

“¡Que se vayan todos!”
Opportunity Structures, Social Movement Mobilization, and the
Argentine Piquetero Movement

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Abstract

The emergence of the Piquetero Movement in Argentina during the 1990s and early 2000s is the result of changing economic, political, and social processes at both the macro (national) and micro (local) levels. With Carlos Menem's election to the presidency, Argentina began a state-led project for national economic development and modernization. The opening of the economy to foreign investment and the reductions of state interference in the national economy transformed the national economy. However, the long-term economic and social costs of these reforms saw the growth of widespread unemployment among the working class, a dismantling of state assistance networks, and growing socio-economic inequality. Deteriorating socio-economic standards would lead to growing dissatisfaction with traditional political institutions and channels of representation. Since these institutions were either unable or unwilling to address the social costs of Menem's economic development program, the lower classes, specifically the urban poor and unemployed began to mobilize in protest.

Piquetero protests were thus born within the context of Argentina's push for economic development. The macro trends of economic, political, and social change that shaped the trajectory of the nation's economic growth efforts would in turn impact the development opportunities afforded to the Piquetero Movement. The changes in macro trends would thus result in the dismantling of state controls and networks that had previously served to contain and/or subdue popular unrest. New social actors, such as the urban poor and unemployed, were thus able to engaging in collective action for the first time, challenging the state's neoliberal economic model and offering an alternative form of social and political representation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Starting with the election of Carlos Menem in 1989, Argentina commenced a decade long project of economic reform and modernization aimed at attracting foreign investment and growing the national economy. Over the course of the 1990s and stretching into the new millennium, this push for economic growth based on free-market, or neoliberal, principles would result in the transformation of Argentina's economic, political, and social landscape.

Deregulation, privatization, and the opening of Argentina's economy to foreign creditors and investment would spark tremendous growth in the project's initial years. The long-term effects of these reforms, however, would eventually result in the weakening of the nation's economic infrastructure and the deterioration of the state's social assistance networks and programs.

In response to these changes, the Argentine lower class soon began to mobilize in response to what they saw as the widespread deterioration of socio-economic conditions among the country's poor and unemployed. They began to organize. They began to protest. And they began to grow. They called themselves *piqueteros*, and before long, they had captured the attention of the Argentine public, the national government, and international newspapers everywhere. Who were these people? Where did they come from? What did they want? And how were they able to transform the nation's poor and unemployed masses into such a powerful force?

The Piquetero Movement (PQM) is a grass-roots movement consisting of "out of work or poorly paid working class citizens, displeased with mass unemployment, deficient salaries and

federal economic policies” in Argentina.¹ The PQM is not a single entity but rather the conglomeration of numerous independent piquetero organizations (PQOs) and assemblies scattered all over Argentina, with a large concentration of groups located in the suburbs and surrounding barrios of Buenos Aires, Argentina’s capital city. Piqueteros are known for their unique methods of protest, the *piquete* (or picket), from which comes the moniker by which the movement is most widely known. *Piquetes* and *cortes de ruta* (roadblocks) form the core part of the movement’s activities. Individual PQOs work both on their own and in cooperation with other PQOS to coordinate these protests against the government’s economic policies and to petition for increased social aid and assistance such as temporary job creation and the expansion of state social services.

Why the Piqueteros?

I first learned of the *piqueteros* in one of my classes during my semester spent abroad in Buenos Aires. The class spent a portion of the semester studying some of the social movements that had arisen following Argentina’s latest financial crisis in 2001. The PQM was one of the groups that we studied. When it came time to pick a topic to investigate for my thesis, I decided that they were worth further investigation. In my initial research about the group, two aspects of the movement continued to reappear in my readings that seemed to set the group apart from other social movement’s I had studied.

The movement’s first distinguishing feature dealt with the national and historical context in which the movement appeared. The piqueteros emerged in a time of great political and

¹ Trigona, Marie. 2002. “Argentine Social Movements: Taking Matters into Their Own Hands.” *Americas Program*. November 7. <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/1679>

economic transition in Argentina's history. Only a short time had passed since the fall of the dictatorship that had so closely regulated Argentina's political and economic spheres during the 1980s. Having only recently adjusted to a newly restored democracy, the country soon began pursuing a swift transition in its economic development strategies. The piquetero movement appeared in the midst of these key changes and in many ways appeared a product of the instability they produced.

The role that this period of economic change and development played in the PQM's creation stuck as a particularly important aspect that distinguished the movement from other Latin American social movements (SMs). Looking at the historical, political, and economic forces that produced the PQM, I believe one can see a deviation from previous patterns of Latin American SMs. History seems to suggest a series of recurring causes that have often spawned SMs within Latin American nations such as: struggles over land distribution, ethnic tensions, dictatorships, transitions to democracy, and organized labor movement struggles to name a few. The root of these strains lies in the political, economic, and social imbalances that many Latin American nations have had to deal with over the past century. The PQ struggle, however, takes place within the context of a Latin American nation trying to foster its own economic production, development, and strength in the global market. The PQM was not spawned in response to any of the other strains I listed above, but rather by the nation's adoption of neoliberal economic policies and development strategies. Considering that other Latin American countries such as Brazil and Chile have utilized many of these same strategies with the same purpose in mind and to certain success, it seems worth investigating why Argentina's efforts towards economic modernization would produce such a negative popular response.

The second aspect was a matter of how the urban poor of Argentina had managed to mount such a massive campaign considering their socio-economic context. Considering the socio-economic status of its members, the resources (or lack of) these members possessed, and their lack of representation in traditional institutions of power, it is interesting that a movement such as the PQM was able to mobilize, grow, and negotiate with the government on the scale and with the effectiveness that it did. The PQM thus constitutes a group that seems to dispel the myth of the powerless atomized poor, a movement that despite its members' exclusion from elite institutions was able to mount a large-scale opposition movement to those institutions. How was the PQM able to accomplish these things? And furthermore, what (if any) were the connections between the PQM's ability to mobilize and the nation's larger political, social, and economic context during this time?

The PQM thus offers us a unique example of SM mobilization. First it presents a new SM context, that of Argentina in its push for economic development, and secondly, new actors involved in collective action, that is the urban peasantry of Buenos Aires that composed the PQM. Considering these two distinguishing features, the PQM presents a case in which our understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate SM formation and the contexts in which these mechanisms operate might be challenged or, at a minimum, enlarged. It is therefore the goal of this thesis to investigate the interplay between these two processes and the extent to which the PQM might further inform our conceptualization of SM formation.

Research Methodology

My research is thus concerned with two main ideas: 1) Investigating the connection between Argentina's economic development efforts in its role as a facilitator for the PQM's creation and, 2) determining how the PQM took shape: its beginnings, its growth, its organization, and the mechanisms that facilitate these processes. In order to answer these questions I will have to establish a means by which I can break down these two processes and understand how the former affected the latter. In this investigation I have chosen to take a theoretical approach in addressing these two processes. The method by which I will address my main research questions will thus depend upon the theories and frames I use to explain and analyze the PQM's national context and development mechanisms. In regards to establishing these theoretical tools, I am greatly indebted to the work of sociologists Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (MM&Z). Their work was invaluable in my research in that they established a series of theoretical categories and frames that address the political, ideological, and developmental mechanisms involved in SM creation. In this investigation I rely heavily upon their theoretical tools in order to address the forces, actors, and institutions that were in play in the case of the PQM.

Structure of the Thesis

The body of my analysis will thus deal with the application of MM&Z's theoretical frames to the case of the PQM. This will first necessitate a detailed explanation of the theories and ideas that underlie MM&Z's framework of social movement analysis, a task I will undertake in Chapter 2. These theoretical perspectives will form the basis of my analysis of my two main research topics as well as dictate the details of the PQ story that I will focus on in more

specifically in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 will address the issue of the PQM's national context. This will entail a discussion of Argentina's political and economic climate during the 1990s and 2000s and the impact they had on Argentine society at large. Based on my analysis of these processes I turn my attention to how these developments are connected with the creation and growth of the PQM. Chapter 4 will consequently focus on the mechanisms that facilitated the PQM's organization, growth, and development in reference to MM&Z's theoretical categories. This analysis will focus specifically on the events that impacted the PQM's inter-organizational development and the mechanisms that made its growth possible. Chapter 3 will thus adopt a broad lens in order to place the PQM within a social, political, and economic context, while Chapter 4, in contrast, will emphasize the micro-level processes that shaped the movement on the ground.

Ever since its beginnings, the PQM has been the topic of many scholarly articles and a topic of discussion among academics from a variety of fields. Much research has been done concerning various facets of the PQ story, but few have tried to address the movement as a whole in a way that emphasizes the relationship between the macro and micro level processes that contributed to its creation and growth. What I hope to accomplish over the course of this research project is to discuss how political, economic, and social processes on both these levels played a part in shaping the PQM. To do so will inevitably mean that my analysis will take at times a very broad lens; while at others a more detail-specific approach will be appropriated. No social movement is ever the product of any single process or change, either micro or macro, but rather the intersection of various political, economic, and social processes at both levels. Thus to cast the PQ story in terms of any single discipline or level of analysis avoids or ignores the

various other factors that shaped the PQM's development and the external context with which it had to interact. For this reason, the goal of this thesis is not to explore any one aspect of the PQM in detail, but to unify various levels and perspectives of SM analysis in order to create a fuller picture of the PQM story and of the forces, institutions, and actors that are often involved in SM mobilization.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the previous chapter I outlined two specific research topics that this paper will investigate. In this chapter I plan to explore the various theoretical models I will use in order to address those questions. The purpose of providing a basic overview of social movement theory is that by understanding the theoretical concepts that social scientists have often used to understand SM mobilization, I will have a better idea of how to approach the birth and development of the PQM. The method by which I will answer my original research questions is thus, dependent on the theoretical framework I will form in this chapter.

Social movement theory is an exercise in trying to understand the various mechanisms that spur individuals to protest, the context in which protests arise, and the organizations, methods, and frames that these individuals utilize in order to achieve their goals. Over the course of time, numerous theories and models have been suggested to explain why and how social movements form. It is outside the scope of this investigation to describe in full the numerous theories and models that have been formulated to explain the mobilization and development of social movements. However, in this chapter I hope to provide a brief sketch of some of the main schools of thought that first framed much of theorists' understanding about SM mobilization. These brief outlines will highlight each model's main arguments as well as the relevant criticisms and shortcomings of each approach.

Like the old cliché concerning every snowflake, every social movement is different and thus presents a unique set of theoretical challenges. One soon finds that no single model or theory explains perfectly and that the process of trying to understand the multitude of

experiences and structures within any certain group is ultimately one of patching together various facets of one theory with another. By understanding the various strengths and weaknesses of certain models, I will have a platform from which I can synthesize a final theoretical framework. Dissecting social phenomenon as complex and multi-faceted as large-scale SM mobilization inevitably forces a researcher to limit and prioritize the scope of his/her investigation. The framework established in this chapter will thus be useful to this researcher in that it will help distinguish the mechanisms, behaviors, and structures within the piquetero movement that necessitate further investigation and analysis in order to answer my original questions.

2.1 Origins and Opportunity Structures

In this section I argue that SM creation is largely a result of broad social economic, and political processes over which the average individual has little or no control. Changes in these processes are important because they produce two effects. First, they create the points of contention that move people to consider collective action (they create the reasons for which individuals are unhappy). Secondly, they shape the environment (political, social, and economic) with which potential protesters have to interact and contend. These larger processes thus not only produce the reason for collective action (grievances) but also shape the larger regional/national contexts that can actively encourage or discourage collective action. This is not to say that social movement are an inevitable result of certain political, economic, or social circumstances, but to demonstrate how a SM's growth (and its later development, which I will

address in the next section) is influenced by a congruence of other external processes apart from the SM itself.

