

SOCIOLOGY

Institutional Strengthening in a Receding Movement: The Trajectory of *Piquetero* Organizations between 2003 and 2015

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This article contributes to the current debate on social movements and popular politics in Latin America by exploring the trajectory of organizations within the unemployed workers movement in Argentina, also known as the *piqueteros*. Analysts agree that the recent history of this movement is characterized by a pronounced decline due to closing political opportunities. I suggest that a shift in the level of analysis toward organizational dynamics indicates a more complex scenario. While the influence of the movement as a political actor has declined, some *piquetero* organizations have in some aspects strengthened. I argue that this strengthening took place not despite the post-2003 context, but rather because of it. I advocate for an alternative conceptualization of *piquetero* groups, emphasizing their immersion in a particular political context and culture rather than their separation from it. I use interviews, participant observation, databases of contentious events, and a diverse literature to sustain my claims.

Este artículo busca contribuir al debate sobre movimientos sociales y política popular en América Latina, por medio del estudio de las trayectorias de organizaciones en el movimiento de trabajadores desocupados de Argentina, mejor conocido como el movimiento Piquetero. La mayoría de los analistas caracterizan la historia reciente de este movimiento como un marcado declive debido a transformaciones en la estructura de oportunidades políticas. El artículo argumenta que enfocar el análisis hacia el nivel de las dinámicas organizacionales sugiere un escenario más complejo. Aunque la influencia del movimiento piquetero en general ha decaído, en ciertos aspectos algunas organizaciones se han fortalecido. Este fortalecimiento tuvo lugar debido al contexto político a partir de 2003 y no a pesar del mismo. Promuevo una conceptualización alternativa de las organizaciones piqueteras, enfatizando su inmersión en un contexto y cultura política particular, en vez de su separación de las mismas. Mis argumentos están basados en entrevistas, observación participante, bases de datos de protestas, y una literatura diversa sobre el movimiento.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, grassroots movements have become major actors in Latin American popular politics. In addition to their key role in many countries' transitions to democracy, they have consistently pushed for the expansion of economic, social, and political rights for marginalized segments of society. More recently, community-based movements that emerged as a reaction against neoliberal policies were a driving force behind the "left turn" in Latin American governments beginning in the early 2000s (Silva 2009; Levitsky and Roberts 2011). Nevertheless, capturing the complexity of most of these movements remains a challenge. The literature tends to lump together heterogeneous experiences, select against instances of failed mobilization, and downplay the links between grassroots activism and other instances of political life (see Roberts 2008).

This article contributes to addressing these issues by exploring the trajectory of one of Latin America's most recent and influential experiences of collective action: Argentina's Unemployed Workers Movement. During the late 1990s, community leaders began to organize groups of unemployed people all across the

country in order to protest the consequences of neoliberal reforms. Their use of roadblocks to demand social assistance gave the movement its name: *piqueteros* (picketers or roadblockers). These organizations rapidly became one of the most visible instances of protest in the years leading to the 2001–2002 economic collapse of the country. However, despite their rapid rise, the *piqueteros* failed to sustain their momentum after 2003 (Svampa 2008; Delamata 2009; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008). Economic recovery, combined with the emergence of a new governmental coalition that appealed to segments of the movement, changes in public opinion, and increasing conflicts between organizations, caused the movement to lose much of its influence and mobilization capacity.

I aim to complement existing interpretations of the *piqueteros*' decline by focusing on dynamics at a lower level of analysis. I argue that despite the loss of momentum of the movement as a whole, at the level of organizations the story is more complex, as in key aspects some of these groups have strengthened. While it is true that they mobilize fewer people than they did fifteen years ago, they now have more resources, expertise, and recognition by state officials than before. In addition, many have developed an inner circle of dedicated activists, combining seasoned community organizers with newer members who originally joined to address immediate needs but gradually developed attachment to the group.

In addition, I explore the role played by the post-2003 context in this strengthening. I contend that some *piquetero* groups were able to adapt to the shifting political opportunities raised by economic recovery and the emergence of a new national administration. While the years following the 2001–2002 crisis presented substantial challenges for organizations and reduced their capacity to engage in large-scale demonstrations, it also offered opportunities for accessing state support. In the short run, like many Latin American governments around the same time, the Kirchner administrations (2003–2015) sought to incorporate social movements into their coalitions of support. In the longer run, structural transformations in social policies since the 1990s opened up the possibility for a symbiotic relation between public officials and even the most radical *piquetero* organizations. State agencies reduced costs and lightened their workload by delegating the management of focalized social policies into networks of local actors, while activists acquired organizational resources they could not obtain anywhere else.

Finally, I advocate for a new conceptualization of *piquetero* organizations in order to understand better how the post-2003 context affected them. I complement comprehensive studies on the movement (such as Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Kaese and Wolff 2016) with ethnographic analyses of popular politics in Argentina (Auyero 2001; Grimson, Ferraudi Curto, and Segura 2009; Quirós 2011; Manzano 2013), as well as my own fieldwork, to emphasize the connections between *piquetero* groups and other instances of community life in the country's working-class neighborhoods. While organizations of unemployed workers developed substantial innovations in their political work and agenda, they also drew heavily from other forms of popular politics. Therefore, it was their embeddedness in local political traditions, rather than their separation from them, that allowed *piquetero* groups to remain active despite ebbs and flows in membership.

Social Movement Trajectories: Beyond Cycles of Contention

Social movement literature has traditionally focused more on the emergence of contention than on its sustainment and decline (Owens 2009). As a result, our understanding of the mechanisms that lead to the weakening of protest is much less developed than our knowledge of how it emerges and thrives (Lapegna 2013).

One of the main ways in which scholars have analyzed the decline of collective action has been through studies on cycles of contention (see Tarrow 1994). Social movements tend to cluster in time: the successes of early activists act as a demonstration effect to other actors, thus generating a self-reinforcing process that leads to an outburst of protest. Eventually, however, political opportunities begin to change. Tensions among movements emerge, adversaries become empowered, the public loses interest, allies withdraw their support, and participants begin to leave due to exhaustion or discouragement (Hirschman 1982; McAdam 1982; Tilly 2004). Thus the cycle comes to an end.

