

ON DOMINATION AND INEQUALITY: THE CASE OF PATRONAGE POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINA

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I. FIELDNOTES, JULY 20, 2004

Daniel lives with his sister, Jimena, in Flammable shantytown (real name, despite the irony); a poor enclave located in Dock Sud, Avellaneda, in the province of Buenos Aires, adjacent to a large petrochemical compound that houses Shell-Dapsa and Petrobras among other large companies. What follows is the transcript of part of a dialogue that the three of us had in July 2004. We were talking about their ways of making ends meet – i.e. their survival strategies in the face of persistent unemployment (neither of them has had a stable job in the past two years).

Jimena – It's really difficult, because Daniel doesn't have a job or a plan [an unemployment subsidy known as Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar – Program Head of Households]. He can't even get a plan, because the punteros [political brokers] here are all sons of bitches. They give you a subsidy and they keep 50 pesos (subsidies consist of \$150 per month).

Javier – Do they take money from you?

Jimena – Yes, they take the money...

Daniel – If you don't want to work, you get \$100, and you have to give them \$50.

Jimena – And if you go to work, you have to give them \$20 or \$30... the subsidy should be free, but do you know how many times they left me out? ... If the brokers asked me for \$50 I would go and denounce them...

Daniel – No, no! Wait! Do you know how many brokers I know? Go and try to denounce them...

Javier – They cut you off the plan...

Daniel – They cut you off...

...

Jimena – You have to do what they say...

II. OF RALLIES AND BUSES

During the 1990s, the Peronist Party shifted its urban organization from union to clientelist networks (Levitsky, 2003; Levitsky and Murillo, 2006). The mutually reinforcing processes of state-retrenchment, hyperunemployment, and mass-immiseration (Auyero, 2000) substantially increased the influence of local brokers and party bosses who provide access to scarce state resources. As Brusco et al. (2004:67) assert, “The recent shift to pro-market policies and the downsizing of the state seem not to have eliminated political clientelism, contrary to some expectations.... Neoliberalism may have revived clientelism.” Patronage politics is hardly new in Argentina (Rock, 2005), but its social, political, and cultural relevance has escalated since the early 1990s – coincidentally, at the time when radical neoliberal reforms were undertaken by the Menem administration. During the 2000s, we witness the consolidation of this political practice. In order to introduce the main subject of this paper, let me provide a snapshot of the way in which patronage works on the ground.

Manuel Quindimil has been the mayor of Lanús, a municipality located in Greater Buenos Aires, for the last twenty years. He is, according to the slogan of the last electoral campaign, “the last *caudillo*” (this slogan has been reiterated during, at least to my knowledge, the last decade). During the last presidential election (2003), Manolo sent seventy-five buses loaded with his followers to the main rally organized by the current president, Néstor Kirchner, in the River Plate soccer stadium. Below is an edited description of the day of the rally and of the dominant political practices in the district as seen by a foreign observer:

Estela Cabrera, who lives in a shantytown [in Lanús], attended [the rally]. With Argentines set to vote for a new president this Sunday, such rallies – with their massive banners and loud drums – are an everyday part of life here, especially for shantytown residents such as Cabrera. Cabrera, a mother of 11, is separated from her husband and has, for the past five years, been unemployed. But she is a busy woman. She cares for her youngsters, works 20 hours a week in a nearby soup kitchen to earn a monthly unemployment subsidy and, until the early morning hours, knits pullovers for less than a dollar each, allowing herself only five hours’ rest before her hectic day begins again.... Cabrera did not know which candidate she would be rallying for, just that she would be showing up. A few days before the rally, Cabrera said that she would attend only because the manager of her soup kitchen would cut her from the workfare rolls if she did not. “You have to go, no matter what,” Cabrera explained. To her, the rally would be just like any day of work. “If I miss the rally, I need to bring a medical certificate saying I’m sick or that one of my kids is sick,” she said, resigned and exasperated at the same time. “Even if I were sick, where would I get a medical certificate from?” María Coronel [is] the administrator of soup kitchens in Lanús.... In her municipal office, Coronel told me that none of the soup-kitchen

managers are involved in politics or mobilize people for rallies. “If any do, I don’t know about it,” she said. But Coronel was being less than truthful. For the Kirchner rally, Coronel herself badgered managers into pledging to fill 40 buses; meanwhile, a smaller set of managers especially faithful to Coronel promised to bring 12 busloads of her people from her territory. Coronel’s political base is the “Happy Children” soup kitchen, where more than 100 people, including me, assembled for the rally. We rode to the stadium on buses displaying Coronel’s name in the front window.... [Most of the people in the bus] work at Coronel’s soup kitchen as workfare recipients, have children that eat at a Coronel-affiliated soup kitchen or eat there themselves.... [Most of them] including Cabrera, did not know the purpose of the rally....

