap between these two apparently antagonistic identities.

### **Distributive Politics: Programmatic or Clientelistic**

An ongoing controversy in the literature on piqueteros pertains to the types of linkages between the movement and the PJ during the administration of either Kirchner. Distinguishing between programmatic and clientelistic modes of benefit distribution is useful in tackling this question. Moreover, a closer look at the benefits exchanged between the piqueteros and the Kirchners illuminates the groups' role within Peronism.

Broadly, programmatic linkages involve support for a party based on a match between citizens' preferences and the party's proposed policies (Stokes et al. 2013, Kitschelt and Wang 2014). Upon victory, the programmatic party should enact its promised policies and any goods derived are to be collectively enjoyed by party supporters and detractors alike. Contrastingly, in clientelist linkages the party directly distributes material benefits in exchange for votes, or more indirectly, grants favors to activists who harness electoral support for the party (Stokes et al., Levitsky 2003, 8). The distribution of goods is narrowly targeted to benefit only supporters in accordance with a quid-pro-quo arrangement.

In the context of Argentina, Peronism replaced programmatic linkages with clientelist ones (Levitsky 2003). Based on the PJ's traditional linkage with labor, its main constituency, workers could expect their ideological affinity with

party elites to result in a favorable redistribution of benefits through labor-friendly policies. However, the onset of neoliberalism reduced both the ability of the party to espouse more universal redistributive policies and of the unions to rally lower-class support. Clientelistic linkages emerged as a viable alternative for the party to maintain electoral success under the new economic model. The PJ's weak institutionalization of programmatic linkages allowed for this transition to machine politics.

The prevalence of machine politics in Argentina is not contested and has been widely documented (Calvo and Murillo 2013; Weitz-Shapiro 2014). However, parties often employ a mix of programmatic and clientelistic distribution of benefits depending on the constituency, creating complex linkage structures. Thus, even though the PJ became generally more clientelistic as a result of market reforms, it is theoretically possible to find programmatic relations with certain sectors. Analyzing the nature of the PJ's linkage with piqueteros helps assess the continuities or discontinuities surrounding the critical juncture of market reforms and piqueteros role in this transformation.

Etchemendy and Garay (2011) make a case for a more programmatic linkage between piqueteros (and the lower class in general) and the Kirchners, even if the PJ itself functions as a machine.

Regulatory policy... is the area in which [the Kirchner governments] rewarded popular constituencies more directly. By regulatory policy we mean three general initiatives: (1) price controls and export taxes and quotas on wage goods (basically, gasoline, milk, and beef) and the main food crops, (2) price controls in public utilities, and (3) subsidies to businessmen (and therefore to consumption) in areas such as energy, transport and food production (291).

These initiatives represent programmatic distribution because the benefits derived were enjoyed by all members of the popular class whether or not they supported the Kirchners. Additionally, the Kirchners nationalized the pension plan and extended coverage until it was virtually universal (297). Again, the programmatic nature of approaches to the popular sectors, including piqueteros is evidenced by the fact that access to coverage was independent of vote commitment. And, though for the most part the authors discard clientelistic relations, they do acknowledge the reliance on patronage, noting that "by 2006 at least 50 members of various unemployed organizations, including their main

leaders, held positions in the state” (287). Generally, a programmatic linkage between the Kirchners and piqueteros would be consistent with the rhetoric adopted by the movement during its origins, including criticism of the Peronist clientelistic network (Svampa and Pereyra 2009, 221).

Unfortunately, despite programmatic distribution of some benefits by the Kirchner administrations and piqueteros own criticism of clientelistic practices, the movement succumbed to the PJ’s political machine. The cooption strategy of incorporation employed by the Kirchners and the internal organization of piquetero groups contributed to a clientelistic linkage.

For the Kirchners, the cooption of piqueteros was not just aimed at curbing protests to achieve governability, but to extend their dominance within Peronism. The Kirchners took advantage of the institutional flexibility of the PJ to incorporate piqueteros and establish quid-pro-quo relationships involving the targeted distribution of benefits in exchange for support (Mayekar 2006, 63). Politically, the cooption of the piqueteros was an instrument used by Néstor Kirchner to accumulate more power than his rival within the PJ, Duhalde. Accordingly, he sought to establish a network of local support relying on piquetero organizations and the availability of massive resources for social

assistance. Framing the clientelistic relation between the Kirchners and piqueteros in terms of supply and demand, as Ponce (2007) does, Kirchner's rivalry with Duhalde provided the demand for a clientelistic network.