This literature has been very informative on the processes that affect collective action at the societal level. However, it assumes a symmetry between the emergence and decline of collective action that rarely takes place in reality. The weakening of contention is not its emergence in reverse: it is a process in its own right, with particular mechanisms and determinants (Edwards and Marullo 1995). For the most part, movements do not just vanish: they leave traces on society at large, on their immediate context, and on their members (see Giugni 2008). The literature's bias toward the emergence of collective action has led us to explore its decline largely through extrapolations: if a set of conditions leads to the growth of contention, then the disappearance of those conditions must lead to the demise of protest.

Moreover, the trajectories of organizations within a social movement are much more complex than the idea of cycles of contention would lead us to believe. Organizations rarely cease to exist when unrest gives way to more stable times, or when public attention to contentious topics wanes. Quite the opposite, during periods of acquiescence, organizations serve as spaces where committed activists maintain their involvement despite the weakening of mobilization around them. Although a movement might seem to be in decline, connections among participants can sustain pockets of collective action, providing the impetus for further mobilization when the occasion arises (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Melucci 1989; Staggenborg 1998). In addition, not only do organizations rarely vanish, but parts of them are frequently incorporated into other institutions which then can sustain a movement's influence beyond a peak of contention. Their members are recruited into state bureaucracies, their agendas are adopted (in part or as a whole) by nongovernmental organizations, and the skills accumulated in contentious times are translated into policy making afterward. Consequently, the connections between actors developed during peaks of mobilization can become institutionalized into more established forms of politics. This situation may raise important dilemmas for social movements, as it limits their strategic choices, increases their dependency on external sources of support, and undermines their most radical demands (Piven and Cloward 1977; McAdam 1982; Alvarez 1999). However, it can also offer avenues to sustain their influence and remain active after cycles of contention are over (Gamson 1975; Andrews 2004; Banaszak 2010). Activists are frequently able to promote their movement's goals from positions within the state apparatus (Santoro and McGuire 1997; Pettinicchio 2012), pursuing courses of action independently from the will of their sponsors (Baiocchi 2005; Park and Richards 2007; Alvarez 2009).

Therefore, social movements do not develop out of thin air or evaporate when their presence in the streets wanes. Nor do they function in a vacuum: activists are always embedded in a social environment that shapes their work in terms of their message (Benford and Snow 2000), trajectories (Viterna 2013), motivations (Jasper 1997), resources (Morris 1984), and repertoires (Tarrow 1994). As a result, the novelty of collective action is always relative. Historically, contention has emerged out of previous instances of mobilization and combined innovative aspects with the adherence to established notions and tactics (Thompson 1971; Sewell 1980; Tilly 2004). Hence, analyzing a social movement entails exploring its immersion in a particular historical context: we are unlikely to understand the growth, persistence, or decline of grassroots organizations without paying attention to their environment.

Studying the mechanisms that sustain collective action in all contexts is essential because social movements have been one of the main driving forces behind the expansion of civil, political, and social rights in the last few centuries (Tilly 2004). This fact has been especially evident in Latin America's recent history. Movements have played an active role in the democratization process that started in the early 1980s, denouncing human rights abuses and demanding free elections. Activists have also pushed for the enactment and implementation of specific social and economic rights, addressing the needs of marginalized populations and developing new forms of expressing demands to the authorities (see Roberts 2008). Furthermore, after the turn of the century governments all across the region sought to incorporate grassroots organizations into their coalitions of support, leading to an increased influence of their members in policy making (see Levitsky and Roberts 2011). These organizations developed out of previous instances of collective action and from the beginning had strong ties with other forms of political life in their countries. In other words, social movements, in Latin America as in any other part of the world, are part of a context. Few cases demonstrate this as clearly as the piqueteros.

Data and Methods

For this article I use four different sources of evidence: in-depth interviews with current and former piquetero activists; participant observation in eleven different organizations in the movement; databases of contentious events; and secondary sources in the form of an extensive literature by scholars, journalists, and organizers.

The first two sources of evidence were collected through ethnographic fieldwork over a period of three and a half years in two Argentinean cities: Buenos Aires and San Salvador de Jujuy. Fieldwork took place during the summers of 2011, 2012, and 2013, and for a year starting in December 2013. I wrote notes daily and performed recorded interviews with 153 current and former activists from eleven piquetero organizations.¹

¹ The online appendix accompanying this article includes a complete list of organizations and respondents, along with information regarding activists' gender, age, district, nationality, recruitment, and affiliation. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Their experiences reflect different moments in the history of the movement: 26.8 percent of them joined their organization in the 1990s, 53.6 percent in the 2000s, and 17.6 percent in 2010 or after.²

Interview transcripts and field notes were processed using open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I first read them in detail, writing down trends that emerged. I used this preliminary list to create a more specific set of codes, which then served as a guideline to repeat the systematic line-by-line analysis of the data. As a result, I was able to identify trends in the experiences of people in my study, as well as in the trajectory of their organizations.

The third source consists of three databases of contentious events. The first one was created by the Study Group on Social Protest and Collective Action (GEPsAC) of the University of Buenos Aires. It includes all protests registered between 1983 and 2006 in Argentina's two most widely read newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, classified by variables such as organizers, repertoire, and demands (see Schuster et al. 2006). It provides information on the relative importance of piquetero organizations during the key years that surrounded Argentina's 2001–2002 economic collapse. I focus on protests in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires because of their higher visibility to national media, which increases the accuracy of the reported frequency and strength of demonstrations. The second database was created by Nueva Mayoría, a think tank located in Buenos Aires. It registers all roadblocks that took place in Argentina between 1997 and 2007. I chose this decade as it marks the period when this repertoire was closely associated with the piquetero movement, hence providing an approximate idea of the extent of its presence in the streets (see Fraga 2008; Nueva Mayoría 2009, 2016). The third database is from Diagnóstico Político, a think tank in Buenos Aires which has compiled data on the number, location, and organizers of all roadblocks in Argentina from 2009 to 2016 (see Giusto 2016).