Manolo has achieved near-dictatorial social and political control of Lanús by channeling state resources to the poor almost exclusively through his network of brokers. Every aid program in Lanús is run largely through the brokers – from the national workfare program to the provincial “Glass of Milk” and foodstuff-distribution programs to municipal services, such as after-school help, primary-assistance medical care, and karate and yoga classes.¹

What’s going on here? The story of Manolo, Estela and María vivifies a key mechanism in the reproduction of inequality in contemporary Argentina, the hoarding of state resources by political brokers and patrons of the Peronist Party (hereafter, PJ, Partido Justicialista). In this paper I examine the workings of this mechanism in both its material and symbolic dimensions.

The argument runs as follows: taking advantage of their privileged position, brokers from the Peronist Party sequester state resources with which they (a) solve poor people’s everyday problems, (b) accumulate political capital that helps them advance in the political field, and (c) maintain the Peronist machine in a working state. In solving poor people’s problems on a daily basis through individual transactions, brokers establish social ties with their clients. These ties, after repeated iterations, concatenate into networks linking patrons, brokers, and the urban poor. The context of widespread material deprivation in which brokers work creates certain organizational problems, the most prominent of which is the lack of sufficient resources to satisfy every single poor person’s needs. Increasingly, brokers of the Peronist Party seek to solve their own problems (and those of the machine) by creating a distinction between members of the party and non-members (i.e., insiders and outsiders), thus unintentionally manufacturing inequality. At an empirical level, this paper hypothesizes the following: With the skyrocketing of unemployment and the ensuing misery, Manolo – far from being the “last *caudillo*,” a “political dinosaur,” or an endangered species within the “complex, brutal,

decisive, and dangerous” Peronist machine (Moreno, 2004) – might well be embodying an emerging system of categorical inequality: one that distinguishes between worthy recipients of (state) aid (i.e., party members) and unworthy recipients of it. With advanced marginality, more rather than fewer Manolos might be lurking in the future of Argentina. At an analytical level, this paper identifies a set of practices the sheer existence of which collapses easy and simplifying (but still widespread) distinctions between state and non-state institutions, formal and informal politics. This paper’s analytical focus lies in a specific social universe in which inequality is reproduced through the mutual imbrication between state, partisan routine politics, and everyday life. At a more theoretical level, this paper brings together Tilly’s mechanism-based approach to inequality with Bourdieu’s attention to its symbolic dimensions (specifically his idea of “collective denial” as a veil that covers the truth of exchanges) in order to explore this (admittedly) broad (and grammatically incorrect) proposition: social inequality breeds domination breeds political inequality.

This paper is based on ongoing ethnographic research in the south and west of the Conurbano Bonaerense area of Argentina (in the districts of Avellaneda, Lanús, and Moreno) as well as ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the provinces of Neuquén and Santiago del Estero during 2000 and 2001. It is also based on secondary literature on political machines and poor people’s politics in Argentina (Torres, 2002; Goldberg, 2003; Levitsky, 2003).

III. HOARDING

April 2003. In a shantytown called Hope, in a municipality that borders Argentina’s capital city, armed teenagers stand on street corners, charging “tolls” of passersby and dealing drugs. It is a scene out of the movie *City of God*. The shantytown’s name aside, hope here is elusive. But Marta Belisan, a Peronist broker in the shantytown, provides an oasis of optimism from her expansive, sturdy shack, which serves as both her home and a soup kitchen. On the day I visited Belisan, three large trucks – which together make up the mobile hospital of Lanús – were parked outside her residence. A long line of mothers and screaming children were waiting to be seen. Belisan is part of the mayor’s network of neighborhood problem-solvers. She provides help to the most desperate, and if, in return, Hope residents have to attend a few rallies for presidential candidate Néstor Kirchner – one of four major contenders in this Sunday’s presidential election [and currently the president of Argentina] – they are often eager to do so.... Residents of shantytowns have a lot of problems: they need to find food for themselves and their children; they need free medication or burial