On the other hand, the piqueteros' organizational structure was particularly well adapted to supply for machine politics. After market reforms, piquetero groups were more representative of the popular classes due to the growth of the informal sector and the decline in political power of the labor unions. Moreover, piquetero leaders had the ability to mobilize large masses in the same way a party broker or local boss would, which hinted at their potential to deliver votes or stage rallies in support of Kirchner and his policies. The selective incentives built into the groups' organization further facilitated a clientelistic exchange. To overcome the collective action problem, piquetero leaders only rewarded with food, money, and social plans those members who participated in the group's activities. As discussed earlier, non-material benefits drew people to the piquetero movement in general, but selective material incentives came to determine which specific groups they would join within the movement. Provided with the resources to distribute selectively to active members, piquetero leaders could strengthen their group by attracting more followers and promoting greater engagement and participation. Because access

to benefits secured by the group was already conditional, making votes or rally participation a requirement for the receipt of money, food, and social plans was consistent with established practice. These leaders commanded resources valuable to Kirchner and they were willing to trade them in exchange for patronage and favors to expand their own power.

The following dynamic, observed at a piquetero group meeting, helps clarify the workings of the clientelistic linkage to the Kirchner administrations. At the meeting, the leader of the *oficialista* group reminded members of the importance of their participation in forthcoming pro-government demonstrations. In his explanation, the connection between providing support to the government through rallies and receiving benefits was made explicit: “As you all know, there is another round of marches approaching. As I always say to you, it is very important that we all participate in these demonstrations because that is what guarantees the things we have achieved so far. We have never been handed [social] plans, we have always had to work for them... Now that we get along [with the government] we must show that we can cooperate so that later when we ask for increases [in funds for plans] they listen to us. But if we do not show up to the demonstrations there are dozens of other groups who would be happy to take our place and [the administration] would see that we are not able

to hold our end of the bargain, that we are not good partners... The march organizer will be taking attendance before we depart because it is not fair that only some of us are fighting for the cause while others just show up to the meetings and to collect the benefits at the end of the month." This excerpt from the speech highlights the conditionality benefits: if a member does not actively contribute to the group, they will jeopardize their welfare assistance. Moreover, it presents the logic of the demonstration: if the group supports the government, the government will reward the group. Lastly, it also hints at the competition between piquetero groups by pointing to the fact that the government could receive support from other groups, in which case those groups would be favored in the distribution of benefits.

### **Relations between Labor and Piquetero Movements**

On the topic of competition, it is important to assess the relation between the labor and piquetero movements. Are the two movements in antagonistic terms, or do they mostly cooperate? While the literature largely addresses each social actor's relation with the state, relations between the two movements have been academically neglected.

Labor unions and piquetero groups seem positioned for conflict. They cohabit in the lower strata of Argentine society. They represent overlapping

constituencies and exhibit similar dependence on the state in terms of political status and access to resources. Both movements operate in the sphere of social protest to advance different aims. It was the retreat of labor, their inability to absorb the unemployed, and the demotion of unions within the PJ that created the space and opportunity for piqueteros' emergence. This dynamic suggests plenty of friction and competition in a zero-sum environment where each movement stands to gain from the other's loss in membership, political relevance, effectiveness in protest, etc. However, the relation between the two movements is more complex than a simple rivalry.

The experience of piquetero groups and labor unions within the *Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina* (CTA; Argentine Workers Central Union) is representative of the interactions between the movements in general. The CTA is an umbrella organization that encompasses several groups, including pro-Kirchner piqueteros and labor unions, groups of squatters, and retiree groups among others. With respect to her organization's role in bringing together such diverse sectors of society, a CTA secretary commented: "this is what is great about the CTA –that we represent the many movements operating within the popular classes and we can coordinate and formulate a coherent strategy for our social struggle. The truth is that many of the problems that the individual groups

within the CTA seek to address are highly interrelated. For example, the issue of housing and living conditions for those in the *villas* [shantytowns] is connected to the issue of unemployment, which is connected to the issue of the precarious labor market, which also affects workers in the formal sector. The people experience all these difficulties. There are groups that deal with each of these problems separately and they are performing a very important task, but here at the CTA we can take a more holistic approach and consider the bigger picture.”