The fourth source consists of the abundant literature on the piqueteros, written by academics (Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Svampa 2008; Garay 2007; Pereyra 2008; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Grimson, Ferraudi Curto, and Segura 2009; Quirós 2011; Manzano 2013; Rossi 2015; Pozzi and Nigra 2015; Kaese and Wolff 2016), journalists (Young 2008; Russo 2010; Boyanovsky Bazán 2010), and activists (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD Solano 2002; FPDS 2003; Kohan 2002; Mazzeo 2004; Oviedo 2004; Gómez and Massetti 2009). Together, they provide a broad diversity of views on the history of the movement.

The combination of several types of data provides the opportunity to identify diverse mechanisms that affected the trajectory of the movement, as well as to observe the same events from different perspectives. Such methodological triangulation (Denzin 1978) allows for checking the robustness of hypotheses and addressing the limitations of each specific source of evidence. In particular, secondary sources and databases of contentious events serve as a check against a potential problem with my interview data: the inaccuracies in my respondent's recollections of past events, some of which took place almost two decades ago (Weiss 1994).

Findings

Movement decline, organizational strengthening

The piquetero movement emerged during the second half of the 1990s as a response to the increase in poverty and unemployment produced by the neoliberal economic reforms implemented by the national government. Community organizers from various ideologies began to establish groups of unemployed workers in different Argentinean cities, demanding access to jobs and relief programs. Although these groups had origins in diverse branches of the political left such as hard-line unions, autonomous community groups, and radical political parties (Svampa and Pereyra 2003), they rapidly developed a similar combination of repertoire and organizational structure that helped them recruit members and gain influence. Most organizations are networks of local groups that stage roadblocks to demand the distribution of social assistance, usually in the form of foodstuffs and positions in workfare programs. If successful, they distribute part of these resources among participants and use the rest to develop a vast array of social services in areas where the welfare arm of the state has retreated. The prospect of obtaining resources needed for survival draws people into these groups, which in turn helps them continue demonstrating.

During its first years of existence, the movement experienced an extraordinary growth. By the year 2002, it had recruited thousands of activists, had been one of the main protagonists in the protests of late 2001 that contributed to the fall of the national government, and had forced significant changes in public policies. This growth came at a terrible cost, such as the June 2002 police murder of two activists in the Greater Buenos Aires district of Avellaneda (FPDS 2003). Between 1997 and 2002 more than ten people were killed during piquetero demonstrations (CELS 2003). Despite these tragedies, the movement became a major actor in national politics.

² Three respondents were unclear concerning the year they joined.

Nevertheless, eventually the piqueteros failed to sustain this expansion, as the post-2003 context posed substantial challenges to their organizations (Svampa 2008; Pereyra 2008). First, economic recovery caused a reduction in unemployment, which despite the persistence of high levels of informality and precariousness (MTESS 2010) led to an expansion of labor opportunities for working-class Argentines and reduced the centrality of piquetero groups for the survival of many families.

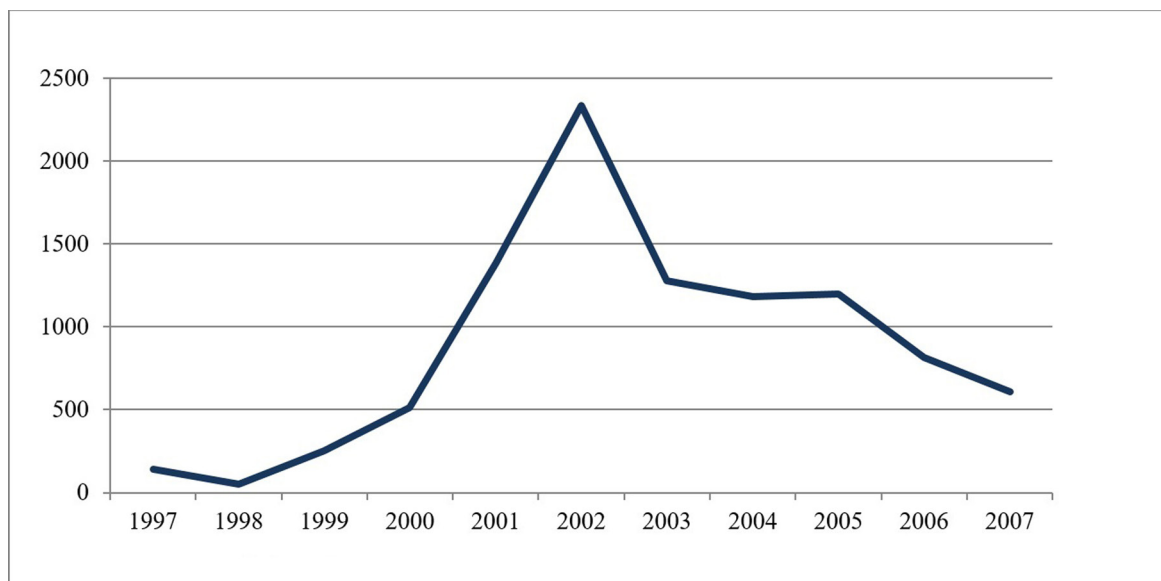
Economic recovery also facilitated a vigorous reconstitution of the political system that had been affected by the crisis (Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008). That is, the capacity of representative institutions to provide governance at all levels improved significantly. After years of fiscal deficit, the end of recession led to a surplus in the budget, an increase in the reserves of the treasury, and more generous government-run assistance networks. As a result, these years witnessed a growth in the legitimacy of the system, as well as in the public confidence in the capacity of the government to solve the problems of the country (UTDT 2011).

The postcrisis context also saw a decline in public support for the piqueteros. Shortly after 2002 the sympathy of middle-class Argentines toward the movement began to erode, giving way to calls for the return to “normal times,” largely fueled by an increasingly hostile media (Svampa 2008). The use of roadblocks by poor people was particularly criticized by a public discourse that opposed “the right to protest” to “the right to transit” (Gómez and Massetti 2009).

Finally, many alliances within the movement collapsed. This caused increasing difficulties to coordinate actions and reduced the influence of organizations beyond the local level. The emergence of a center-left government in 2003 exacerbated divisions among organizations and introduced a central cleavage between supporters and opponents of the presidencies of Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015). The ability of the Kirchners to create a coalition of forces behind a political project that distanced itself from previous administrations deprived the piquetero movement of the equation government=antagonist that had prevailed until then. Consequently, existing conflicts within the movement were intensified by new divisions (Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Kaese and Wolff 2016).