services; they need plastic sheets to build a new shack because a kerosene stove exploded, burning down the shack they had worked years to assemble from wood scraps. There are also a lot of things they would like to have, such as pipes to install a sewer system (so their children stop getting parasitic infections, which are endemic especially where shantytowns have been built over swamps).... Belisan the broker is available, like most *punteros*, at any hour of the day or night. Her activities vary from obtaining identification documents from the municipality to throwing a pizza birthday party for a 71-year old man without a family to trucking out the body of a young boy so ravaged by a dog that the municipal health service refused to remove it, according to locals.²

Foreign correspondent Goldberg is rightly pointing at a widespread yet still little-explored political practice in contemporary Argentina. With unemployment hovering around 14 percent to 16 percent, and more than half of Argentines living below the official poverty line, poor people find in brokers of the Peronist Party one of the few outlets to satisfy their basic material needs. As Goldberg's account highlights, Peronist brokers are deeply embedded in the everyday life of the destitute in Argentina.

Let me briefly outline the form and function of Peronist problem-solving networks. In poor and working-class neighborhoods, shantytowns, and squatter settlements throughout the country, many of the poor and the unemployed solve the pressing problems of everyday life (access to food and medicine, for example) through patronage networks that rely on brokers of the Peronist Party (locally known as *punteros*) as key actors (see also Torres 2002; Levitsky, 2003). Depending on the (not always legal, not always overt) support of the local, provincial, and national administrations, these problem-solving networks work as webs of resource distribution and of protection against the risks of everyday life. *Punteros* provide food in state-funded soup kitchens, broker access to state subsidies for the unemployed or to public hospitals, distribute food and/or food vouchers to mothers, children and the elderly, and occasionally give out toys (manufactured by workfare recipients) to parents who cannot afford such items. As Goldberg (2003:3) writes: "The main source for all these most basic necessities [food, clothes, and medicine] among impoverished Argentines is the Peronist neighborhood broker, or *puntero*." Other basic needs aside, the procurement of food is, according to my own ethnographic work and that of other analysts (Torres, 2002; Goldberg, 2003; Grimson, 2003; Levitsky, 2003), the main task of brokers of the Peronist Party. Steve Levitsky's (2003) recent work on the transformation of the Peronist Party provides an exhaustive examination of the PJ activities. Based on a survey of 112 *UBs* (*Unidades Básicas* – grassroots offices of the Peronist Party) in

La Matanza, Quilmes, and the federal capital, Levitsky (188) shows that more than two-thirds of them engage in direct distribution of food or medicine. Nearly a quarter of them regularly provide jobs for their constituents. Sixty percent of the *UBs* of Greater Buenos Aires surveyed by this author participate in the implementation of at least one government social program. In another recent study of three Argentine provinces (Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Misiones), Brusco et al. (2004:69) found that 44 percent of the 1,920 respondents

reported that parties gave things out to individuals in their neighborhood during the campaign. The most common item respondents mentioned was food, but they also mentioned clothing, mattresses, medicine, milk, corrugated metal, construction materials, blankets, hangers, utility bill payments, money, eyeglasses, chickens, trees, and magnets.

This recent survey shows in unambiguous terms the extent of clientelist practices among the poor (2004:69): “[M]ore than one-third of [the] full sample (and 45% of low-income respondents) would turn to a party operative [a *puntero*] for help if the head of his or her household lost their job.... [M]ore than one in five low-income voters had turned to a political patron for help in the previous year ... 12 percent of poor voters – 18 percent of poor voters who sympathized with the Peronist Party – acknowledged having received a handout from a party operative in the 2001 campaign.” In Lomas Verde, Moreno, where part of my research took place, two of the most important brokers have housing cooperatives, distribute milk for a state-sponsored program, and manage the largest soup kitchen in the area. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes depicts the activities of one of these brokers.