Strain Theory

Structural strain theory (or grievance theory), an SM model proposed by early social theorists such as Neil Smelser, William Kornhauser, Ralph Turner, and Lewis Killian, suggests that social movements are sparked as a result of stresses placed on an a social system.² These stresses would then result in undesirable effects for a certain portion of the population. If these grievances were of a sufficient magnitude, individuals would then be moved to action in order to change their situation. Furthermore, if these strains adversely affected a sufficient amount of people, individuals would then band together in larger numbers in mutual self-interest – thus sparking the movement. Strain theory is an important idea in SM theory in that it establishes the importance of the shared grievance as the cornerstone upon which any social movement is built. Without points of contention, no one has any reason to protest. Though it seems to be a rather obvious observation it is nonetheless a very important one. Many factors that shape the later mobilization and goals of a social movement stem from how its constituents first identify and understand those strains that first motivated them to collective action. This idea of structural stress is an important building block in forming a theoretical approach to SM analysis.

However, structural strain theory only offers a very narrow perspective of SM origins. For starters, strain theory places the individual as the most important unit within a SM. This idea owes much to the research done by Mancur Olson, an economist who tried to explain SMs in

² Hall, Melvin F. *Poor People's Social Movement Organizations: The Goal Is to Win*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995, 3.

economic terms in which individual actors become the focus of analysis.³ While Olson's idea certainly has merit, when incorporated into the calculus of strain theory its hyper focus on the role of the individual only serves to limit the model's ability to explain SM behavior on a larger and more complex scale. According to strain theory, we cannot think of SMs as a unified body but rather a collection of individual actors whose decisions are made independent from organizing structures and according to a purely economic, cost-benefit analysis. Groups, organizations, and other collective networks that SMs often utilize as decision making bodies and means to coordinate further collective action are left as unexplained phenomenon. The idea that accumulated structural strain is the sole factor behind SM creation also creates several other theoretical problems. According to Tarrow, system strain is present in all societies, yet all societies are not in a constant state of social upheaval. Strain theory is ambiguous about how much stress is actually necessary in order to produce a SM. There is no benchmark laid out by which one can judge structural strains and/or at what point these strains might produce a SM. Furthermore it offers no explanation as to the number of people who must be affected in order to push those persons from inaction to action. These thresholds are left ambiguous.

As a result, strain theory does not offer a very satisfying explanation as to why SMs form at a given time. However, what it does do is provide us with two crucial theoretical ideas. First, that social strain (and the grievances it produces) is a necessary precondition for SMs to form. A logical assumption considering that without any point of contention there would be no reason to mobilize. And secondly, social strain is not itself a sufficient cause for a SM to appear. If that is the case, what variable(s) are missing? If the sheer force of social strain is not sufficient to produce collective action on its own, what additional factors must be taken into account?

³ Tarrow, Sidney G. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1994,14.

Strain theory presents a very simple idea of cause and effect: when a sufficient amount of social strain negatively impacts a portion of the population, people will inevitably react. This point of view, however, says nothing as to the origin of these stresses, the context in which these stresses occur, or how one's context might possibly discourage or encourage collective action. Social movements do not occur within political, economic, and social vacuums and it is reasonable to assume that varying circumstances in regards to these three factors would have some sort of influence on the likelihood of mobilization.

SM context and Political opportunities

Political opportunity theory offers a few clues as to how this process works. The theory of "political opportunity structures" attempts to understand how political circumstances can influence SM mobilization. Douglas McAdam's theory suggests that "collective action is a function of the changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations of a given national political system"⁴. In other words, the likelihood that aggrieved individuals or groups would attempt to mobilize is directly related to the health and/or weakness of the current political state. Why might this be the case? McAdam's theory suggests that: 1) Political weakness and change are recurring cycles that are inherently present in any political system. Though the causes behind these times of instability may vary (administration changes, transitions to democracy, shifts in political ideology or policy, etc.), every political system regularly goes

⁴ McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds. *Comparative perspectives on social movements, political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge UP, 1996, 3.

through periods in which traditional political institutions are more vulnerable to disruption 2) SMs, will more than likely be met with resistance from some section of the political establishment since its end goal is to affect a change in the political status quo. For this reason SMs are considered a form of “contentious politics”, an alternative means of engagement with the political process for those who have been denied access to traditional structures and organizations. 3) Alternative means of representation stand a better chance of achieving their goals during periods in which resistance is diminished by political division, disorganization, or change.

If McAdams’s analysis is correct, what does that then tell us about the interaction between SMs and their political environment? For one, it suggests that the ability of political actors and institutions to constrain or combat SM activity would have a large influence on the success or failure of SM efforts, thus shaping SM strategies and approaches (this idea I will address later in the chapter in regards to development opportunities). But secondly, and more importantly in regards to the present discussion, this model connects the cyclical processes of national politics to increased opportunities for collective action. In other words, the implication of the political opportunity theory model suggests that we can make correlations between external processes (such as cycles of political instability) and the likelihood of mobilization. This does not necessarily mean that there is a direct correlation between the two processes, but it does imply that larger external forces can and do play a role in creating an environment that is more conducive to SM mobilization.

Using this same logic, I argue that one could expand the list of external factors that affect the context of SM mobilization to economic and social processes as well. This is in fact, exactly the approach I will take in subsequent chapters.

Strain theory has proven to be an insufficient cause for SM mobilization on its own. But by incorporating larger cultural, economic, and political processes as potential variables in the equation of SM creation, one better understands the context and environment that first produced those strains and the SMs that are subsequently created to address them. SMs, are therefore just as much a product of their individuals contexts. By better understanding these contexts, we then have a better understanding of its later development. It is for this reason that I believe an examination of these external factors is important because they not only create the conditions for possible SM mobilization, but also continue to have implications on a given SM's development as they continue to change and reshape the political, economic, and cultural landscape with which the growing SM will have to engage.

2.2 Development and Mobilizing Structures

If these macro/external processes are the source of SM grievances and provide an opportune environment for SM creation, how then do aggrieved individuals go about constructing a cohesive movement? I have already discussed how structural strain alone has proven insufficient to explain how SMs actually crystallize. I have also tried to clarify how external processes might encourage or discourage SM mobilization considering the current contexts and affects on potential participants. Finally, in this section I will discuss the various methods and models by which the aggrieved are able to take advantage of the opportunities afforded them and begin building a *movement* (as opposed to isolated, disparate pockets of protests). These methods are what MM&Z have called *mobilizing structures*. Mobilizing

structures are defined as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action...this focuses on the meso-level groups, organizations, and informal networks that comprise the collective building blocks of social movements.”⁵ While external processes may present various opportunities for SM mobilization, these factors are inconsequential if aggrieved individuals are unable to capitalize on these opportunities. SM development is concerned with the mechanisms by which SMs are able to band together as a cohesive unit, utilizing what resources are available to them, and engage in collective action within the context of these external processes. Once again, I will rely heavily on the theories laid out by MM&Z and will be using their concepts of political opportunity/restraint, resource mobilization, and collective frames in my analysis of the developmental process.

Political Opportunities and Constraints

Earlier I hinted at how political opportunity theory might serve as a useful tool in understanding SM development in addition to how external processes shape SM mobilization. Cycles of political weakness and institutional change can be viewed in two distinct ways, depending on the period of time by which it is constrained. If these cycles are understood to be long-term processes, one could use opportunity theory to understand the historical correlations between political changes and SM creation. An example of this point of view might suggest that the political instability of Latin American dictatorships and their transition to democracy

⁵ MMZ, 3.

constituted a period of political weakness that created an opportunity for increased SM creation, for instance. However, if the cycles of political weakness are considered on a smaller scale, this theory could explain how the policy decisions of a specific administration or the health or weakness within certain political parties/institutions might affect SM strategies and/or behaviors. This first point of view I have already discussed. The second however, bears further investigation.

According to McAdams, SMs must learn to formulate strategies based on the political opportunities that they are afforded by the present political system as well restraints to which they are submitted. As I have previously mentioned, political opportunity is a result of division and/or change within traditional political institutions that weaken its ability to take decisive action. These institutions are thus more susceptible to challenges from alternative political institutions such as social movements. Protesters may be encouraged to continue and/or increase the intensity of collective action based on perceived political indecisiveness. However, depending on the context and nature of SM activity, indecisiveness may give way to direct conflict. More often than not, political opportunity is tempered by political constraints. These constraints can take various forms; both indirect measures (restrictive bargaining conditions, limiting of SM activities, exclusion from political debate) and direct (repression, police violence, etc.). Regardless of its manifestations, political restraints constitute an attempt by the political elite to exert and maintain control over SM activities. SMs must thus adapt their strategies to these constraints by either agreeing to work within their limits or transgressing these lines and dealing with the consequences. The interaction between these various restrictions and opportunities form the basis of the relationship between SMs and the state. How these

opportunities and restraints are created thus seems a pertinent issue to address in my evaluation of the PQM.

Resource Mobilization

Thus far, we have established structural strain and political opportunity as important mediating factors in the process of SM development both on macro and micro levels. Changes in political, economic, and social dynamics produces structural strains that may eventually move individuals to action in order to respond to these perceived grievances. However, even if given the opportunities, how do individuals go about building, organizing, and coordinating a SM? Organizational structures must be formed (things that strain theory did/ or could not explain) and resources must be found/recruited, mobilized, and used in order to further the movement's work (a process political opportunity theory did account for). For this reason, McCarthy, Zald, and John Wilson proposed the resource mobilization model as a way to explain how SM's mobilized and developed. According to this theory, discontent caused by strain would remain dormant until resources were made available to the protesters, thus providing an opportunity for mobilization. McCarthy, Zald, and Wilson assumed that a SM could not sustain itself without capital of some sort by which the movement could "finance" its activities. But where would these resources come from? Would those who participated in the movement supply these resources or would they have to look for resources from outside the movement? Implicit in McCarthy, Zald, and Wilson's model is the assumption that the aggrieved are unable to affect change on their own, for why would they protest if they already had the power to change their situation? This idea certainly fits with Tarrow's idea of SM as expressions of "contentious

politics”, providing a means of political engagement for those whom access to the political arena had been restricted. This being the case, McCarthy, Zald, and Wilson said that SM resources would most likely originate from outside the aggrieved group, provided by what he calls “insiders”, elite individuals who offer the movement necessary support and resources that they might not otherwise have access to. This point of the theory, however, becomes problematic since it implies that a SM cannot sustain itself without assistance from the elite.

Nevertheless, establishing and utilizing resources, both human and material, is an unavoidable hurdle in the process of SM development. In the case of the piqueteros, a movement composed of unemployed workers and the traditional urban peasantry, this process presents an especially difficult challenge since many of its members lack even the most basic of necessities such as food, lodging, and steady employment. The piqueteros’ economic, class, and social standing does not afford the group the material resources, social networks, and other pre-existing connecting structures that are often available to other SMs. Instead, it tends to isolate individuals from one another and has often meant that the lower classes were easily coerced and co-opted by politicians and political parties in exchange for basic social assistance. How were the piqueteros able to overcome these obstacles? How were they able to establish the necessary networks, organizing structures, and materials considering their lowly position? These are questions I hope to investigate more thoroughly in subsequent chapters.

Collective Framing

If the combination of political opportunities and mobilizing structures affords groups a certain structural potential for action, they remain, in the absence of one other factor,

insufficient to account for collective action. Mediating between opportunity, organization, and action are the shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation. At a minimum, people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem. Lacking either one or both of these perceptions, it is highly unlikely that people will mobilize even when afforded the opportunity to do so. Conditioning the presence or absence of these perceptions is that complex of social psychological dynamics – collective attribution, social construction that David Snow and the various of his colleagues have referred to as framing processes.⁶

Collective framing is the process of formulating SM group identity. As MM&Z have just argued this process is an essential part of SM mobilization. It involves the definition of shared grievances and promoting the idea among participants that collective action offers them an effective mechanism to affect change. If a SM fails to be able to reach a consensus concerning “What are our grievances?” and, “Can we actually do anything to change our circumstances?” it is unlikely that they will be able to launch a very convincing or successful campaign. This section will address the issue of collective framing by exploring several key questions related to this process of group identity: How does the nature of SM grievances affect SM framing? And how might the process of identity building affect further SM behavior? These processes are important because they help define SM protesters as a group, forging a common bond based on shared circumstance and common grievances. These questions are also especially relevant to the formation of the PQ as a SM considering their rather unique make-up and approach to organization.

⁶ MMZ, 5.