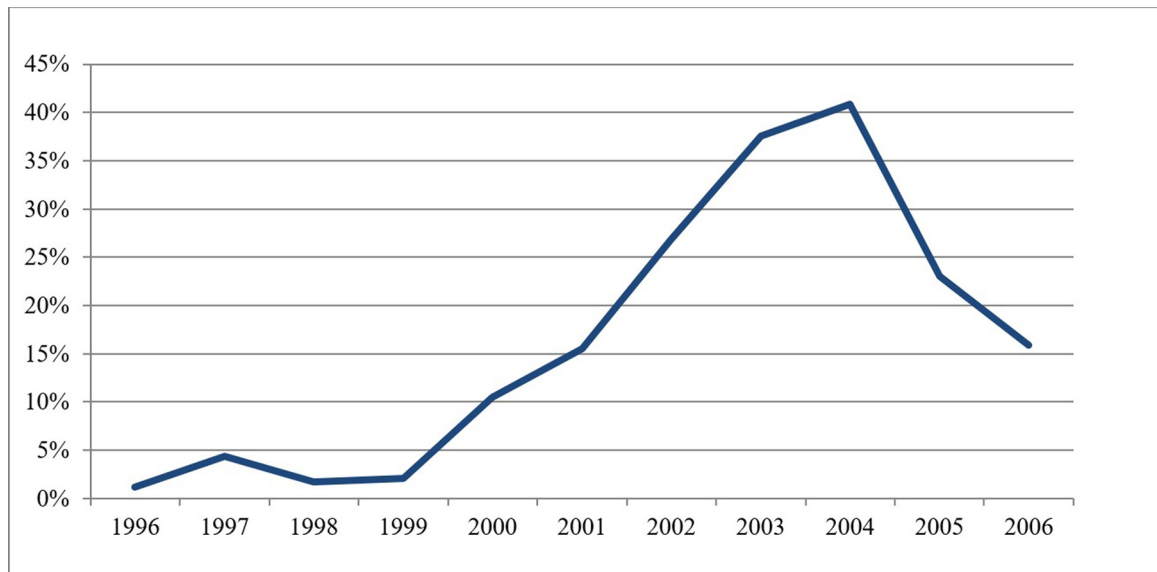
In sum, the post-2003 context was characterized by economic recovery, a reconstitution of political elites, improving state capabilities, and changes in public opinion. After peaking early in the decade, piquetero organizations began to lose members and had increasing difficulties overcoming differences. This challenging environment forced many of them to adapt their strategies and rely less on large-scale disruptive collective action (Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Boyanovsky Bazán 2010; Kaese and Wolff 2016).

Quantitative evidence strongly supports a scenario of lost momentum. **Graph 1**, from the Nueva Mayoría database, shows that roadblocks in the country peaked in 2002 and declined afterward. **Graph 2**, using data from the GEPSAC, shows the percentage of registered protests in Buenos Aires in which piquetero organizations participated. It reveals that the unemployed worker’s movement was a major driving force in protests around the city until the year 2004, when its relative importance declined from 40.8 percent to 15.9 percent in two years.



Graph 1: Number of roadblocks – Argentina, 1997–2007.

Source: Nueva Mayoría (2009).



Graph 2: Percentage of all protests with participation of piquetero organizations – Buenos Aires, 1996–2006. Source: Author’s analysis based on the GEPSAC database.

That is, after 2004 the piqueteros became less prevalent on the streets relative to other actors, particularly with regard to roadblocks. As diverse social sectors (such as unions, landowners, and environmentalists) increasingly adopted this type of demonstration (Nueva Mayoría 2016), the proportion of them carried out by piquetero groups fell from four out of five between 1997 and 2004 to one in five by 2006–2007. The reduced public presence of the movement became particularly salient in 2008: even though nationwide protests by rural producers caused the number of roadblocks to soar, less than 1 percent of these events were organized by piquetero groups (Fraga 2008, Nueva Mayoría 2009). To this day, the unemployed worker’s movement remains a minor actor in what used to be its main form of protest. According to the Diagnóstico Político database, between 2009 and 2015 piquetero organizations were responsible for an average of 16 percent of roadblocks in the country.

Therefore, as the labor market and political system recovered from the worst years of the economic crisis, the piquetero movement as a whole lost much of its influence (Svampa 2008; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Delamata 2009; Pozzi and Nigra 2015). However, an exploration of dynamics at a lower level of analysis offers a more complex story. Although they failed to maintain their momentum in 2001–2002, piquetero organizations have not vanished (Kaese and Wolff 2016). Over the years some of them have accumulated substantial resources and expertise. In particular, these groups are in a better situation than fifteen years ago in terms of their recognition as managers of social policies; the number of skilled, committed activists they rely on; and the amount of organizational resources they have.

First, piquetero organizations have been increasingly recognized by the authorities as managers of social assistance. Interactions between activists and public officials reveal a working relationship despite occasional disagreements. Ties between these actors have cemented over the years as part of the way politics are done, especially at the local level. Channels of communication remain open for organizations both opposed and allied to the national government, even during times of conflict (Quirós 2011; Battezzati 2012). As Rossi (2015) explains, this increasing official recognition is the result of a process through which piquetero groups and other grassroots organizations have sought inclusion in the political arena. Using disruptive protests, the unemployed worker’s movement has demanded (and sometimes achieved) “the presence of the state as more than a merely repressive institution” in the lives of its members (Rossi 2015, 3). A good example is provided by Valentina, who despite belonging to an antigovernment organization, constantly meets with officials to ensure a smooth application of social programs: “In the past if a fellow was not paid, we all blocked the road to make sure he was paid. Instead, now it is another political moment, now you negotiate, a fellow is in trouble and you go directly to the official with a claim. And since we have political deals, then our fellow gets paid again. It is not necessary that we all go. I go there, take the forms, make the claim and leave. That is my work nowadays.”