In practice, this means that the CTA coordinates joint protests attended by diverse groups, employs resources on behalf of piqueteros’ and union’s (and other groups’) interests, and negotiates common positions between them. A piquetero leader weighed in on the topic: “it is easier to cooperate with labor unions under the auspices of the CTA, although we also have good relations with unions outside the Central. In terms of logistics, if we are going to stage a protest, for example, it is easier to organize with the different groups from the CTA because we are within the same hierarchy so one person can take the lead and organize who’s going to be positioned where and what message is going to be on the banners and so on... This doesn’t mean that there are not tensions sometimes. When trying to set the agenda for the CTA, deciding which points to emphasize, what demands to push forward, the unemployed groups and labor

unions often fail to see eye to eye. We each are trying to steer the CTA in opposite directions... well, not necessarily opposite, just different priorities. They want better wages and Christmas bonuses and we are not against that, but most of our people are either unemployed or working in cooperatives so those things do not apply. We are focused on fighting for genuine jobs and securing assistance to maintain a minimum living standard meanwhile." As a microcosm for popular social movements, the CTA shows that collaboration between piqueteros and labor is possible and even disagreements about priorities can be negotiated internally.

The main division, then, is not between piqueteros and labor, but rather between hard and soft piqueteros. Piquetero groups with differing positions regarding the Kirchners are less likely to cooperate among themselves than are piquetero groups and labor unions who share a common position on the Kirchners. As explained by the pro-Kirchner piquetero leader from the CTA, "those radical or so-called hard [groups] have a very different philosophy. They stuck to more extreme and defiant methods; we found more efficient methods to channel our demands and it has worked for us. But they have their own unions they are allied to as well... Everyone is entitled to their political views; that is not the problem. We do not agree with the president 100% either, but we believe we

can achieve more working within the system than against it." In short, the divisions within the piquetero movement along the lines of pro- or anti-Kirchner positions are greater than the differences of the movement as a whole in relation to organized labor.

## CONCLUSION

A theoretically grounded understanding of piqueteros helps dispel many of the academic mysteries surrounding the movement. First, a review of the origins of labor and piqueteros revealed adherence to historical patterns underpinning the early trajectories of the movements. Both emerged in close relation to profound systematic changes in the country, organized and represented the salient popular class of the time, and assumed similar political roles. In light of this analysis, organized labor emerges not as a disconnected movement, but rather as point of reference for future studies of the piqueteros.

Secondly, a reevaluation of the literature on the intrinsic features of piqueteros, enriched by primary data deriving from observations and interviews yields important contributions to some of the most debated aspects of the movement.

The logic of roadblocks, not so much contested as neglected by the literature, is illuminated through a finer understanding of the constraints and incentives under which members operate. The legacy of labor unions' strikes molded the search for a new viable form of protest that would maintain the same functional purpose of interrupting economic activity. Additionally, non-material benefits acquire primordial importance as the main motivators in the highly

principled and highly social practice of collective participation in roadblocks. The data also suggests that state repression motivated further organization, counterintuitive as it may seem. Yet again, the convergence of labor unions and piqueteros is illustrated by their common use of roadblocks as a protest technique in recent times.

The consolidation of a piquetero identity is another process that becomes more comprehensible thanks to the intellectual moves undertaken in this paper. Piquetero identity appears to be associated to the cathartic experience of roadblocks and the interplay of identity-forming elements at a very local scale where heterogeneity did not present as a problem. In terms of identity, too, the ties to labor become relevant, given that the self-conceptualizations as piquetero and as worker are compatible and overlapping.

The linkages between piqueteros and the PJ were assessed to establish a case for either programmatic or clientelistic ties. Though some of the benefits distributed by the PJ were programmatic in nature, most were found to be exclusive and conditional, consistent with clientelistic practices. The constraints of the neoliberal age, along with the mutual need of Kirchner and piquetero

leaders to exchange resources to consolidate their power contributed to this type of relation between the party and the movement.

Lastly, the relation between piqueteros and labor was examined. Contrary to reasonable expectations for a competitive, antagonistic relation, unions and piqueteros were shown to collaborate and relate most prominently through shared support or opposition of the Kirchners.

The contributions of this paper notwithstanding, piqueteros remain a ripe topic for research. Piqueteros' status as informally incorporated clientelistic partners to the PJ may be jeopardized once Cristina abandons the *Casa Rosada* after the elections of 2015. At that point not only will piqueteros likely have to renegotiate with the incoming president, but perhaps also among themselves to bridge the hard/soft divide and present a more united front. Socially, the possible emergence of indigenous people as a more assertive actor, especially in matters of land rights, will provide piqueteros with the opportunity to expand their ranks. However, it will also pose the challenge of redefining their identity and message to become more inclusive. But just like piqueteros, researchers will also be faced with numerous challenges and opportunities. Only through sustained

academic attention and theory-rich data interpretations will we achieve an expansive understanding of the future of piqueteros.

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