IV. FIELDNOTES, JULY 12, 2005

Mabel has lived in Lomas Verde, in the district of Moreno, since 1985. Her husband works in a bakery in nearby Villa Ballester. Together they have seven children, six of them still living in their household. Mabel is an active member of the local Peronist party. She directs the soup kitchen *Por los Pibes* (For the Kids) with funds from the local, state, and federal governments. *Por los Pibes* serves 290 beneficiaries, and some of them have their lunches in premises that Mabel built with the help of the municipal government. Others pick up their food and have lunch at home. Eleven beneficiaries of the *Plan Jefas y Jefes* work in the soup kitchen under Mabel’s supervision. She first coordinated a soup kitchen (not a *comedor* as she does now, but a less organized *olla popular*) in the late 1980s under Alfonsín’s presidency. As she told us: “My niece was not doing well, and she asked me if I could get milk for her... I went to the

municipality and they offered me help to get a soup kitchen started.” Soon, she was involved in many other welfare programs (the provincial *copa de leche* program being one) and became the vice-president of the local improvement association (*Sociedad de Fomento*). “I’ve been in politics for years,” Mabel tells me. And for her, politics means, as for many others, attending to poor neighbors’ needs, helping them on a daily basis. In return, she gets recognition and support from them that eventually translate into good standing in the party and more resources for her, resources that further her political work. “I’m everywhere... any problem [that neighbors have], they all come to see me,” she proudly tells me. “But I can’t solve every single problem! People keep demanding and demanding.” When there are elections, she says, “I gave my people the ballots to vote for the person I tell them to... they know what to do.”

Brokers direct flows of goods, information, and services from their political patrons to their clients and flows of political support (in the form of attendance at rallies, participation in party activities, and sometimes votes) from their clients to their patrons. Being members of the governing Peronist Party, they have the personal connections that enable them to gain access to resources and information about them. Brokers know the whens, hows, and wheres of the allocation of welfare resources (from distribution of foodstuffs to the spread of information concerning a new program) and continually attempt to position themselves as the only channels that facilitate transactions or resource flows.

What are you doing here? You are no longer in the program,” said a Peronist *puntero* to Alejandra, a 34-year-old unemployed woman, who was about to claim her unemployment subsidy at the local branch of the state bank in Lanús. At the local municipality, officials had informed her that she was on the list of entitled recipients. At the bank, however, an employee told her that another woman, who happened to be the *puntero*’s wife, had claimed the subsidy under her name with a note which, including Alejandra’s personal information, asserted that “she was unable to attend (“Los peajes del Plan Jefas,” Irina Hauser, *Página12 Digital*, web-accessed January 14, 2004).

The above story, thoughtfully entitled “The tolls of the Plan Jefas,” describes one of the instances in which part of the resources of the largest welfare program in Argentina (the *plan Jefas y Jefes* to which Daniel and Jimena refer to in the opening of this paper) ends up in the hands of Peronist brokers. This particular program has become, in the last year, the mainstay of subsistence for 1.8 million unemployed who receive a cash subsidy of \$150 (US \$50) every month. In exchange, they have to perform four to six hours of work daily – carrying out community work, attending school, etc. Funded by the national treasury, new taxes on exports, and a loan of US \$600 million from the World Bank, the program is similar to

and different from previous “social programs” in Argentina: it is different in its magnitude (it is the largest welfare program, so far, covering close to 20 percent of Argentine households), in the amount of legal regulations that govern it, and in the rhetorical framing that emphasizes an unspecified “right to social inclusion.” It is similar in that it puts emphasis on “assistance” to those in need (rather than on income redistribution) and in that, if we are to believe the evidence culled by journalists, human rights advocates, and some state agencies, it ends up financing part of the operation of the Peronist machine through the “tolls” that brokers collect for granting access to the program (see CELS 2003). Crucial in this respect is the fact that, after much wrestling involving federal and local officials, mayors kept control of the on-the-ground administration of the program. Mayors throughout the country have *de facto* veto power regarding who is and who is not a welfare recipient. Similar to other welfare programs (now extinct or still in operation, like *Plan Vida*, the *Bono Solidario*, the *Planes Trabajar*, and the *Programa de Emergencia Laboral*), the *Jefas y Jefes* turns into one key state resource that circulates within the Peronist problem-solving network and oils the operation of the Peronist machine.