Strain Origins and the Building of Collective Identity

As I will argue later, the piqueteros distinguish themselves from previous social movements in LA, not because of the mechanisms by which they mobilized and developed, but because of the nature of their grievances. The “nature” of a movement’s grievances however, is ultimately subjective to its point of view. The neoliberal economic policies that were implemented in Argentina during the 1990s negatively impacted a large portion of the population, the middle and lower classes especially, and produced the strains that first moved the piqueteros to action. How the piqueteros then collectively understood and interpreted these strains depended would have a large effect on the way in which the group would frame its struggle within the context of Argentina’s changing economy. And as I will show later, the identities and frames that were created as a result of this unique point of view would impact future PQ actions, methods of protest, and goals.

Why Frames Matter

This correlation between “types” of strains and collective framing can be seen throughout LA history. Since their independence, LA nations have had to deal with several recurring categories of social strain. Among some of the most frequent have been struggles over land distribution, ethnic tensions, democratic transitions, and labor struggles. Each different situation presented a different series of strains, and as a result, the collective identities and the responses from SMOs that formed in order to address these strains took different shapes. SMs protesting land

distribution might form collective identities that emphasize common class identities among its members and call for an equal distribution of resources. Political repression of middle-class intellectuals might spark a movement emphasizing freedom of the press or a right to free speech. The identities such a movement might form and the measures it might employ to reach its goals would thus differ greatly from a group that was working to promote the rights of indigenous peoples. As a student of history, one can see that every different situation required a different set of ideological tools and methodologies. This fact is no less true in the case of the piqueteros. Exploring how the piqueteros went about solving these issues of identity is thus a central point of interest in my investigation; the last piece of the SM development puzzle.

Conclusion

What do these theoretical models have to tell us about the PQ movement? In this chapter, I have tried to outline the basic concepts behind these models and the questions they force us to ask about the processes involved with SM mobilization and development. By dividing SM creation into the two processes of origins and development, I have created a way to examine both the macro-level process that shape the context of SM creation as well as the internal structures that shape SM organization and behaviors. In the following two chapters I hope to investigate in more detail how these two processes played out in the creation and development of the PQM. First, I will explore the external forces that reshaped Argentina's political, economic, and social landscape during the 1990s and early 2000s. I must then explain how these forces produced the strain that moved the piqueteros to first mobilize and how they continued to affect and influence PQ strategies and actions. Secondly, I will explore how the

PQs took advantage of these external processes in order to fuel the internal mechanisms that allowed them to organize and mobilize effectively. MM&Z's concepts of political opportunities and restraints, resource mobilization, and collective framing will again be useful organizational and thematic tools in this effort.

Chapter 3: Argentina From a Distance: Macro Processes in Political, Economic, and Social Change

This chapter will attempt to provide the social, political, and economic background necessary to understand the historical circumstances that produced rise of the piquetero movement. This will consist of first examining the shifts in national economic policies that shaped the Argentine economy during the 1990s up through the turn of the millennium. These changes in the national economy had important consequences for Argentine society since they shaped the economic opportunities and social resources that were available to society at that time. Secondly, I will examine shifts in the political landscape that might affect the relationships between the state and social actors.

And thirdly, this chapter will also conclude with a discussion of the social costs these economic reforms generated and how Argentine society was affected by these shifts. Also, in addition to investigating the historical processes that shaped Argentina during this time, I will try to address how these processes color our understanding of the smaller processes that drove PQM mobilization.

3.1 Neoliberal Development and Argentine Economic Transformation in the 1990s

Argentina began the 1990s on rocky ground. Only a few years removed from the collapse of a seven year-long military dictatorship, newly elected president Carlos Menem was faced with a country paralyzed by astronomical inflation and political instability. Menem's predecessor,

Carlos Alfonsín, had done his best in overseeing the country's transition to democracy and attempting to solve many of Argentina's economic inefficiencies. However, like many other Latin American countries that were attempting to jumpstart their domestic economies during the 1980s, efforts at an economic turnaround produced poor results. As Alfonsín neared the end of his term as president in 1989 economic inflation hovered around 6,000%.⁷

As economic conditions had worsened over the course of the 1980s, Alfonsín's Radical government had slowly crumbled under the weight of a poor economy and public unrest. In large part due to the Radical government's poor economic performance, Carlos Menem was able to win the presidency on the Peronist ticket with 49.0 percent of the vote.⁸ In the campaign preceding the presidential election, Menem had promised huge salary increases and a "revolución productiva" in the populist-styled politics typical of old-school Peronism. However, upon assuming the presidency he soon abandoned the populist overtones and, instead, began talking of sweeping market-based reforms, changes he described would be akin to "major surgery without anesthesia".⁹

In times past, such an abrupt change in tune might have sparked immediate public outcry. However, Menem was able to implement his new economic plan with little to no resistance. Why was that the case? For starters, the severity of the country's economic problems necessitated aggressive and swift action in order to stave off further economic backsliding. Secondly, labor union protests were minimal. In the past, times of economic hardship had frequently meant eventual military intervention. Thus for the sake of political stability much of organized labor seemed hesitant to rock the political boat for fear that another such intervention might occur.

⁷ Roger, José. *La Economía Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Universidad De Belgrano, 2009. Print.

⁸ Romero, Luis Alberto. *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002, 288.

⁹ Romero, 289.

And lastly, by capitalizing on the unpopularity of the previous administration, the Peronist party was able, for the first time since the dictatorship, to solidify their political presence and place it firmly back in the political driving seat. These factors, the national sense of urgency in regards to solving the country's economic problems, the relative assurance of steady business-labor relations, and a cooperative Peronist bloke in the national legislature, meant that Menem was able to accomplish what Alfonsín could not – the free-market reformation of the Argentine economy.

At the end of WWII, Argentina was poised as one of world's up and coming economic powerhouses. As a result of its abundant and varied natural resources Argentina had greatly benefited from the exportation of primary products such as agricultural goods and livestock during the first half of the century and through the end of the Second World War. At this point in history, national leaders were searching for ways to insulate the national economy from the fluctuating market for primary goods and modernize the economy. As a result, they began looking for ways to increase the country's industrial capabilities through investment in modern manufacturing technologies and heavy infrastructure. Thus, in order to protect its fledgling manufacturing sector, government economic policy consistently insulated domestic producers from influxes of imported goods through tariffs and other trade barriers. However, instead of boosting economic production, these policies only served to isolate Argentina from international markets and healthy competition over the course of the following decades. Argentina thus increasingly looked inward towards home markets in order to prop up its inefficient, state-owned manufacturers. As a consequence, great economic and political strain was created within the federal government as they attempted to maintain the nation's finances as well as political legitimacy. In times of financial hardships, these two responsibilities often came into direct

conflict with each other since necessary economic cutbacks would inevitably be detrimental to a regime's political image and public support. It is this inherent dichotomy that was ultimately behind the downfall of numerous regimes in the decades following WWII.

Menem's answer to this paradox was to extract the state from the national economy via neoliberal reforms such as those promoted by Washington-based credit organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the WorldBank. The theory was that by decreasing state intervention and opening Argentine markets to international investment and competition, previous inefficiencies would be corrected by the market and foreign investment capital could be used to jumpstart domestic production. This would, in turn, increase economic growth thereby attracting even more foreign investment yielding further economic growth, creating an upward spiral of economic growth and development. Economic reforms centered around three major objectives: eliminating state intervention in economy through the privatization of inefficient state-owned companies, enacting austerity measures aimed at decreasing government spending to the level of the state's real fiscal resources, and the opening of Argentine markets to international markets through the lowering of trade barriers and tariffs.¹⁰

The Menem administration quickly committed to achieving these three benchmarks. Taking advantage of the Peronist majority in the legislature, two key laws were passed that facilitated a speedy restructuring of the economy. The Law of Economic Emergency "suspended all kinds of subsidies, special privileges, and promotional schemes and authorized the laying off of public employees. The Law of State Reform declared the necessity of privatizing a long list of state-owned companies and gave the president broad powers to choose the specific manner of

¹⁰ Romero, 286.

achieving this.”¹¹ In 1990 as proof of their commitment to achieving these goals, the government rapidly auctioned off the national telephone company, Entel, the national airlines, Aerolineas Argentinas, and promised to privatize other state holdings such as electricity, coal, natural gas, oil, and subways as soon as possible.¹² Between 1989 and 1993, over 302,000 public sector jobs at the local, regional, and national levels were eliminated.¹³ These cuts in government subsidies and market protections, as well as payroll reductions and decreased social spending, helped bring runaway inflation under control. Inflation had been cut from 4,900 percent in 1989 to 4 percent by 1994.¹⁴ Regional and international trade was encouraged by the reduction of tariffs and other trade barriers. The most noticeable example of this was the creation of MERCOSUR (the “Common Market of the South”) in 1991. MERCOSUR was envisioned as a free-trade zone between the member countries of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay that would foster regional trade through the removal of trade barriers and the free dissemination of information and production technology. Another early program aimed at spurring economic growth and an influx of capital was a ‘currency board’ that established a one-to-one exchange rate between the Argentine peso and the U.S. dollar. The board was created to inspire confidence in the Argentine currency and communicate to international creditors and investors the country’s commitment to the free market.

The majority of these reforms were put in place within the first few years of Menem’s administration. And for their time they produced impressive results. From 1991 until 1994 the Argentine economy grew at a rate of 7 percent. However, the apparent success as reflected by

¹¹ Romero, 288.

¹² Skidmore, Thomas E., and Peter H. Smith. *Modern Latin America*. Sixth ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2005, 104.

¹³ Lewis, Daniel K. *The History of Argentina*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001, 171.

¹⁴ Skidmore, 104.

growth in GDP disguised some of darker side effects of Argentina's economic reformation. The privatization of state-owned companies was poorly conducted and with little state oversight.¹⁵ As a result, auctions were not carried out in a way that encouraged competition but, more often than not, were used to distribute favors to loyal political constituents. The administration's insistence on expedience often meant that corrupt business deals were over-looked for the sake of the appearance of economic liberalization. Unemployment grew from 6.5 percent in 1991 to 12.2 percent in 1994 due to the elimination of jobs in the public sphere as well as downsizing in many privately held companies.¹⁶ The currency board's one-to-one ration also led to the "dollarization" of the Argentine economy and the return of inflation as Argentine goods were overvalued on international markets, making export growth harder to maintain. Additionally, the opening of Argentina's money markets to large scale foreign investment left the economy vulnerable to speculators who could move large sums of money in and out of the country with relative ease. In fact, that was exactly what happened in December of 1994 as an economic crisis in Mexican money markets led to the limiting of credit available to many Latin American countries. Between December 1994 and March 1995 more than \$4 billion dollars in deposits had been moved from Argentina.¹⁷ Though the government was able to negotiate temporary loans to stave off a national crisis, the Argentine economy would never fully recover. The honeymoon period of those first few years was over as GDP growth in 1995-1996 was reduced to 5 percent.¹⁸ By 1997 the country was officially in a recession, exaggerated by the devaluation of the Brazilian *real*, and the subsequent flood of cheap Brazilian imports that entered the country. Argentine goods, still valued at prices pegged to the American dollar could not compete and still

¹⁵ Roger, 18

¹⁶ Skidmore, 104.

¹⁷ Lewis, 174.

¹⁸ Roger, 16.

Menem's economic advisors refused to devalue the *peso* for fear of encouraging more capital flight from the country. By 1999, policies that had at first brought a strong economic recovery had left Argentina with an economy whose foundations were slowly crumbling as unemployment soared, inflation returned, and overvalued goods could no longer compete on international markets.