Second, while the membership of most piquetero organizations has dwindled, many of them still have a core of skilled and loyal activists. Over the years these groups have been able to turn at least a portion of the people who join “due to necessity” into committed cadres. Despite the fact that few recruits enter

the movement due to ideological sympathy, most lack extensive political experience, and almost all face significant barriers to participation, some of them gradually develop a strong attachment to their group. As a result, some piquetero organizations have solidified an inner core of reliable and experienced members. For instance, Simón and Belén belong to groups that have followed diametrically opposed strategies. Simón's organization was one of the first to oppose the Kirchner administration, while Belén's became one of its most reliable allies. Yet both respondents highlight the same development as a crucial achievement over the last decade and a half:

Simón: In the past you could march to get social plans, you could take twenty buses with people to a demonstration, but these people perhaps went through the organization and you didn't even know their name, because there were so many of them and they came with a specific interest. At least today, all the people who are in our movement are there due to their conviction. That is, those who stay have been tempted many times [to leave], but they keep coming because they are convinced. That's why I feel our fellows say "now we don't have that much quantity, but we have more quality."

Belén: We are in a much better shape. Much more politicized. We used to have fellows who did not understand, who were there in the neighborhood just for the assistance, without associating it with politics. That took us a couple of years, but now we are much more mature, even the fellows who are at the base understand what [our] politics are about.

Evidence for this strengthening also comes from participant observation and interviews with rank-and-file members. Of the 109 respondents who joined since 2000, 40 (or 37 percent) said they held negative views of the movement at the moment of joining, yet their post recruitment trajectory includes making substantial sacrifices to remain involved in their organizations (such as declining lucrative job offers, cutting leisure time, or severing ties with relatives who opposed their activism). In addition, during participant observation I saw 34 of these respondents voluntarily spending more time in their organization than what was required by their workfare program. Many of them used similar terms to describe their progressive involvement: "It's like you get in, in, in" (Leila); "I started getting in more, more, and from here I'll leave when I die" (Valentina); "I began to soak in, soak in, soak in, know the people, that way until stayed in there, and I am not leaving anymore" (Macarena).

Finally, some piquetero organizations not only have strengthened their inner circle of activists, but they have also accumulated resources and know-how over the last fifteen years, allowing them to embark on broader types of projects and be more resilient to hard times. When I asked Mario, the leader of a small pro-government organization, about changes in his group, he told me: "Compared to the end of 2001, this feels like Europe. Let me tell you, I am talking to you now and I am figuring out how I can buy more computers [for a classroom]. Back then I used to go house by house asking for rice, in solidarity, because if we gathered ten kilos of rice and made a big stew for all, the big pot fed more than if everyone ate rice separately, at their homes."

This accumulation of resources and expertise also took place for groups opposed to the government. Inés compared the difficulties her organization had finishing their first housing units in 2005 with their progressive capacity to undertake more complex tasks, including large-scale infrastructure projects and privately funded buildings:

Inés: We did not have qualified people. And we needed to build houses for our fellows. We reached the point of having such a bad experience that we worked six months without being paid. It was all solidary, because we needed to finish the houses. I remember fellows raised walls and forgot to leave an opening for the windows. Some fellows installed doors upside down ... millions of disasters we did there. ... And after that we did a lot of housing units. And we finished them all. Then we started with the water supply network. And then sidewalks, then painting and repairing schools. And then bus stops. ... I tell everyone, when I saw how we finished a bank branch, I really got emotional because in that same corner there is a small bus stop that we had built. And right by it there is the bank. And I see that building and then see the bus stop, and I say "look how far we've gone."

In sum, centering on the overall decline of the movement relative to other forms of political participation may obscure crucial developments taking place at a different level of analysis. Although the impressive demonstrations of the early 2000s are a memory of more unsettled times, many piquetero groups remain

active. Therefore, an exploration of organizational dynamics can allow us to understand the ways in which the political environment after 2003, despite posing specific dilemmas, also offered significant opportunities for grassroots development.

Shifting political opportunities

Even though opportunities for large-scale protests by the piqueteros became more limited after the 2001–2002 crisis (Svampa 2008; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008), there are two reasons why the post-2003 context has not been entirely negative for grassroots organizations within the movement. In the short term, the political scenario created various opportunities for them, as a new national administration sought to incorporate them into its coalition of support. In the long term, social policy reforms enacted since the 1990s expanded the possibilities for civil society groups (including piquetero organizations of diverse ideologies) to administer state resources.

The short-term political context benefited organizations that allied themselves with the government. Similarly to what happened in other countries of the region (Alvarez 2009; Rossi 2015), the Kirchner administrations, which came to power in 2003 with only 22.2 percent of the vote, sought to incorporate grassroots organizations to their coalition of support (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010; Perelmiter 2012). The need for the government to obtain the allegiance of these groups generated openings for piquetero organizations that had been mobilized for years in their communities. The government offered resources to sustain their activities: “In 2004 the minister of social welfare came here, and proposed us to join what they were doing in the ministry. So, the things we did for free, now we could do them from inside the state. The alphabetization program, we did it, but from the state” (Mario).

Members of some piquetero groups were also offered high-level positions in state agencies, and a few obtained seats in legislative bodies: “We gained recognition from other sectors, and possibilities, for example we are part of the Land Commission, which depends of the Chief of Cabinet of Ministries. That is not a small thing, because we deal with many problems, and in a way many problems with access to land are solved. We have a state representative, who is the president of the Land Commission of the Province. And many other fellows who hold political offices. I mean, we used to have nothing. So there is like an accumulation” (Graciela).

Finally, pro-government organizations received substantial funds for the management of workfare positions, as well as for construction, sanitation, and other infrastructure projects. The national administration’s strategy of strengthening its coalition of support opened avenues for the direct transfer of resources to grassroots groups, bypassing levels of government controlled by opposition parties or unreliable allies. This was particularly important in districts where local elites were able to resist the federal government’s agenda due to either geographical distance from the nation’s capital or the control of strategic resources. Such was the situation in San Salvador de Jujuy, where the Kirchner administration used federal programs to directly support allied organizations (Battezzati 2012). In the words of one activist: “[The organization] grew so much, it is impressive. It feels like it was yesterday that we started with marches and now we have a lot. . . . We built a neighborhood! It grew a lot, compared to what it used to be, it grew a whole lot” (Amanda).