V. DOMINATING

The more we hang around poverty enclaves, the closer we look at what brokers, patrons, and clients of the Peronist machine do on the ground, on a daily basis, and the clearer becomes our view of the daily construction of Peronist domination. Brokers and patrons of the Peronist Party pursue their own political careers, try to accumulate as much political power as they can, and improve their positions in the local political field. In order to do so, they attempt to maximize their intake of state resources (material goods distributed by the state, welfare programs, and information) vital to solving poor people’s problems *and* to winning followers: they do politics through problem-solving. They surely do not directly command the actions of poor people who need to solve pressing survival needs. Yet, the structural domination effects that are entailed in the position of Peronist brokers should be clear. In pursuing their own interests (improving their positions in the local political field through the accumulation of political capital), some of them achieve a quasi-monopoly on problem-solving.³ In so doing, they increase their capacity to narrow and constrain the possibilities of problem-holders, i.e., they dominate.

Social scientist Karina Mallamaci’s (2003) detailed study of educational policy-making and implementation in Lomas de Zamora (a district in the Conurbano governed by Peronism until 1999) offers evidence of the practical convergence between actors within the school system

(principals and teachers) and actors within the clientelist network (brokers and clients) while pointing at the politicization (i.e. partidization) of otherwise presumed non-party organizations: the COCs (Center of Community Organization), the Educational Council (Consejo Escolar), and two non-governmental organizations. Her study also detects that “neighborhood health units, local daycares, and even schools establish specific (exchange) relationships with the local (party) problem-solving network.” As she writes (2003: Chapter 7):

Twelve of the nineteen observed schools obtained goods or services through contacts with local politicians: (they got) their lawn mowed, sausages, bread, and drinks for a festival, a bus to drive students back to their homes, an entertainment center, fans for a classroom, paint for the building, the expansion of the state-funded milk program for the school, medicine for kids’ lice infection. For the politicians involved in these transactions, they imply a good opportunity to deploy their party strategies. Although they obtain concrete benefits, schools can also be losing others if the competition between politicians is strong – two competing politicians will not benefit a school population that is already the clientele of someone else.

The evidence regarding the actual capacity of PJ patronage for getting votes is quite mixed (for contradictory evidence see Auyero, 2001; Brusco et al., 2004; Murillo and Calvo, forthcoming). What is undeniable is that the very workings of the networks help the Peronist Party to solve important organizational problems: funding of the party’s operational costs, maintaining the party in an active state between elections, providing crucial personnel during primaries and general elections, etc. Favors are given (bags of food, medicines, speedy access to a welfare plan, etc.) and reciprocated with rally attendance, voting in primary elections, shows of support, etc. Brokers test, in practice, the allegiance of their followers, while clients experience, again in practice, the reliability of brokers and patrons.

VI. UNSUBTLE MODES

In 2002, the main newspaper of Santiago del Estero published an investigative report entitled “The Foundations of Power.” In the cover photo, there are two bricks, with the names of the then governor Juarez and his wife Nina printed on them. The bricks, the report asserts, were used to build public housing. Santiago del Estero is probably one of the most obvious examples of patronage and clientelist politics in contemporary Argentina (see Auyero, 2003). The report details some of the ways in which corruption and clientelism, although analytically separable, go together in everyday political practice. The report also shows one way (not

very subtle, if compared to others) in which parties and local governments attempt to build political loyalty.

“I’d like to ask you to replace Mr. Luis Cejas... – following legal procedures if at all possible – with the lady who has been the secretary of the Unidad Básica, and who has been with us for a long time and we haven’t given her anything and she also has seven children. Her name is Teresa Tévez.” This is the text of a memo signed by Yolanda Quiroga de Cisterna, a member of the Women’s Branch of the Peronist Party for the neighborhood of Sarmiento. The memo was sent to Mr. Rizzo Patrón, current vice-chief in the Secretary of Emergency Plans.... This was not the only memo. We were able to obtain many documents that ... reflect the power that Peronist activists have in the Institute of Housing and Urbanism (*Instituto Provincial de la Vivienda y Urbanismo*). According to regulations, the supervision should be carried out by social workers that are employed in that area. But members of the Peronist Women’s Branch won’t allow them to do their job (*El despliegue de la Rama Femenina las deja postradas en las oficinas del Instituto, sin nada que hacer*). The Peronist Women’s Branch and other Peronist groups ... apparently have a quota of houses that they directly give out. Many sources in the Institute told us so. According to these sources, the Institute distributes at most “15% of the houses.”