Economic Crisis of 2001

Menem's economic minister, Domingo Cavallo, had built his strategy for economic development around the central pillar of his "convertibility plan", pegging the Argentine peso at a one-to-one ratio with the American dollar. This gesture was designed to stimulate investment by assuring foreign creditors that Argentina was committed to economic reform and would honor its debts. Soon after it was put in effect, the "plan" produced a large ingression of capital that produced a growth in federal reserves, available credit, and domestic production¹⁹ Argentina's GDP would subsequently grow at an annual rate of 6% from 1989 to 1997, an overall growth of 51%.²⁰

Unfortunately, this growth could not be maintained. Three factors would slowly debilitate the Argentine economy. First, easy availability of foreign credit meant that Argentina's external debt grew rapidly, rising from US \$60 billion in 1991 to US \$95 billion by the end of 1994.²¹ Second, the American dollar gained strength as the decade progressed. Since the price of Argentine goods and services were still tied to the dollar, Argentine exports were

¹⁹ Roger, 17.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid

now priced above their actual value. The resulting inflation produced the gradual stagnation of export growth and a negative trade balance that allowed cheap foreign imports to flood the Argentine market. Third, currency crises in other areas of the global market such as such as Mexico (1994), Southeast Asia (1997), Russia (1998) and Brazil (1999) cast doubt on Argentina's ability to pay off its mounting foreign debt (which had been financed in dollars, not pesos).²² All together, these events spelled disaster for Argentina's economic prospects, and by mid-1998 the economy was officially in recession.

The recession only further exacerbated Argentina's economic woes. The debt crisis continued to compound, as additional loans were needed just in order to make interests payments to creditors. Sharp drops in federal reserves further debilitated government resources as foreign capital left the country. The peso was theoretically still valued at a one-to-one ratio with the dollar, yet in actuality it was worth far less. A devaluation of the peso seemed inevitable, yet Menem refused for fear of further capital flight, not to mention the fact that his successor, de la Rúa, was scheduled to take office soon after.

The new president would thus, have to pay for the mistakes of his predecessor. In the year and a half following de la Rúa's election, Argentina's economic strains reached their breaking point. Between 1998 and 2001 gross domestic production contracted by 9%, unemployment grew from 12.4% to 18.3%, investments fell by 31%, and the total exterior debt grew from \$126 billion dollars to 165 billion.²³ By this point in time foreign assistance had all but disappeared. The IMF, unhappy with the state's inability to reign in its public deficits, refused requests for further assistance. By mid-2001, investors had lost all confidence in the peso. Bank runs (on the part of both international investors and worried Argentine citizens)

²² Ibid, 18.

²³ Roger, 19.

depleted the reserves of the Central Bank to just under \$5 billion by December of that year compared to \$15 billion of the preceding October and the \$30 billion in reserves in 1999.²⁴ In response to one such run in late November, President de la Rúa ordered that all bank deposits be frozen, what was referred to as the *corralito*.²⁵

On December 19, 2001, food riots broke out in the capital city of Buenos Aires leaving 32 dead.²⁶ The next evening, December 20, thousands of lower and middle class citizens took to the streets of the capital banging pots and pans together (an event now known as the *cacerolazo*) in protest of the *corralito*. On December 21, President de la Rúa resigned amid continued riots and looting. Argentina was left in a political and economic vacuum as three other interim presidents resigned in the course of the few weeks following de la Rúa's resignation. Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, the third of the interim presidents, was forced to declare default on the country's national debt. Weeks later, Rodríguez Saá was succeeded by Eduardo Duhalde, de la Rúa's opponent in the previous presidential election. Duhalde took immediate action to address the nation's economic turmoil by promptly abandoning the currency board and establishing additional restrictions on imports and bank transactions in order to shore up national resources. However, by the end of December the Argentine peso had lost 70% of its value and GDP had contracted another 10.9%.²⁷

²⁴ Romero, 339.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 347

²⁶ Burbach, Roger. "Throw Them All Out: Argentina's Grassroots Rebellion." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 36.1 (2002). *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Oct. 2009. <<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.umiss.lib.olemiss.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=7116250&site=ehost-live&scope=site>>.

²⁷ Roger, 19.

3.2 Reformation Repercussions: A Changing Political Landscape

In terms of the larger political processes at play in Argentina during the 1990s and early 2001, reform resulted in the gradual loss of trust in government institutions and a search for alternative means of representation. In Menem's first presidential campaign platform, he had not only emphasized the importance of economic reform, but also a return to honest government and an end to state corruption. Yet these goals for reducing state corruption were not compatible with his administration's practices.²⁸ In the words of one trade union official, "Nobody makes money by working."²⁹ Political favoritism continued as usual since these practices allowed Menem to consolidate his political power and continue implementing reform legislation, despite campaign promises to clean up corrupt government practices. Various scandals were uncovered during the course of his administration involving the government auction of state companies as well as the bribing of congressman.³⁰

Though Carlos Menem was effectively able to secure his reelection to the presidency in 1995 (amending the nation's constitution in order to do so), his administration did not fare nearly as well in the latter half of the 1990s as it did in the first. The economic dynamism that characterized his first term in office was largely absent from the period of 1995-1999 due to the nation's deteriorating economic infrastructure and growing foreign debt. The enthusiasm with which his administration had initially embraced the new economic model offered to them by organizations such as the IMF and WorldBank had been a product of necessity. The previous

²⁸ Villalón, Roberta. "Neoliberalism, Corruption, and Legacies of Contention: Argentina's Social Movements, 1993-2006." *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-first Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy*. Ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Glen David. Kuecker, and Harry E. Vanden. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 254.

²⁹ Romero, 298.

³⁰ Romero, 274.

president, Raúl Alfonsín, had left the national economy in shambles requiring swift action on the part of the new administration. In order to attract foreign investment and stimulate production, Menem immediately began redesigning Argentine economic policy around the IMF supported neoliberal economic model, placing an emphasis on fiscal austerity and free-market efficiency. The political will and leverage that was necessary to implement these measures in such a short amount of time proceeded largely from the executive branch. State funds and resources were often distributed to provincial governments and politicians as a means of ensuring their political cooperation and support. Presidential decrees were also largely used in policy implementation in order to circumvent the national legislature and allow the president to swiftly address economic issues. However, such a strong leadership style left Menem increasingly isolated politically and his political leverage dependent upon his ability to deliver political favors. As economic growth slowed during the mid-1990s, state coffers began to run dry and Menem was no longer able to sustain the patronage networks that had preserved the political and social order to that point. As a result, his administration suffered a large loss of public and political support in its final years as the economy continued to worsen.

Argentina's political opposition took advantage of the administration's waning popularity by establishing the Alianza por el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educacion (simply known as "la Alianza") in preparation for the 1997 congressional elections. La Alianza was a political alliance between Argentina's two largest opposition parties, the Radical Party (UCR) and the FREPASO (Frente por un País Solidario). Individually, these two organizations had been unsuccessful over the past decade in their attempts to challenge Menem's Justialist Party (PJ, the modern-day representation of Argentina's Peronist party). Yet by joining forces under the banner of La Alianza, they were able to garner close to 46% of the vote in mid-term congressional elections

and effectively threaten the Justicialist's political dominance in the legislature. Though La Alianza did not publicly disagree with Menem's economic policies it was able to gain support by drawing attention to existing social inequalities, unemployment, and government corruption. Continuing with this strategy into the 1999 presidential election, la Alianza succeeded in electing its candidate, Fernando de la Rúa, with 48.5% of the vote, 10% more than the Peronist candidate Eduardo Duhalde.³¹

De la Rúa's Alianza administration inherited the growing national debt and social unrest that the previous administration's policies had produced. Yet, despite the regime change they were unable to alter the course of the economy. Why? Firstly, the FREPASO-UCR coalition had been forged on shaky ground from the start. Despite its electoral success, the coalition lacked the legislative majority that would have been necessary to attempt the in-depth reform necessary to produce any sort of national economic recovery. Though the Peronist block was never unremittingly hostile towards de la Rúa's administration, it was unenthusiastic towards proposed reforms and slow to mobilize any support until the last moment.³² Furthermore, the resignation of Vice-President Carlos Álvarez towards the end of 2002 seriously weakened the administration's political footing. Álvarez had been the FREPASO half of the Alianza's presidential ticket in 1999 and had been crucial in attracting voters from the left of the political spectrum. As a result of his resignation, the remaining FREPASO members abandoned la Alianza in March 2001.³³ The administration's political allies were thus scattered and divided in one of its greatest times of need.

Crucial changes in the country's economic infrastructure had also crippled any chance the

³¹ Romero, 317.

³² Ibid, 338.

³³ Lewis, 182.

administration had for a swift recovery. Most of these changes have already been discussed in detail, but it bears to reiterate several key macroeconomic factors. The previous administration's economic pillar, convertibility, had undermined the country's ability to overcome its trade deficits. The currency board had provided the illusion of stability to foreign investors while also crippling the growth of domestic exports. The unregulated opening of the economy also left the nation's money supply incredibly vulnerable to the whims of international investment brokers who were able to move large amounts of money in and out of the country. The uncertain ebb and flow of these investments prevented the state from being able to form any medium or long-term plan for stable economic growth and left the economy overly exposed to market fluctuations. Furthermore, austerity meant that the state was unable to help overcome the limitations of the Argentine work force. Any long-term growth would be dependent on the nation's ability to retool its work force for a globalized economy through improved access to education, social services, and advanced technology.³⁴ The economy's reliance upon IMF bridge loans and international creditors prevented the state from this type of long-term social investment.

De la Rúa's administration was thus politically immobilized as a result of the country's economic predicament – unable to spark economic growth due to its lack of political capital and the limitations of the Argentine workforce, and unable to address the social needs of the working class because of the poor economic performance and mounting debt. De la Rúa was thus found himself the captain of a sinking ship. As a result of this vulnerable position, De la Rúa resigned from the presidency soon after the explosion of riots and protests in Buenos Aires during the December of 2001. His previous opponent in the 1999 presidential election, the Peronist

³⁴ Roger, 21.

Eduardo Duhalde, would succeed him weeks later.

3.3 Reformation Repercussion: The Social Costs of Economic Development

Economic reform not only had enormous consequences for the country's political landscape but also produced numerous socio-economic costs among the Argentina's working class and, later (although to a lesser degree), among the Argentine middle class as well as the economic slowdown of the late 1990s continued. In this section, I will address how the implementation of neoliberal reforms facilitated three specific transformations: the state's abandonment of its role as a guarantor of stable employment and social services, the diminishing role of traditional state institutions, such as unions, as methods of political and social representation, and the polarization of Argentine society according to the economic and social opportunities afforded to different socio-economic groups. By reshaping the landscape of the Argentine public's economic, political, and social opportunities, these processes would consequently facilitate the creation of a new wave of national protests in which the PQM would play an important role. An investigation as to how neoliberal reforms transformed Argentine society is thus important because these macro processes would subsequently set the stage for later PQ mobilization.

In Argentina, access to employment, along with other public goods such as education, health care, and social security, was viewed as a public right that should be available to all citizens. This idea can be traced back to the state-labor relations that were forged during the presidency of Juan Peron in the 1940s. Peron's populist political practices created strong links

between the national government and Argentina's working class. His incorporation of the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT, Argentina's national workers union) into the political structure of the national government during his times in office serves as evidence of the close relations he fostered between the state and the Argentine labor movement. Peron's political career was consequently built on the back of the Argentine worker and his political power was dependent upon keeping this sector of society happy as a consequence. His wide base of popular support among the Argentina's workers thus stemmed from his efforts at expanding job opportunities (through the construction of industrial plants and factories), increasing salaries and working conditions, and expanding the networks of social services available to the working class. These populist political practices became the defining characteristic of the Peronist party.

This political strategy (targeting the working class as one's political support base) was consequently adopted and utilized by subsequent Peronist administrations throughout the twentieth century, to more or less to the same effect. As a consequence, the Argentine working class had come to expect the national government to assume the responsibilities of ensuring opportunities for employment as well as other social service programs. And it was upon this political platform that Carlos Menem had launched his campaign for the presidency in 1989. However, once in office, Menem changed his tune drastically. According to his economic advisors, the social responsibilities the state had assumed placed an unnecessary burden on state resources, resulting in a growing national deficit and an inefficient industrial sector. Consequently, the best way to improve Argentina's long-term prospects for prosperity would be through unhindered economic development; development that could only be achieved through an emphasis on efficiency and decreasing state interference in the economy.