Organizations like Mario’s, Graciela’s, and Amanda’s found state funding for activities they had struggled to maintain over the years. Moreover, this support came from a government that (at least rhetorically) shared many of their ideas, and in a regional context where several Latin American countries elected left-leaning presidents. The tactic followed by the Kirchner administrations was to back the development of already sympathetic grassroots groups, directing resources toward them and incorporating them into the official coalition of support (see Boyanovsky Bazán 2010; Rossi 2015; Kaese and Wolff 2016).

However, although the Kirchner administrations privileged the relation with allied groups, some organizations that did not support the government still benefited from state resources. To a great extent, this was due to the continued negotiation power of disruptive collective action and the potential political cost of repression,³ which led authorities at different levels to use workfare plans and foodstuffs as bargaining tokens to defuse conflicts. However, this outcome also stems from long-term transformations in the management of social policy. Starting in the 1990s, social policies in Argentina and other parts of Latin America moved from a universalistic logic to a more targeted one, in which the state relinquished control over certain areas of social assistance (Lo Vuolo et al. 2004; Barrientos and Santibañez 2009).

³ For example, the 2002 murder of two activists in Avellaneda forced provisional president Eduardo Duhalde to call for early elections, which were won by Nestor Kirchner (FPDS 2003).

This transformation helped state agencies delegate a significant portion of the management of welfare to all sorts of grassroots organizations (Alvarez 1999, 2009; Park and Richards 2007). This “focalized” nature of public intervention allowed piquetero groups, regardless of their ideology, to become distributors of resources, which provided important organizational support and a way to recruit members (Garay 2007; Manzano 2013).

In other words, piquetero organizations and state officials gradually entered a symbiotic relation that remained in place after the crisis. While officials were able to delegate the responsibility for the implementation of social policies into other actors, organizations acquired resources necessary for their functioning. Given the context of extreme poverty in which they are immersed, piquetero groups cannot obtain the funds and assets they need to function from their members or other community institutions. Quite the opposite, activists usually need material support from the movement in order to maintain their full-time involvement. The goods and money needed to sustain long-term collective action in these poverty-stricken neighborhoods are provided by different state programs, through a constant process of negotiation between activists and the authorities. This dynamic is evident in the day-to-day work of piquetero organizations. The following are the notes I took after a routine meeting in one of the largest antigovernment groups in the movement:

The leaders' meeting was about the same issues as always: plans and beneficiaries. Gimena explained a situation that had happened with some beneficiaries. From there, the meeting moved to the main issue: the taxes beneficiaries have to pay. ... Diego said that it has been a mistake to tell them not to pay. He said that even though paying 73 pesos per month is a lot given that they only make 1,000 pesos, there's no other way out because otherwise they will have problems with the plans. Oscar got in the conversation and said “we already decided that all fellows must pay it.”

Something to which Diego and Oscar referred a lot are the “contacts” and “political deals” that the organization has with diverse state offices. First, the group has “frenemies,” “friends,” and “contacts” within organizations and agencies that are officially adversarial. Now, these “friends” are not spies or undercover allies: Oscar and other leaders describe them as opponents that for different reasons have an interest in keeping a good relation with the group. Second, the “political deals” are described as deals that emerge out of negotiations, and which allow for the twisting or adaptation of the requirements of diverse social plans. ...

Oscar talked more in detail about these “deals” and “contacts.” He said that [the leader of an adversarial organization] is giving them a hand with the license for the radio. He said he's doing it “because he's a politician. He knows that perhaps a year and a half from now they may be throwing rocks with us.” Lucrecia said, “Let's not forget he got us the lands to build some houses.” They also mentioned the contacts they have with the social security office. (Extract from field notes, July 18, 2014)

As the above field note illustrates, ideological differences have not prevented many piquetero organizations from developing connections with politicians at the local, provincial, and national levels. These connections serve as ways to share useful information and solve problems with the implementation of assistance programs. In the previous case, when some members of this organization were asked to pay a specific tax, the first reaction of activists was to contact their “frenemies” in the administration to ask for details. After the workload of one program became too demanding for certain participants, the group negotiated a “political deal” that exempted these individuals from specific requirements. In addition, the leader of another grassroots organization with strong links to the government helped the group obtain crucial resources for specific endeavors such as a housing project and a community radio station. State officials help organizations in different ways, seeking to ensure a swift implementation of social policies and avoid open conflict as much as possible.

Thus, while piquetero organizations allied to the government received more resources, opposition groups also managed to obtain some degree of state support. Combined with their alliances with other actors (such as hard-line unions, opposition parties, and NGOs), piquetero organizations that were less favored in the distribution of resources still received a great deal of public funds, which allowed many of them to remain active. For instance, Osvaldo's organization became a close ally of the Kirchner government while Alejandro's turned into one of its most active opponents. However, despite their differences, both activists describe a similar mixture of obstruction and facilitation when dealing with state officials:

Osvaldo: The state is much more present today. From an absent state in the nineties, we have a state more and more present. With delays, with problems, with bureaucracies, with slowness. Sometimes you need to burn some tires in front of some office to make them listen to you, or you have to call and say “what do you want, that I take a thousand guys and sit there until you come out so you listen to us?”

Alejandro: Nothing happens by chance. When you are involved in the struggle, in politics ... you curse at others, but then you meet them for coffee. They tell you, for instance, “you know that in such and such district, the government gave the mayor money to set up cooperatives.” ... Why do they get it and not us? Then we go and fight for that. We go to the municipality, we discuss, we discuss. We go to the Ministry of Labor, the Palace of Government, the Ministry of Planning. Sometimes we even occupy it. We discuss, we discuss, they tell us “either you leave, or we’ll beat the shit out of you,” we say “Well, we need jobs,” and so on, until we finally succeed.

State authorities and piquetero groups have thus developed a complex yet relatively stable relation, especially at the local level, where the interests of both actors frequently align. Over the years officials and activists have agreed on an informal set of common expectations about the management of social assistance that holds true even in districts with a tradition of conflict between both actors.