“I, Jugo Manuel (general secretary of the *Unidad Básica 8 de Abril*), report that ... Manuela Santillán gives up her benefits [from the social welfare program called *Plan de Ayuda Mutua*]. It is proposed that Jugo Manuel takes her place.” That means Jugo Manuel proposes himself as a new beneficiary.... For many years now, Juarismo made housing one of the pillars of their social policy. The idea is quite clear: hammer into people’s head the idea that the government is the one giving the house as a gift, even when the beneficiary has to pay for it in installments. “To be honest, we don’t care much if we don’t get the money back,” says an employee of the Institute. “It is anti-political, because it is expected that people think that the governor himself is the one bestowing the house.” (From Informe Especial in “*Los Cimientos del Poder*,” *El Liberal*, Santiago del Estero, 2001)

VII. VEILING

[Marta] Belisan ... categorically denies that the state services she provides are related to her political activities for the mayor. “We don’t ask people, ‘Can you come to the rally?’ We tell them, ‘Do you want to come to the rally?’” Belisan says. “The mayor doesn’t like politics and social action to be mixed.” But as Elsira Ramirez explains, her job – rounding up Belisan’s clients when there is a rally – is an easy one, seeing as “the people already know us.” Everyone in Hope knows Belisan and her inner circle.... An elderly woman who plays cards in the afternoon in the soup kitchen explains why she boards Belisan’s buses. “She’s got the [workfare] plans that are given out here,” the woman says. “She’s got medication, she’s got things for here.” (From “Client Privilege,” Jonathan Goldberg, *American Prospect Website*, April 2003, accessed January 2004)

Such denial of the demand for votes and support in exchange for favors and goods is hardly the lone work of the Martas who labor in municipal offices throughout Argentina. It is part of what Bourdieu calls “collective denial,” a symbolic dimension that is constitutive of the operation of Peronist machine politics.

In his critique of Levi-Strauss’s and Mauss’s understandings of gift exchange, Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1998) places the experience of the gift as a key factor in the construction of the veil that covers the truth of the exchange.⁴ Following Bourdieu’s insight, I argue that the way in which objective problem-solving is lived among poor urban dwellers matters a great deal. A close look at the ways in which patrons and brokers present their actions tells us that a rejection of the very idea of an exchange is being passed along. Peronist *punteros* emphasize the “service to poor people,” the “love [they feel] for the humble,” “the passion [they have] for social work,” and their “sacrifice.”⁵ This is evident in the following testimony from Susana, a powerful broker in the Municipality of Lanús. She is talking about “her” soup-kitchens program, and her comment encapsulates the brokers’ point of view on their own actions:

I take care of the soup kitchens with the love you give to your children... I direct the program as I do my own house.... The quality of the food is great because I personally taste it.... [This job] affects your health because twice a year I am in the hospital because my defenses go down, because of this vocation that one feels for what one is doing.

The following interview excerpt provides further insight into the symbolic dimension of clientelism (from the broker’s viewpoint) quite well, a dimension that analysts concerned with the immorality (and/or illegality) of this kind of political practice routinely dismiss or ignore. Segundo Alberto Herrera is 58 years old and the president of the Retirees Club in BID, La Matanza. He has been involved in local party politics until quite recently. We interviewed him at length in June 2005.

I was working in the political campaign to elect [current mayor] Balestrini. I had 21 *Unidades Básicas*. When we had to go to a rally, I called my people, and ten buses were never enough, because I filled them up. And never, never in my life, did I pay people to attend rallies. They went to the rally to be with me (*para acompañarme*), not for a bottle of wine or anything.... When Balestrini won, I organized a big party. Mind you, I had not been elected or anything. I spoke and told those who had been with me that I was thankful for all the times they went with me to the rallies. After each rally, as they were coming out of the buses, I thanked them for coming. And they asked me: ‘Why are you thanking us if we are doing this from the bottom of our hearts? (*lo hacemos de corazón*)’ I had a big following when I was working in politics.

Sometimes, recipients like Estela Cabrera are “resigned and exasperated” about the strings attached to the goods delivered by the broker. “*Soguero*” – a term I first heard in La Matanza to describe a powerful local broker – is the term that better encapsulates this critical view of brokers: “*Soguero*” refers to someone who throws you a rope (*soga*), someone that gives you a hand. The meaning of “*soguero*” does not stop there: that same rope (or that same hand, for that matter), in turn, can be used to strangle you. In years studying clientelism, I never heard a term that better synthesizes the dualism of brokerage: problem-solving and naked domination.