Reaching these goals, however, ultimately meant a drastic reduction of the labor force. Pay roll cuts across government agencies and the auction of state-owned companies helped cut government expenses. Newly privatized companies often then faced additional downsizing of their work force in order to cut overhead, and those who still had jobs suffered sharp drops in real wages.³⁵ The state's assurance of employment was thus sacrificed for the sake of economic growth and exchanged for the principles of labor "flexibility" that these free-market policies necessitated. The social contract to which the Peronist party had committed itself (at least in theory if not in practice) was broken as a consequence. In the spirit of free-market capitalism and in an effort to control state spending and reduce the national debt, the state began dissolving its networks of social assistance programs, privatizing state-companies, and subjecting the national economy to the external forces of the global market. The implications of this decision would have far reaching effects, not only in terms of the nation's economy, but also in terms of the state-labor dynamics.

One additional consequence of Menem's economic reform was thus the diminishing importance of institutions that had previously facilitated state-society interactions. Organizations that had traditionally served as representatives for the Argentine labor movement, such as the CGT, became seen as increasingly irrelevant. Argentine unions had traditionally been an important mechanism by which the state was able to maintain the balance between capitalist and labor interests. These syndicates were integrated into the national political system and served as conduits through which workers could voice their needs, concerns, and demands to the government. During the Alfonsín era, leaders of the CGT organized massive strikes in protest of

³⁵ Romero, 321.

the country's poor economic condition that greatly destabilized that president's administration. Yet Menem's reform measures faced minimal opposition from organized labor, despite their economic consequences, and what protests did occur had little impact on the course of government policy.

This rapid decline of union influence was the result of the nation's new economic circumstances as well as changing dynamics within the labor movement itself. First of all, growing unemployment meant that there were simply fewer active members in each labor organization. Secondly, growing disagreement among union leaders over what to do in response to the Menem government's actions split the CGT in two and limited the size and impact of later popular protests as the reforms continued.^{36,37} Thirdly, corruption damaged the legitimacy of the union leadership in the eyes of industrial workers. The close ties between workers' unions and national politics, forged during the post-war period of the 1940s, had created tight bonds between the Peronist party and the CGT. Unions became an extension of the party apparatus and as such, union leaders became involved in the political favoritism and clientelism for which the Peronist Party is famous. In the 1990s these practices became more and more common in order to ensure union cooperation and support for new reforms. Workers protested these practices by publicly accusing union leaders of "illegal political practices (such as off-the-record agreements with government authorities over financial matters), misrepresentation of social interests (such as benefiting unions' elites as opposed to the bases), and misuse of public funds (such as hidden

³⁶ Lewis, 170.

³⁷ As a result of these differing opinions, dissenting CGT leaders formed splinter organizations such as the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA) and the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos* (MTA). These groups would later go on to organize manifestations and strikes associated with the PQM in protest of state economic policies.

investments of resources for non-union purposes).”³⁸ By only mobilizing to protect the privileges of their elite few, union officials increasingly distanced themselves from their constituencies. As a result, an institution that had once been a lynchpin in state-society relations was now seen as an aloof extension of the current Peronist administration in which workers, both employed and unemployed, found themselves on the outskirts of the political and economic landscape.

New economic policies also played a large part in reshaping the country’s socio-economic make-up. The Menem administration’s push for economic development encouraged economic growth at all costs and was achieved, often times, regardless of its long-term social costs. Yet As long as national production increased and GDP continued to grow, Argentine politicians seemed willing to overlook the reforms’ social costs for a time. This season of unbridled economic growth would hold serious consequences for Argentina as it looked toward the new millennium. Among the most widespread of the reforms’ social consequences was the growing inequality between socio-economic classes within Argentine society. Growing inequality, in this case, does not simply refer to a widening gap in salaries (though differences in income between rich and poor is certainly an important factor) but also to the inverse relationships between economic growth and employment, the distribution of national wealth, and the access to/quality of social services. All told, these growing inequalities meant that Argentine workers quickly disassociated their own prospects for economic improvement with the nation’s

³⁸ Villalón, 255.

macroeconomic growth.³⁹ Instead, the changing economic landscape would only further segregate their needs and interests from those of the national economy.

As I previously mentioned, these economic policies necessitated a degree of labor flexibility to which Argentine workers were not accustomed. Jobs in key economic sectors such as agricultural production and manufacturing were modernized and mechanized in a push for greater efficiency and international competitiveness. Unemployment was the end result of this process and this had a certain effect on the national economy. From a sociological standpoint, however, unemployment also served to distance individuals from the institutions and relationships that previously had integrated them into society. A by-product of Menem's market reforms was the erosion of the "institutional thread that linked the individual, not only to a job but also to the syndicate [workers union] and to politics. This loss of institutional relationships provoked discouragement [among workers] to the point that it produced an estrangement from an active, live, of social and political participation."^{40,41} This means that unemployment not only caused the loss of a paycheck but also the disintegration of the social, political, and economic networks to which one belonged. This loss engendered a heightened sense of social isolation and exclusion among the Argentine working class as previous means of representation and social integration disappeared.⁴²

In post-2001 Argentina, these changes began affecting the middle class on a large scale as well. Instability in the labor market led to the eventual impoverishment of much of the middle

³⁹ Nueva Cuestion social pg. 7

⁴⁰ Original Text= "trama institucional que vinculaba al individuo no sólo al trabajo sino también al sindicato y a la política. Esta pérdida de relación institucional [provocaba] desaliento a alejamiento de la vida activa, de la participación social y política."

⁴¹ Nueva Cuestion Social, 9

⁴² Ibid, 9

class, the so-called “new poor”. The “new poor” were often well educated, skilled in some trade, and accustomed to a certain level of integration within society. Though these social and economic ties were severely strained by their lack of work, they did not necessarily disappear. The traditional poor had none of these resources and lacked the opportunities to gain the education and job skills that would allow them to reenter the job market. As jobs continued to disappear, more wealth became concentrated in fewer hands until nearly a third of the population was living below the poverty line.⁴³ Furthermore, state spending was being curbed in an effort to combat the national debt and reduce public expenditures. Just as a large portion of the population was in dire need of its services, the state vastly reduced its extensive network of social programs and services. By 1992 the state had already reduced social spending by almost half, from \$8 billion in 1989 to \$4.4 billion.⁴⁴ This trend would continue through the rest of the decade, further accentuating existing inequalities.

While the lower sectors of society slid deeper into poverty, a small segment of the population rapidly ascended the socio-economic ladder. The “new rich” were composed of the beneficiaries of the rapid growth of Argentina’s consumer economy. It was this portion of society that “[prosperaba] ostentosamente” (prospered ostentatiously) during the 1990s and “[exhibía] sin complejos su riqueza, en muchos casos reciente, de modo que las desigualdades no [se dismulaban] sino que [se escenificaban] y [se espectacularizaban].”^{45, 46} The end result was a growing segregation between the rich and the poor within Argentina’s social and economic spaces. The communal sense of “lo publico”- shared spaces of public responsibility such as

⁴³ Romero, 303.

⁴⁴ Lewis, 172.

⁴⁵ Translation= “Exhibited without qualms its riches, recently won in many cases, in such a way that inequalities were not hidden but dramatized and spectacularized.”

⁴⁶ Romero, 54.

public education, public health care, public safety, and even shared physical spaces such as plazas and streets- gave way to “lo privado” in which the academy, the private clinic, the enclosed and guarded subdivision, and shopping center are the norm⁴⁷. The growing division between socio-economic classes thus increasingly polarized Argentine society, creating a larger gap between the haves and the have-nots.

3.4 Theoretical connections

Part of the purpose of this chapter was to provide a historical overview of the economic, political, and social process that were at work in Argentina during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, apart from their historical significance, how are the transformations in these three areas relevant to our understanding of how and why the PQM formed in the way that it did? I would argue that an understanding of these three macro processes is important because they form the basis from which the smaller, micro processes and mechanisms that spurred PQ mobilization are derived. An understanding of these larger socio-economic processes thus outlines the limits and boundaries within which later mobilization mechanisms must operate. By this I meant that the mobilization and development strategies utilized by the PQM were formed as a result of and in response to the specific social, political, and economic contexts that these processes created. Thus, before one can jump into the details behind PQ mobilization strategies, one must first understand the larger processes that shaped their creation.

Economic reform had a great impact on not only the prospects for the country’s long-term economic stability but also on its socio-economic and political fabric. Due to legacy of

⁴⁷ Ibid, 304

Peronist-style populism, state led economic growth in Argentina had been traditionally tied to the promotion of social justice and economic equality. Periods of industrial development were usually accompanied by increased wage concessions for workers and state investments in social services. Economic development could be stimulated through increased investment in infrastructure and the assurance of a reliable work force where workers would be guaranteed jobs, increased wages, and the improvement of social services. During the Menem years, however, the state's changing role in the economy endangered this balance. As the state abandoned its role as the economic regulator, its ability to distribute public resources was directly affected. As a result state-society interactions, the access to public services, means of political and social representation, and relationships between different socio-economic classes were all greatly affected.

Economically, neoliberal reforms contributed to the instability of the Argentine economy during this period. Unemployment, the national debt, and dwindling state resources Rather than reinforce and promote domestic production and industrial growth, these policies left Argentina's national economy vulnerable to the whims of international investors and creditors. Long-term economic planning could not be formulated as a result of these conditions, forcing the government to comply with stiff austerity packages imposed by foreign creditors in order to survive in the short-run; further exaggerating the nation's economic weaknesses.

Politically, the greater public grew disillusioned with the federal government as a result of its inability to address domestic social issues. Growing social inequality combined with the continued hegemony of the traditional elite meant that the government gradually lost credibility as a legitimate means by which the concerns and needs of individuals could be addressed. Institutions that had traditionally been closely tied to state apparatus, such as the CGT, likewise

suffered from a lack of public trust and confidence. And socially, deteriorating social conditions, dwindling state assistance networks, and the loss of traditional institutions of social representation produced more and more strain between the government and the Argentine working class.

It was within the context of this period in Argentine history that groups, such as the piqueteros, began looking for alternative methods and means to express their needs, demands, and discontent. The solutions and strategies these groups formulated were based upon certain assumptions and understandings of the problems these strategies were meant to address. Context thus informed function; strategy; the macro thus determined the trajectory of the micro.

Chapter 4: The Piquetero Movement Up Close: Collective Framings, Mobilizing Structures, and Political Opportunities/Constraints

In my theory chapter I outlined the two distinct processes that I would explore in relation to SM mobilization and development: the macro shifts in external political, social, and economic processes and the micro, internal mechanisms of group and organizational development. In the previous chapter I've shown how Argentina's desire for economic growth produced shifts in the country's economic policy that in turn greatly affected the country's political, economic, and social make-up. The guarantor state was exchanged for a system based on free-market capitalism in which the government adopted a decidedly *laissez faire* stance. Over the course of the 1990s, the economic, social, and political consequences that resulted from these changes left Argentina politically weak and socially divided. These processes shaped the landscape from which the piqueteros would emerge. Reform created the socio-economic strain that would ultimately crystallize piquetero grievances and provide the political opportunity necessary for mobilization by weakening the Peronist Party's hold over national politics.

Given these external conditions, I will now turn my attention to the internal mechanisms that allowed the piqueteros to take advantage of these circumstances. According to the theoretical framework I established in chapter two, this discussion will focus on MM&Z's three mobilizing structures: *collective framings*, *resource mobilization*, and *political opportunities/constraints*. At this point I have outlined these three ideas only in very broad terms. Here I hope to expound upon these three ideas in greater detail and emphasize their

usefulness in understanding piquetero development by connecting these development concepts to the piquetero narrative. The goal of this chapter is thus two fold: 1) Provide a narrative account of the piquetero movement as it unfolded over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, and 2) To apply MM&Z's development theories to this historical account in order to better understand the mechanisms by which the PQ were able to grow and develop.

Here, I must insert a brief aside in order to address a small methodological challenge implicit in my analysis of PQ development. It is important to remember that the piquetero movement is not a single unified entity or organization. Rather, the PQM is a conglomeration of numerous independently acting groups and organizations. These individual groups differ from each in various ways and can often be divided according to numerous distinguishing factors such as geographic location, political ideology, or union/ political affiliation (or lack thereof) among many other things. The variety of its parts thus makes it difficult to analyze the piquetero movement as a single entity since these variations will inevitably impact how MM&Z three mobilizing structures manifest themselves in each group. Yet despite these peripheral differences, I would argue all of these organizations share common traits that unite them under the piquetero banner. Thus, while I concede that there may be variations in regards to how these processes unfold on an case by case basis, the commonalities that PQ organization share in regards to their methods, group identities, and organization allow for them to be considered as a whole.