For instance, Julia frequently receives logistical support (in the form of buses to take people to events) from the mayor she formally opposes: “The mayor knows what I am doing. And when I ask for buses that I need, sometimes he helps me. Everyone knows that, he helps me. I have no problem. My doors are open. Because he knows that at one moment we went with our leader to the municipality and took it, and got for them the Trabajar program, they did not have that.” In Julia’s case, the mayor benefited from the occupation of his own building, because that forced higher levels of government to send resources to the district (in the form of positions in a workfare program).

Another example is Gustavo’s organization, which has a congenial relation with the municipality despite many episodes of hostility: “The municipality respects us, because they know we know how to defend what is ours. They don’t want us to mess with them.” In this case, the relation between piqueteros and the authorities is sustained by the certainty of retaliation if any of them cheats the other. State officials know that the group efficiently delivers educational services to hundreds of people, and that its members will “defend what is ours” if deals are not respected. Hence, despite their distrust of each other, the relation stands, to their mutual benefit: activists obtain resources, and the district extends its services at little cost.

Therefore, after 2003 political opportunities for the piqueteros gradually shifted from a context that encouraged disruptive collective action to extract concessions from a debilitated government, to a new environment in which short-term calculations by political elites and longer-term transformations in social policy generated avenues for the growth of grassroots organizations. As a result, even though their overall mobilization capacity and number of followers declined, in other aspects some piquetero groups have strengthened. That being said, this process would not have been possible without these groups’ immersion in specific political traditions that predate their emergence.

Piquetero movements as problem-solving networks

The complex relation between piquetero organizations and other actors in the post-2003 context suggests the need to reexamine the movement’s origins and development. Piquetero groups were responsible for substantial innovations in popular politics in Argentina (Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008). Activists in the movement combined historical and novel grievances of the urban working class into a coherent narrative, associated with a particular methodology of protest (roadblocks), a specific collective decision-making mechanism (assemblies), and a central demand (jobs) (Svampa and Pereyra 2003). In addition, the movement has contributed to expanding the public debate by incorporating new issues, encouraging other actors to adopt more radical agendas, and constructing coalitions that challenged established political alignments (Pereyra 2008; Delamata 2009; Russo 2010).

However, piquetero activists have also drawn heavily on previous traditions in Argentina’s popular politics. Much of the capacity of some groups in the movement to remain active has been due to the resonance between their actions and a preexisting organizational, cultural and spatial environment. Regarding organizational links, piquetero organizations developed as networks of semiautonomous local groups more or less well coordinated by a central leadership (Merklen 2005; Quirós 2011; Grimson, Ferraudi Curto, and

Segura 2009; Manzano 2013). These groups and their members had extensive connections to other instances of community life, such as unions, religious institutions, land occupations, and radical left political parties (Merklen 2005; Benclowicz 2011; Battezzati 2012). These links provided resources, know-how, and networks that were essential for the movement's emergence. Arnaldo, a founding member of his organization, was among the many activists who recalled how the piqueteros developed out of previous experiences: "The so-called social movements in Argentina, the piquetero movement, all that comes from a previous formation. This whole thing begins formally in the year '98, but in '97 there was already an assembly, and in '95 people were talking about doing something. ... Notice that in '98, '99, when the first roadblocks were made, our organization did not start them, it joined later to that methodology, and backed the demands of those fellows."

In addition to organizational resources, piquetero groups benefited from their embeddedness in a specific political culture. As Robnett (1997) and Wolford (2010) have emphasized for the cases of the United States and Brazil, the success of activists at mobilizing support depends on their ability to connect the work of their organizations to context-specific cultural scripts concerning right and wrong, or what Wolford (2010, 19) calls "localized moral economies." In the case of the piquetero movement, from the beginning, organizations have been embedded in the political culture prevalent in Argentinean working-class neighborhoods, built around relations of reciprocity and trust between patrons and their constituencies (Auyero 2001; Levitsky 2003; Grimson, Ferraudi Curto, and Segura 2009). Despite their competition for resources with other networks of social assistance, the piquetero movement shared the set of norms, dispositions, and expectations that have characterized popular politics in Argentina for the last few decades.

Furthermore, much of the strength of piquetero organizations has relied on their strategic use of spatial dynamics already familiar to their constituencies. The utilization of neighborhood networks as basic units of organization, the occupation of public spaces to gain visibility, and the use of blockades to force authorities to negotiate have been present in many instances of working-class collective action in Argentinean history (Merklen 2005; Pereyra 2008; Grimson, Ferraudi Curto, and Segura 2009). As with other experiences of mobilization in Latin America (Oslender 2016; Wolford 2010), piquetero organizations took advantage of established spatial dynamics in poor neighborhoods to recruit members, advance their goals, and obtain resources (Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Quirós 2011; Battezzati 2012; Manzano 2013).

Thus, to a great extent it has been their resonance with local political traditions, more than their break from them, that allowed piquetero organizations to expand and remain active. Despite their innovative aspects, since their emergence these groups have functioned in a similar way as other instances of political life in their neighborhoods (Quirós 2011; Lapegna 2013). In particular, the influx of leaders knowledgeable in community activism, a flexible internal structure, and an effective repertoire of contention have allowed piquetero organizations to operate as efficient problem-solving networks (Lomnitz 1975; González de la Rocha 1986), on which poor Argentines rely when faced with the deprivations caused by unemployment: "People see our place like a community service center, where they can go and say, 'Hey, I have this problem.' It is not that we feel we are anyone's saviors, it is more like, 'OK, come in, let us organize and look for a solution.' And I think that tends to become like a family, because then people come to drink mate, see what's going on, what problems, brings someone else's problems. And we move forward with that. Why? Because we are just another neighbor. ... People feel more represented by people who are like them" (Carlos).

The importance of specific problem-solving networks varies with their context. As the economy in Argentina began to recover in 2003, employment opportunities became more available. In addition, alternative networks such as traditional party politics, state offices, and charitable organizations obtained more resources. This scenario severely affected the number of people mobilized through piquetero organizations (Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2008; Kaese and Wolff 2016).