But that is hardly the whole story about Peronist machine politics. Many other times, recipients of brokers’ patronage, especially those with long-lasting ties with their benefactors, see them as “friends,” “caring neighbors,” or “good people” and think and feel that partisan problem-solving is not their “right” but a “favor” performed by helpful and responsible people. Sometimes, as in the case of Santiago del Estero described above, patronage works seemingly in the open; at other times patronage is veiled in subtle and deceiving ways. The following two sets of conversations that I had with shantytown dwellers in Lanús attest to this diversity:

VIII. CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DESTITUTION AND CLIENTELISM IN A SHANTYTOWN IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF BUENOS AIRES

Tomás – Look, there go the buses to pick people up...

Javier – And people go?

Tomás – Yes, people go... I don’t get it... I swear, I don’t get it...

Tomás – They use them...

Javier – And don’t they realize they are being used?

Tomás – People are too obsequious (*obsecuente*)... or there’s too much misery. Maybe they have hopes that they are going to get some help...

Silvia (block delegate working for the welfare program *Plan Vida*⁶) – I tell my husband that we should be thankful when people do you a favor. Andrea (municipal official and local broker) told me: “The only favor I’ll ask you is that you come with me to the rallies.” And I told her: “Sure, no problem.” My husband sometimes doesn’t allow me to go because there might be trouble... But I tell him that thanks to Andrea we have the pension. I made the effort, because every time they told me to go to a rally I went, so that they could see that I was interested, because if someone doesn’t budge, doesn’t show interest...

Javier – And how did you get elected to be a block delegate for the Plan Vida?

Silvia – Well, it was also because of Andrea. She got us involved. One day she came and told me about this, but I didn't quite understand because it was the first time.... One gives help and we help each other.

Another shanty-dweller summarizes the symbolic dimension of patronage (this time, from the client's point of view) well.

He [the PJ broker] is an excellent person. He takes care of people, he is an exceptional human being. He suffers, because those who go to see him will never leave without a solution to their problems. He has an answer to everybody. He willingly advises everyone.

Moral indictments made by well-intentioned journalists (Di Natale, 2005) and by analysts who focus on the collective actors that have organized in opposition to machine-clientelist politics⁷ would have us believe that the dominant practice within the specific social universe of Peronist problem-solving networks is that of explicit commands made by brokers to their clients every time they hand out the goods. Machine politics, for its critics, is all about plain orders and material resources. The more goods and services patrons and brokers distribute, the more support they get and the more power they have. Hoarding and domination, however, do not live a single life in the objectivity of resource distribution. Paraphrasing Bourdieu, we should point out that the network lives another life in the dispositions it inculcates in some of its actors – dispositions that ensure the reproduction of this arrangement. The automatic appearance of the exchange of “support for favors” should not be interpreted in mechanistic terms but as the result of the habituation it generates in beneficiaries or clients. The everyday working of problem-solving networks infuses in those who receive the daily favors from patrons and brokers a set of dispositions (and I emphasize the regular, routine operation of the network to highlight that this relationship of exchange transcends singular acts of exchange). These schemes of perception, evaluation, and action are, in turn, reconfirmed by the symbolic actions that patrons and brokers routinely enact in their public speeches (emphasizing the “love” they feel for their followers and their “service to the people”) and in their personalized ways of giving (stressing their efforts to obtain the goods and thus creating the appearance that were they not there, the benefits would not be delivered).

The network inscribes the relations of domination in the minds of beneficiaries-turned-into-followers, in the form of durable dispositions – evidenced in the innumerable manifestations of respect (“I think he [the broker] should be recognized for all what he is doing for the neighbors”), admiration (“[T]he way he takes care of people, he is an exceptional human being”), and even friendship (“We consider ourselves her friend.” “She is

always present when something happens... She is so good.” “She pays attention to every single detail”) that clients sometimes discursively articulate about their benefactors. Most of the time, however, these dispositions manifest in practice through the things party clients simply know (“I tell my husband we have to be thankful...” “Because she gave me medicine, or some milk, or a packet of yerba or sugar, I know that I have to go to her rally in order to fulfill my obligation to her, to show my gratitude”). Acts of knowledge are, we are reminded by this last testimony, acts of submission.