The piquetero movement's development can be divided into four phases: the emergence of contention (1993-1996), the diffusion of piquetero protest (1996-2001), period of nationwide

picketeering (2001-2003), and the movement's eventual decline (2003-present)^{48,49}. Over the next few pages I will break down each of these three phases individually, highlighting important protests, events, and developments within each period, and then address one of MM&Z's development structures (i.e. collective framings, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities/constraints) within the context of that particular phase. This is not to say that these three frames are time-specific or that they unfold in a certain order over the course of SM development. On the contrary, these processes develop simultaneously with one often influencing another. But in the interest of simplicity, I will address each frame individually in order to show how each played a role in the process of PQ mobilization.

These three theoretical frames, however, are useful beyond their use as a framework from which one can analyze the processes of PQ development. They also point out the ways in which the piqueteros distinguish themselves from previous social movements in Latin America. As I will argue at the end of this chapter, the discussions of collective identity, grievances, resource mobilization, and changing state-society relations that these theoretical frames engender point out how the piqueteros offer us a new take on SM mobilization and development. Thus while the majority of this chapter will focus on the application of MM&Z's three mobilizing structures to the timeline of PQ development, in the conclusion of this chapter I hope to briefly address how the piqueteros might reshape our understanding of modern SMs in Latin America.

⁴⁸ Villalón, 257.

⁴⁹ Since the main interest of this chapter lies in understanding the mechanisms of development that facilitated the PQM's growth and maturation and not the role these mechanisms played in the movement's effectiveness or successes, my analysis will focus on the first three time periods only. Concerning possible explanations behind the PQ's gradual decline, I will leave that investigation to another researcher and will only engage in any such discussion to the extent that it is relevant to my central topic of investigation.

4.1 Emergence of Contention (1993-1996)

As early as 1993, the Menem administration's economic reforms had begun to take its toll on the Argentine lower class, especially state employees, and began to produce isolated pockets of resistance in the interior provinces of Argentina. This inaugural phase established important precedents and ideas in regards to PQ collective framings and methods that would recur throughout subsequent phases and that would greatly affect other mobilizing structures of the PQ movement. The following three accounts serve as examples of how popular unrest emerged in these early years as well as how these initial protests began to frame how later protesters would understand their struggle.

The Santigueñazo

On December 16, 1993 “approximately five thousand residents of the northwest city of Santiago del Estero looted and burned three public buildings (the Government House, the Courthouse, and the Legislature) and a dozen private residences of some of the most prominent local officials and politicians (notably, the homes of three former governors, a Supreme Court judge, and several members of the parliament).”⁵⁰ If the “Shot heard round the world” heralded the beginning of the American revolution, then this now infamous *pueblada*,⁵¹ the Santigueñazo, ushered in a new era of collective action in Argentina during the 1990s. The Santigueñazo was

⁵⁰ Auyero, Javier. "The Moral Politics of Argentine Crowds." *Latin American Social Movements: Globalization, Democratization, and Transnational Networks*. Eds. Paul Almeida and Hank Johnston. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 147.

⁵¹ Mass uprising involving a large portion of the population of a city/ town

sparked by state employees in a conflict with the regional government over back-wages that hadn't been paid in three months.⁵² The aggrieved government employees were joined by other sectors of the town in protest and resulted in the destruction of numerous government buildings and residences. Though the protest in Santiago del Estero was not directly connected to the PQM, the Santiagueñazo served as an inspiration for later protests as more and more government employees across Argentina began voicing their opposition to Menem's austerity policies.

Unrest in Neuquén province

At the end of 1994 and the beginning months of 1995, the privatization of YPF, Argentina's national oil company, saw unemployment reach more than twenty percent in the small towns of Senillosa, Centenario, San Martín de los Andes, y Plottier of Neuquén province.⁵³ YPF was the economic cornerstone of these small towns and as the government began liquidating state-owned enterprises whole villages saw their local economies disappear. In response YPF employees staged the province's first *corte de ruta* (roadblock) in Senillosa, established an *asamblea popular* (popular assembly), a body that then resolved to begin a general strike involving the whole town.⁵⁴ The protests in Neuquén province serve as just a few examples of the growing unrest across the interior of the country as state-owned companies began downsizing or closing their doors. In response to growing protests, Neuquén's governor

⁵² D'Attri, Andrea, and Celeste Escati. "The Piquetera/o Movement of Argentina". Building Feminist Movements and Organisations. Association for Women's Rights in Development, 1 Jan. 2009. Web.<<http://www.awid.org/eng/content/download/44884/482294/file/Case>>, 2.

⁵³ Oviedo, Luis. *Una Historia Del Movimiento Piquetero: De Las Primeras Coordinadoras a Las Asembleas Nacionales*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Rumbos, 2001, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

approved Law 2128 (Ley 2128), a measure that established a 200 peso per month subsidy for *los jefes de familia desocupados* (unemployed heads of households).⁵⁵ The measure was aimed at temporarily quieting protesters but only served to further encourage additional action as protesters saw that they could successfully extract from the government the resources that they needed. Ley 2128 established an important precedent in the PQM story. From this point on, subsidies and other government assistance packages would play a large role in mediating state-protester relations on a national level. The establishment of Ley 2128 foreshadowed a process that would take on a much larger scope of significance as PQ activities increased in magnitude and intensity.

Los Cutralcazos

The protests in Neuquén province signaled a shift in demographics during this initial period of protests. The same piquetero methods (*piquetes, cortes de ruta*) that YPF workers had used in Neuquén began to extend themselves to the greater workers movement.⁵⁶ On June 21, 1996, National Road 22 and Provincial Road 17 were blocked by piqueteros from the cities of Cutral Co and Plaza Huincul after the provincial government cancelled a contract with the Canadian business Agrium to construct a fertilizer plant in the region.^{57,58} Cutral Co and Plaza Huincul, much like the previously mentioned cities within Neuquén province, were cities that had been built on the foundation of oil production by YPF and who were similarly affected by the unemployment produced by company's privatization and subsequent downsizing. Days

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 41

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 43

⁵⁸ Auyero, 147.

before, five hundred unemployed convened a popular assembly in response to the provincial governor's decision to lower the assistance subsidies provided under the Ley 2128. The assembly had resolved to stage a march "against hunger and unemployment" on July 21.⁵⁹ On the day of the march, spurred on and encouraged by local radio stations broadcasting the loss of the contract with Agrium, thousands of people (more than 20,000 at the protest's peak) took to the streets in protest.⁶⁰

This first mass protest, known as the *Cutralcazo*, sparked a series of smaller demonstrations, general strikes, and popular assemblies over the course of the next year. The following year, in March of 1997, "a general provincial strike supported the march of more than 10,000 teachers, students, parents and neighbors that culminated with the occupation of the two bridges that unite [the provinces of] Neuquén and Río Negro. Piquetero methods were now the common patrimony of the exploited!"^{61,62} The *corte* lasted for two days and was met with strong police repression, resulting in several deaths and dozens wounded.

The *Cutralcazos* marked an important transition in the spread of *piquetes* and of *piqueteros* throughout Argentina. They accomplished this by transforming the substance of *piquetero* protests in two main ways. First, *piquetero* methods, as Luis Oviedo stated, were now being employed by a larger cross-section of the population. *Piquetes* and *cortes de ruta* within Neuquén province now incorporated broad class coalitions among the cities' working class, teachers, neighbors, retirees, and students. Collective action was no longer the "patrimony", as Oviedo says, of the working class but a collective activity by which all citizens could express

⁵⁹ Oviedo, 43.

⁶⁰ Auyero, 155.

⁶¹ Original Text: "Un paro general provincial apoyó la marcha de más de 10,000 docentes, estudiantes, padres y vecinos, que culminó con la ocupación de los puentes que unen Neuquén y Río Negro. Los métodos piqueteros ya eran un patrimonio común de los explotados!"

⁶² Oviedo, 47.

their contempt for the province's economic policies and their dissatisfaction with the socio-economic conditions these policies had created. Piquetero methods were no longer seen as belonging to a singular socio-economic group (i.e. state employees) but were transformed into an expression of community solidarity and formed a collective response to the town's economic predicament.

Secondly, the Cutralcazos facilitated the crystallization of piquetero grievances. In the case of the first Cutralcazo, the political discourse among protesters at the protest site gradually transformed protester grievances from the specific ("we want the fertilizer plant") to a more general call for economic change ("we need jobs").⁶³ Piquetero grievances began to transcend the local issues and contexts that had first driven protesters to the streets and were transformed into a discussion of the larger economic processes that were changing the socio-economic landscape of the country. The piqueteros of Neuquén province consequently began to understand their grievances within the larger context of Argentina's push for economic transformation. This realization would have a large long-term impact on the trajectory of later piquetero protests. Here we see that the Cutralcazo's importance to the PQ narrative, in fact the importance of this whole first phase of initial protests, has very little to do with whether or not protesters were successful in the end. Rather it is how the experiences of these first protests facilitated the formation of a piquetero *identity*. According to MM&Z this process of identity building, a collective understanding among protesters as to the similar grievances and shared struggles that bind them together as a group, is a key component in the process of SM

⁶³ Auyero, 157.

mobilization. That being the case, the process of identity building is a topic I will discuss in more detail over the course of the next few pages.

4.2 Early Protests and the Building of Collective Identity

As I mentioned in my discussion of MM&Z theoretical frames, one of the necessary conditions for SM mobilization and development is this process of building collective “identities” or “frames”. In this process individuals try to unite its members towards a common goal by identifying shared struggles and experiences among its members. Each group must ask itself: What unites us a body? Who are we as a group? What are we struggling for? And what are we struggling against? This process of identity building is important because in the process of answering these questions, movements must form specific ideas concerning the origins of the grievances they are trying to address and the ways in which those grievances might be rectified. Identity building is thus important because it has the ability to effect how a SM formulates its methods, goals, and course of actions.

One of the first steps in this process of identity building is the defining of grievances. The defining of grievances is a process in which a group forms a collective understanding as to the nature of the strains that first drove the group to protest. This process requires that a group make certain judgments concerning the contexts in which these strains appeared. These judgments are subjective and may vary, depending on the socio-economic make up of the groups’ members. As a result, group grievances, and consequently group identities, are to a certain degree functions of the socio-economic variables (class, education, income, etc.) that characterize a group’s members.

My investigation of the PQM during this phase of initial protests will explore how the piqueteros went about this activity of defining grievances for two reasons: 1) Piquetero experiences in this process would do much to shape the collective “frames” piqueteros would employ in understanding their social, political, and economic context. The shared group identity they would form as a result would subsequently inform the PQM’s goals, methods, and development strategies. 2) By investigating the creation of piquetero group identity, I will better understand how the macro socio-economic processes at work in Argentina during this time intersected with mechanisms (collective identity in this case) that informed the PQM’s development.

Initial Protests and Piquetero Demographics

As opposed to the urban poor and unemployed that would compose the PQM in its later phases of development, resistance during these first two protests were incited by workers within the upper echelons of the state’s social assistance networks. That is to say, the individuals who largely composed the groups that participated these first protests were skilled workers who depended upon state companies, such as YPF, for their salary and livelihood. It is important to point out that in these first two episodes of resistance, the socio-economic make-up of protest participants differs significantly from what we will see in subsequent phases of the PQM’s development. Because the state employees that participated in these protests had access to better education, job training, and social support networks, they did not suffer from the same lack of socio-economic integration that would characterize those that would later compose urban PQ organizations. This being the case, the resources available to the groups involved in the

Santigueñazo would differ from those in later phases of protests. However, in terms of collective frames and grievances, these protesters shared much in common with the piqueteros that would compose the Cutralcazo and later piquetero protests.