That being said, this development did not significantly affect the networks of committed activists at the center of most organizations. The post-2003 context undermined the capacity of piquetero groups to attract and keep short-term participants, reducing overall membership and making large-scale protests more difficult. Nevertheless, some groups have been able to accumulate the resources and expertise necessary to cement a core structure of committed members, which can be used to engage in diverse forms of community-based political work. By providing participants with the basic means to sustain themselves, organizations allow activists to overcome obstacles that would hinder their involvement. For instance, Gloria was able to decline a job offer that would impede her full-time involvement in the movement: "They asked me what would happen if I talk with my organization so I could work as shift manager with the municipality. Because I am a person who works well. Then I decided, I said no. 'Thank you anyway for the offering,' I said 'because it is much more money, but I have another ideology. For me and my family. And I want to continue learning, studying, doing other things, it is not just making more money.'"

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the overall decline of the piquetero movement since 2003 has coincided with the strengthening of some organizations within it. Although political opportunities after that year became less conducive to large-scale protests by the unemployed, they were still favorable to the organizational growth of grassroots groups. In order to back my claims, I put forward a new conceptualization of my case study, emphasizing its connection with other local experiences of political life. My findings raise four main implications for further debate and research in the fields of Latin American studies, social movements, and political sociology.

First, understanding grassroots movements like the piqueteros has crucial implications for governance in Latin America, particularly given the uneven expansion of democracy and the persistence of authoritarian enclaves at the subnational level (Durazo Herrmann 2010; Behrend 2011; Giraudy 2015). Local activists and movements have proven themselves to be essential to expand accountability, transparency, and electoral participation in different countries (Baiocchi 2005; Goldfrank 2011). As a result, exploring the nature, strengths and weaknesses of social movement organizations can inform efforts to address the limitations of democratic rule in the region.

Second, this article emphasizes the connections between social movements and other factors that affect contention (McAdam and Boudet 2012). Only by placing the piqueteros in a particular historical and social context we can have an idea of where they came from and where they are going. The novel aspects of a movement should not distract us from its continuities with previous experiences of collective action. In particular, the trajectories of piquetero organizations have been influenced to a great degree by the legacy of past instances of grassroots development (Merklen 2005; Pereyra 2008), their immersion in a particular political culture (Grimson, Ferraudi Curto and Segura 2009; Quirós 2011), and their strategic use of space and locations in ways that resonated with their constituency (Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Merklen 2005). Hence, the contextualization of experiences like the piqueteros needs to pay attention to the organizational legacy (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984), cultural repertoires (Jasper 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Tilly 2004), and spatial dynamics (Sewell 2001; Martin and Miller 2003; Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008; Nicholls, Miller, and Beaumont 2013) that have influenced their capacity to remain active.

Third, this study highlights the importance of analyzing social movements after they leave the headlines. If the emergence of cycles of contention depends on existing networks of activists who remain engaged when the rest of society seems compliant, then focusing only on the most visible moments of these cycles will lead to inaccurate interpretations about the nature of social protest. While databases of contentious events can help us determine when protest cycles begin and end, the fate of particular groups and activists is much more complex. Not only do movements leave traces, but participants themselves remain involved during acquiescent times, sustaining national organizations (Rupp and Taylor 1987), focusing on local struggles (Staggenborg 1998), and ensuring the implementation of legislative victories into specific policies (Andrews 2004). In other words, collective action rarely vanishes entirely. The frequency with which large-scale protests emerge when scholars least expect it may not be a sign only of their complex nature but also (and perhaps primarily) of the difficulty associated with capturing the experiences of activists after they cease to be eminently visible.

Fourth, the complex trajectory of the piqueteros after 2003 indicates the need for a more nuanced understanding of the incorporation of social movements into the state. Not only are the boundaries between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized activism unclear (Santoro and McGuire 1997; Banaszak 2010; Pettinicchio 2012), but the debate on how integration and bureaucratization affect a movement's success is far from settled (Gamson 1975; Piven and Cloward 1977; Alvarez 1999, 2009; Andrews 2004). In the specific case of Latin America, given the diverse attempts by governments to incorporate grassroots organizations into their coalitions of support, as well as the increasing role that these groups play in the implementation of policies (Baiocchi 2005; Park and Richards 2007; Goldfrank 2011), binary concepts such as co-optation or integration are unlikely to capture the intricate dilemmas that activists face when interacting with the state.

To conclude, it is important to avoid conceptualizing the piquetero movement as a monolithic actor. Not only it has historically included a great variety of groups and ideologies, but organizations within it are open to very diverse views and agendas. It is to a great extent thanks to this capacity to incorporate different ideas and demands that for the last twenty years piquetero groups have been one of the main experiences of poor people's mobilization in Latin America. Thus, discussing which variant of the movement is more authentic to its original characteristics might not be as fruitful as exploring the mechanisms that allowed many of them, regardless of their particular aspects, to remain active for so long. Further research on the processes that sustain all forms of grassroots organizations is crucial, because the inclusiveness and stability of young democracies depend greatly on the work of sometimes perplexing, often complex, but always essential social movements.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** List of Respondents. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.336.s1>

Acknowledgements

Several people and institutions made this article possible, and to all of them I extend my most sincere thanks. The field research leading to it was supported by funds from the Department of Sociology and the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (Award ID: 1406244). Three anonymous reviewers offered extensive comments on previous versions of this manuscript. My colleagues at the Urban Ethnography Lab and the Departments of Sociology and Government at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as the Departments of Sociology and Latin American Studies at Colby College, gave extremely helpful feedback. The GEPSAC group at the University of Buenos Aires and Patricio Giusto from Diagnóstico Político granted me access to their databases. In addition, the Gino Germani Research Institute at the University of Buenos Aires and the School of Humanities and Social Science at the National University of Jujuy provided substantial logistical support for my fieldwork.

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How to cite this article: Perez, Marcos Emilio. 2018. Institutional Strengthening in a Receding Movement: The Trajectory of Piquetero Organizations between 2003 and 2015. *Latin American Research Review* 53(2), pp. 287–302. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.336>

Submitted: 12 May 2016

Accepted: 06 February 2017

Published: 13 June 2018

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