To be blunt, patronage might be based on material resources but it has a crucial symbolic dimension that is entirely missed by most analysts who repeatedly predict a looming “crisis of machine politics” (a “crisis,” I should add, that has presumably been in the making for a decade now). The daily social order of the machine has durable effects via the dispositions it instills in clients’ beliefs. The authority of specific patrons and brokers might well come from the resources they wield, but the authority of machine politics and the authority of brokers and patrons in general comes from habituation to the everyday workings of the network.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Close-up, on-the-ground observation of problem-solvers and problem-holders in real time and space shows us people receiving goods, obtaining access to various state programs through personal contacts, attending rallies, voting in primary elections, and committing themselves to daily party work. Different forms of social interaction take place within this specific social universe. Everyday trips to the *Unidad Básica*, routine rounds to the Municipality, endless meetings with brokers and party gatherings constitute a realm of sociability with its own rules, its catalog of things to say and not to say, to do and not to do, with its own taken-for-grantedness, its own doxa. Ethnography also provides us with evidence concerning the collective denial of any sort of *quid pro quo*; a subjective, but hardly individual, refutation of the objective exchange. To what end? True, this collective denial humanizes and personalizes the assistance given to those in need (Merton, 1949) – a dimension not to be underestimated in a context, such as Argentina, in which official neglect and indifference toward the plight of poor people have long prevailed – but it also masks the unequal balance of power within this hierarchical arrangement, presenting resource-hoarding as a “service to the people.”

In *Durable Inequality*, Charles Tilly identifies one basic inequality-promoting mechanism: opportunity-hoarding. He provides the following definition:

When members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi, network members regularly hoard their access to the resource, creating beliefs and practices that sustain their control. (1998: 91)

Tilly surely did not have the operation of the PJ in mind when defining the mechanism – more than about patrons, brokers, and clients, he was thinking about other categorical pairs such as male-female, black-white, and citizen-noncitizen. But, isn't his mechanism-based understanding of the perpetuation of social inequality useful to examine its daily manufacturing within the specific social universe of Peronist politics? Attention to the sequestering of state resources carried out by the PJ machine (a task that requires detective-like skills) and to the organizational problems such appropriation creates, should be complemented with an ethnographic examination of the cluster of "beliefs and practices" that, by veiling the mechanism, perpetuates its operation. Bringing Tilly and Bourdieu into the PJ machine, i.e., paying simultaneous attention to the structures and experiences that sustain Peronist poor people's politics, should help us illuminate the daily creation and maintenance of party-membership-based inequality.

Notes

- ¹ From "Campaign Conscripts" and "Go Between," Jonathan Goldberg, American Prospect Website, April 2003, accessed January 2004.
- ² From "Client Privilege," Jonathan Goldberg, American Prospect Website, April 2003, accessed January 2004.
- ³ This process is not devoid of struggle, as even a superficial look at the factionalism within the PJ will attest.
- ⁴ Writes Bourdieu (1998:94, my emphasis): "Mauss described the exchange of gifts as a discontinuous succession of generous acts; Levi-Strauss defined it as a structure of transcendent reciprocity of acts of exchange, where the gift results in a countergift.... [W]hat was absent from these two analyses was the determinant role of the temporal interval between the gift and the countergift, the fact that in practically all societies, it is tacitly admitted that one does not immediately reciprocate for a gift received, since it would amount to a refusal. I asked myself about the function of that interval: why must the countergift be deferred and different? ... [T]he *interval had the function of creating a screen* between the gift and the countergift and allowing two perfectly symmetrical acts to appear as unique and unrelated acts.... Everything occurs as if the time interval, which distinguishes the exchange of gifts from swapping, existed to permit the giver to *experience the gift* as a gift without reciprocity, and the one who gives a countergift *to experience it* as gratuitous and not determined by the initial gift."
- ⁵ For a dissection of brokers' public performances, their enactment and origins, see Auyero (2001).

⁶ *Plan Vida* is the name of a welfare program that distributes milk, cereal, and eggs to needy pregnant women and children.

⁷ Such as the recent *piquetero* movement, i.e., the movement of jobless workers.

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