In this case both groups focused their protests on the effects that Menem's economic reform had on state resources and assistance programs, and the increase in public need that these effects produced. State employees in Santiago del Estero acted in order to address this issue of back-paid salaries. YPF employees in Neuquén as well as piqueteros in Cutral Co and Plaza Huincul would protest the unemployment and lack of basic services that the privatization of the oil company had produced. In later phases of development, piquetero manifestations in and around Buenos Aires would criticize the depletion of state assistance programs upon which protesters had depended on for their livelihood. Piquetero demands consistently focused on job creation, food subsidies, and other means of state assistance. The common thread between all of these groups was that on some level, all understood their grievances to be a direct result of the government's new economic strategy.

Perspectives on Piquetero Identity

The experiences of these early protests were such that the piqueteros came to understand their struggle within the greater context of Argentina's push for economic development. Piquetero identity thus became a function of how the piqueteros understood their place within the context of Menem's economic development strategy and Argentina's larger economic system. The next natural question to ask given this statement is: what did the piquetero's understanding of their function within the country's push for economic development look like?

A central theme in piquetero identity is closely connected with the idea of exploitation. In an interview conducted by Marina Sitrin with several members of the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (Unemployed Workers Movement, MTD), one piquetero, in response to a question concerning the piquetero conception of work, answered with the following response: “Dignified work is not going back to a factory to work 16 hours and be exploited. We want to generate different projects, projects, without bosses, where the workers themselves, the same compañeros decide what to do with the production.”⁶⁴ As evidence by his response, piqueteros understood their place in the current economic system to be that of the “exploited”. Furthermore, they understood the underlying economic principles of the country’s economic system to be oriented toward the benefit of the “exploiters” and not the “exploited.”

As a result, the free-market principles that under girded Argentina’s approach to economic development came under increasing criticism. The ultimate blame “for the undesirable status of being poor [was] shifted away from those unable to find work; such poor individuals [were] now deemed merely the unwilling victims of the capitalist system and those who benefit from it.”⁶⁵ In the end, piqueteros understood their predicament to be a product of Argentina’s free-market approach to economic development rather than any single political actor, institution, or policy. Actors and policies were not necessarily the source of their problem; rather it was the economic principles upon which the current economic system was based. Piqueteros increasingly identified capitalism as the origin of their particular grievances, and as a result, the reformation of the capitalist system (in its Argentine context and application) became an

⁶⁴ Sitrin, Marina. *We Are Everywhere: the Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-capitalism*. London: Verso, 2003. *We Are Everywhere*. Web.<<http://artactivism.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/472-The%20Power%20of%20the.pdf>>.

⁶⁵ Epstein, Edward. "The Piquetero Movement in Greater Buenos Aires: Working class protest during the current Argentine Crisis." *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* (2003). *Www.findarticles.com*. Web. 14 Oct. 2009.

important focal point of piquetero dialogue and protest. The expansion of the scope of piquetero demands, in the case of the Cutralcazo, from the fulfilling of immediate local needs (“we need the fertilizier plant”) to a broader call for economic reform (“we need steady employment opportunities”) serves as evidence of this shift.⁶⁶

The PQM and the Neoliberal Model

Piqueteros were not necessarily opposed to the idea of developing the national economy. What they did oppose was the idea that economic development be realized at the expense of the livelihoods of the lower classes. Neoliberal logic, however, necessitated the dismantling of much of the state-sponsored social assistance networks and programs that many of the lower classes depended on for employment and other basic necessities. The implementation of these changes and their subsequent effects, protests such as the Cutralcazo, shaped piquetero identity in that piqueteros began to think of their struggle in terms of its relation to the capitalist, neoliberal economic system. But on a broader level, piqueteros also understood their struggle to embody a national struggle over the country’s philosophy of economic and social growth. Luis Oviedo notes that,

“The Cultralcazo laid bare the irreconcilable contradiction between the needs of the popular majority and the capitalist state, even in its "democratic" form. [The Cutralcazo] showed that popular sovereignty, completely fictitious in the

⁶⁶ Auyero, Javier. "The Moral Politics of Argentine Crowds." *Latin American Social Movements: Globalization, Democratization, and Transnational Networks*. Eds. Paul Almeida and Hank Johnston. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 157.

framework of a capitalist democracy, rediscovers itself in popular demonstrations. The Cutralcazo showed that the capitalist state is a machine organized to respond to the needs of the exploiters and not those of the exploited. The Cutralcazo revealed that popular movement victory will only be achieved by an overcoming of the restrictions imposed by the capitalist state, a push for direct action on the part of the people, and by creating organizations adapted to the fight, that respond directly to the will and mandate of the people.”^{67,68}

In this context, piquetero protests and demands can be seen as a means by which participants could confront the inadequacies of what they saw as a flawed economic system. In the eyes of the piqueteros, economic development based on the neoliberal model would inevitably prejudiced the lower class; that it would perpetually concentrate economic, political, and social resources in the hands of the few elite, while excluding the rest of society. The duty of popular protest was thus to overcome the restrictions and barriers the capitalist system created and form organizations that would place power back in the hands of the people. These ideas had a large impact on the piquetero’s worldview. The political and economic perspective that they engendered would impact piquetero goals, scope of demands, and, I will discuss in the next section, methods of protest.

⁶⁷ Original Text: “El Cutralcazo puso al desnudo la contradicción irreconciliable entre las necesidades de la mayoría popular y el Estado capitalist, incluso en su forma ‘democrática’. Mostró que la soberanía popular, completamente ficticia en el marco de la democracia capitalista, se reencuentra a si misma en la movilización popular. El Cutralcazo mostró que el Estado capitalista es una maquinaria organizada para responder a las necesidades de los explotadores, no de los explotados. El Cutralcazo reveló que la victoria de cualquier movimiento popular obliga a superar las restricciones que impone el Estado capitalista a la acción directa del pueblo, y a crear organizaciones adaptadas a la lucha, que respondan directamente a la voluntad y mandato de las bases”

⁶⁸ Oviedo, 44.

Piquetes and Cortes de Ruta

The PQM thus adopted a method of protest that logically followed from their understanding of the processes and ideas that caused their grievances: the roadblock. This first phase of protests is thus important because it is here that the *corte de ruta* and *piquete* were established as important means of disruptive protest. These methods would become pillars of PQ protests and activities.

Roadblocks are the “equivalent of workers laying down the tools of production” in that they “paralyze the circulation of goods, both inputs for production and outputs destined for domestic or overseas markets.”⁶⁹ Simultaneous protests coordinated among regional and national PQ leaders could effectively bring state and interstate commerce to a standstill. In a country whose scattered commercial centers are inter-connected by only a small network of poorly maintained roads, these methods proved to be highly effective in capturing the attention of the provincial and, later on, national government. Roadblocks and pickets thus became the principal tools the PQs used by which they were able to extract concessions from the government

The roadblock, however, is an important part of PQ activities not only because of its effectiveness at disrupting national commerce but also because of its symbolic value. By coordinating *cortes*, protesters effectively paralyzed the very economic system that contributed towards the creation of their grievances in the first place. The disruptive nature of the *corte* not only gave the piqueteros a certain measure of leverage against the government, but also helped unite piqueteros in a single cause - the fight against the state’s unbridled push for economic

⁶⁹ Petras, 2001, 5.

development at the expense of their livelihood. Participation in protest activities thus became a symbolic way for piqueteros to express their solidarity, unity, and commitment to one another in a shared fight.

Theoretical Connections

In terms of collective framing, this first phase of protests, though scattered and isolated, did much to create a sense of common identity among its participants and those that would participate in the later phases of PQ development. This common identity was shaped by the piquetero's understanding of the larger socio-economic processes that had produced their grievances – namely, the Menem administration's economic development strategy and the free-market capitalist model upon which they were based. These processes provided a common bond among piquetero protesters due to the shared socio-economic circumstances that widespread unemployment and the dismantling of state social services produced. Since protesters understood their grievances to be the product of these state economic policies and the neoliberal ideals upon which those policies were based, the *piqueteros* were provided a common enemy against which they could direct their activities. And furthermore, their collective participation in roadblocks and pickets served as an activity that bound PQ members in a common struggle, reinforcing the sense of shared purpose and identity that resulted from their shared circumstances.

4.3 Diffusion of Piquetero Protest (1996-2001)

Early protests by state workers soon spread to other parts of the country, eventually reaching the urban areas of Buenos Aires. Prior to this point, protests in the interior of the country had been limited in their reach and brief in their duration. Protests were sparked by localized strains specific to the area of protest. However, once protests spread to the capital city, the movement gained momentum in its number of participants, frequency of protests, and visibility on the national and international stage as a result of the opportunities offered by the city's urban environment. The translation of protests to the urban context of Buenos Aires is thus a crucial inflection point in the *piquetero* story since it provided protesters a context in which they were able to mobilize on a larger scale.

Once reaching Buenos Aires, collective action now centered on the structurally unemployed masses that inhabited the *cordones* surrounding the city⁷⁰. The urban poor that populated this area became the driving force behind these protests as opposed to the professionals, state employees, and factory workers that engineered protests during the previous period in the country's interior. The inhabitants of these areas were largely unemployed, uneducated, and lacking in access to basic social services. As a result, these individuals were heavily reliant upon state social assistance for their livelihood. Since the urban poor lacked the social networks, financial resources, job skills, and political connections to re-integrate themselves into the national economy or effectively voice their needs, they were forced to turn to alternative methods of representation. PQOs offered the urban poor this type of opportunity and piquetero numbers grew exponentially as a result. By 2001, 40% of piquetero protests occurred

⁷⁰ D'Atri, 4.

in and around Buenos Aires; by 2003 that number had grown to 53%.⁷¹ During this period, Buenos Aires became the epicenter of national piquetero protests. As a result, the PQ organizations located on the outskirts of the city would gain the most national (and international) attention and would be most represented in on-going negotiations with the national government.

The PQM in Buenos Aires emerged as a composition of individual groups based on their regional/territorial location in and around Buenos Aires. Groups formed and organized independently from one another, meaning no one group looked exactly like another. Each group had its own leaders, group politics, and demands but would often work together in conjunction with brother/sister organizations. These cooperatives would allow the protesters to better coordinate activities and protests and increase their ability to disrupt national commerce. Protests, marches, and roadblocks grew in frequency and scale as a result of these efforts.

The arrival of protest to the greater Buenos Aires area contributed greatly to the growth and maturation of the PQM. The city offered a large, concentrated pocket of individuals who had been negatively impacted by Argentina's changing economic state. As a result, protesters had easy access to the very demographic that would be most willing to engage in collective action. Furthermore, the environment of Buenos Aires' urban, impoverished suburbs produced the shared circumstances and grievances conducive to the creation of common group identities, which I have already discussed. But more importantly, the city provided a place in which protesters and protests could be more effectively mobilized. The PQM as a whole was bolstered by the increased ease with which PQOs could now attract new members, organize protests, and coordinate activities on a large scale. However, even though the city provided protesters

⁷¹ Massetti, Astor. *Piqueteros: Protestas Social E Identidad Colectiva*. Buenos Aires: Ed. De Las Ciencias, 2004, 40.

numerous opportunities for development and growth, how were the piqueteros able to take advantage of these opportunities? What mechanisms and structures did PQOs form in order to do so? These are the questions I will address in the following section with a discussion of piquetero mobilizing structures.

4.4 PQM Growth and Mobilizing Structures

When the spread of the interior country's episodic protests arrived in the urban environment of Buenos Aires, the PQM was faced with several structural and organizational hurdles to its further development and growth. First, piquetero protesters needed to collect and acquire resources. And secondly, piqueteros needed to create formal organizational structures in order to effectively utilize these resources. These tasks are linked to what MM&Z have labeled the creation of mobilizing structures. This concept deals with the formation of methods by which SMs take advantage of the resources (monetary, human, or otherwise) available to them in a certain context and utilize those resources to further their activities and meet goals. In this section I will explore the formation of piquetero mobilizing structures during this phase of the movement's growth. This will first involve an exploration of the mechanisms that allowed PQOs to aggregate and acquire resources, and secondly, the formation of the organizational and leadership structures that PQOs used to determine how those resources would be used.

Resource Mobilization

Soon after piquetero protests reached Buenos Aires, the PQM was no longer a concern of just local or state authorities. With such an increase in protests right on its doorstep, the national government soon became involved in mediating piquetero grievances as well. In response to growing unrest the national government established the Plan Trabajar in 1997, a law very similar to the previously mentioned Ley 2128, creating temporary employment opportunities for the poor and establishing monthly government subsidies and stipends for unemployed heads of households⁷².

In terms of resource mobilization, the urban unemployed and poor possessed little capital of their own that could be used to attract potential members or utilized to further their cause. Thus, for reasons of unemployment, lack of education, or social connections, the poor were effectively excluded from the social, political, and financial networks that might have provided these resources. I established earlier how from a theoretical standpoint one could not say that grievances alone are sufficient cause for SM mobilization and growth. More than a shared belief that its circumstances are unjust and should be changed, a movement must have some mechanism or point of leverage that propels its activities and growth. Considering PQ participant's socio-economic condition and lack of resources, to what then does one attribute the movement's growth and development during this period and those that followed? I argue that the promise of government subsidies, as established by the Plan Trabajar, provided the necessary incentives and resources that drove PQ growth.

⁷² Villalón, 266.

In this I agree with Lucas Ronconi and Ignacio Franceschelli in their article “Clientelism, Public Workfare, and the Emergence of the Piqueteros in Argentina.”⁷³ There they argue that piquetero growth and protests were driven by more than a shared public desire to fight unemployment and poverty or a desire for social justice, but by the necessity for temporary assistance. *Piquetes* thus became a means by which protesters could obtain desired goods (subsidies) rather than an ideological reaction to broader changes within the government. I agree with their assessment concerning the importance of the Plan Trabajar in facilitating piquetero growth and its function as a mobilizing mechanism. However, I believe they short sell the impact that the larger political, economic, and social changes had on the public, especially the lower class. For that reason I have tried to emphasize in this investigation how larger socio-economic and political factors shaped the smaller processes involved in the PQM’s birth and subsequent growth.

The Plan Trabajar, much like Ley 2128, thus acted as a mobilizing mechanism. First, it provided temporary assistance that the *piqueteros* needed. Though there were many temporarily or newly unemployed persons who would later join the *piquetero* cause, especially as the country’s economic condition worsened, a large percentage of persons involved were perennially without work even before the economy took a downturn. Economic assistance during the latter half of the 1990s was thus even more of a necessity for this cross-section of the lower class.

Secondly, the ability of *piquetero* activities (marches, *cortes de ruta*, *piquetes*) to extract these initial concessions from the government held out the possibility of future expanded assistance. The prospect of extracting further concessions provided an incentive to continue

⁷³ Ronconi, Lucas, and Ignacio Franceschelli. "Clientelism, Public Workfare and the Emergence of the Piqueteros in Argentina." *Political Institutions and Development: Failed Expectations and Renewed Hopes*. Ed. Natalia E. Dinello and Vladimir Popov. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2007, 228-46.

pressuring the government via protests. Furthermore, government subsidies served as an effective recruiting tool since the deteriorating national economy continued to produce more and more unemployed to whom the prospect of government aid would seem attractive.

Thirdly, the method by which aid was distributed reinforced among the unemployed the importance of continued association and participation with local PQ organizations. The Plan Trabajar did not establish a state-run mechanism for the distribution and administration of its subsidies. Rather, following negotiations between the state and whatever PQO (or group of PQOs) that was protesting, these responsibilities were transferred to the individual organizations. The limited number of *planes* available to each organization meant that they would have to be shared within the group. Since the *planes*, and the provisional employment they provided, were only temporary measures, members were put on a rotating list and would then have to wait their turn to receive the monthly subsidies. What PQ organizers soon realized was that this PQO controlled distribution system provided a unique advantage. Namely, that it provided a way for PQ organizations to ensure the continued member participation in group activities and protests.

One of the problems that all SMs must solve is that of the “free-rider.” The free-rider problem is a trend in which individuals choose to abstain from risky social behavior, such as protesting, if they believe that they will be able to share in the benefits of those protests regardless of their personal involvement. Why risk the negative consequences of social movement if others are willing to protest, and you will be able to reap the benefits of their work? The free-rider problem poses the dilemma of how SMs can prevent the whole from benefiting from the work of the few. That is to say, how can SMs encourage individual membership in collective action and ensure that individual’s continued participation even when times get tough. For the PQM, PQO controlled subsidy distribution systems functioned as the answer to this

problem. In order to be eligible to receive government subsidies, many PQOs require members to pay a small monthly fee and be in good standing with their respective PQO. Consequently, only individuals who stayed involved in PQO activities, protests, and programs could expect to receive government assistance. An additional side effect of this strategy was its ability to limit the fluidity of PQO membership. To a certain degree, the PQO controlled distribution system encouraged protesters to choose a particular organization and stick with that organization, promoting organizational allegiance and solidarity.

As a result of these various factors, temporary subsidies soon became the currency that governed piquetero-state and interactions as well as inner politics within the PQM itself. Competing for these subsidies became a top priority among PQOs since those groups that were able to win more *planes* benefited from the increase in membership and influence that accompanied these aid packages. The creation of the Plan Trabajar was thus a significant development towards further piquetero mobilization and growth because it provided the PQM with mechanisms necessary for its continued growth and expansion. It provided material resources in terms of state money and temporary work for members. It promoted increased participation in piquetero activities in terms of increased membership as well as ensuring the continued involvement of those members. And finally, it facilitated the creation of internal organizational structure within PQOs for the purpose of aid distribution. All of these developments are a direct result of the Plan Trabajar's creation.

The PQM is an interesting case study because it seems to dispel the notion of the "atomized poor"; the idea that the traditional peasantry is incapable of mounting any serious opposition to an existing region on its own due to the lack of resources inherent to the group's socio-economic make-up. One might be tempted to think that the PQM serves an exception to

this rule. However, by looking at how the Plan Trabajar affected and facilitated the PQM's growth, one can see that this is not the case. In the Plan Trabajar, the Argentine state provided the PQM with resources and mobilization opportunities it would not otherwise have enjoyed left on its own. Without this influx of external resources, it is probable that the PQM would not have enjoyed such a period of growth and expansion. As a result, the PQM seems to reinforce the idea of the atomized poor rather than undermine it, since in many ways it owes its growth and expansion to the actions and resources of the state rather than to any force within the movement itself.

Organizational Structure

The Plan Trabajar served as a resource mobilization mechanism in that it provided the PQM a way to attract new members, acquire funds in the form of government subsidies, and encourage the continuation of piquetero protests. How PQOs then decided to utilize these resources was a function of each organization's internal structure. In my description of this period of PQ development, I mentioned that the PQM in Buenos Aires was decentralized in its leadership and structural organization. In this section, I will investigate possible reasons why the PQM became structured this way as well as its affects on PQO organization and inter-movement dynamics.

I would argue that the PQM splintered into individual groups, as opposed to combining together as a single organizational entity, for two reasons: 1) a lack of social networks linking protesters from across the city meant that groups formed around one of the few social networks they had, their neighborhoods and 2) a deep seated mistrust of bureaucracy meant that the

piqueteros attempted to prevent the concentration of power in too few hands, resulting in the splintering of the movement in order to conserve the group's egalitarian ethos.

As I mentioned earlier, the traditional peasantry that composed the PQM lacked many of the social networks that were more readily available to other sections of Argentine society. Thus, when the wave of protests that had started in the interior reached Buenos Aires, piquetero groups formed around one of the few formal social institutions that they possessed, neighborhood assemblies. Neighborhood assemblies were composed of the people within a certain barrio that would meet to discuss and debate issues that faced the residents of their specific neighborhood. These neighborhood assemblies would become the building blocks upon which the city's first piquetero groups were built in response to worsening social and economic conditions. The PQM's decentralization was thus, in one sense, a result of the scattered pre-existing social networks that piqueteros possessed. This grass roots approach meant that the PQOs were often separated along the geographical barriers that distinguished one neighborhood from another. The result was a proliferation of autonomous piquetero cells as opposed to a single governing entity.

Additionally, the piqueteros' rejection of traditional political institutions and hierarchies produced a general mistrust of large bureaucracies among protesters. Recent history had evidenced how government bureaucracy could co-opt working class endeavors. Union workers particularly had seen efforts for higher salaries and increased benefits undermined by government politicians. The CGT's leadership structure combined with the union's close ties to Argentina's political system meant that politicians could easily influence and co-opt union efforts by offering political and monetary favors to union leaders. Likewise, many of the perennially unemployed were all too familiar with the fickle patronage system that fueled party

politics in Argentina. Political parties and politicians often gave material resources in exchange for votes. Piqueteros were well aware of the possibility and the power of political cooptation and coercion. As a result, PQOs adopted a more horizontally orientated distribution of power as a means of discouraging the concentration of too much power in the hands of too few. This holds true for both the internal structure of individual PQOs and the structure of the movement as a whole.

As I mentioned in my analysis of piquetero frames and identities, piqueteros understood their struggle to be about a return of political honesty and legitimacy – a returning of power, particularly political power, to the masses. Piqueteros saw their current political leaders as unresponsive to the voices and needs of the popular masses. Thus, as PQOs began consolidating more formal leadership structures, their internal distribution of power reflected this. Pablo Solana, an unemployed electrician who works with the MTD Lanus and who was interviewed by Sitrin, describes his assembly's decision-making process like this:

“It's pretty simple: a group of neighbors has a weekly assembly; the discussion that needs to happen, the information that needs to be shared, and the decisions that need to be made are all done at the assembly. It's that simple and direct, it's the way that democracy works in our neighborhood. When we have to co-ordinate various neighborhoods and when the organization grows, it becomes a bit more complex and debates are held on how to co-ordinate in a way that doesn't create an atmosphere of centralized decision making. Within that debate we discuss

the election of delegate and the way that they rotate, it's a way we found so that it's not always the same people playing the same role.”⁷⁴

Dissatisfaction with the current political leadership and a distrust of traditional political institutions meant that the *piqueteros* placed a premium on organizational autonomy and self-governance. These sentiments consequently had a large impact on how PQ institutions organized internally. PQOs were thus internally decentralized in their distribution of power. Many PQ organizations operated on the principles of direct democracy. Group decisions would be made in popular assemblies by majority vote. The popular assembly could revoke the mandate of elected representatives at any point.⁷⁵

These mechanisms were established in order to prevent the co-optation of the movement by outside political forces. Solana would go on to say that, “we did want our grassroots organization, our neighborhood force [to] not be subordinated by partisans or unions or be subordinated by the logic proposed by the state. And that's how we started organizing, with the idea that the assembly should be the place where decisions are made.”⁷⁶ This style of leadership distribution stands in stark contrast to that of worker organizations in previous decades, such as the CGT, in that it is designed to encourage the unemployed poor's participation in their own decision-making.⁷⁷ *Asambleas* thus serve as a source of symbolic, counter political power to that of the national political system of the time.

On a broader, movement-wide level the decentralized structure of the PQM has served a

⁷⁴ Sitrin, 476.

⁷⁵ Petras, 2001.

⁷⁶ Sitrin, 478.

⁷⁷ Epstein

necessary and important role in “promoting local initiatives and leadership and guarding the autonomy of the various movements.”⁷⁸ However, this does not mean that PQOs act completely independent from one another. On the contrary, individual groups often worked jointly with other PQOs in order to coordinate protests, debate common problems, and formulate responses to government actions. Formal congresses, such as the First and Second National Piquetero Assemblies that were held in June and September of 2001, were held in an effort to promote inter-organization communication.⁷⁹ Yet despite, these efforts towards increased inter-organization cooperation, individual PQOs continue to assert their own individual autonomy. Thus, though these congresses did much to facilitate the coordination of PQO activities, they accomplished little in regards to creating a more unified movement.

One of the effects of this horizontally structured organizational strategy is that, for the most part, individual PQOs continue to pursue their own agendas. All PQOs continue to vie for government subsidies, and to that end they often coordinate protests and activities. But in terms of the movement’s overall cohesiveness, organizational fragmentation prevents PQOs from being able to more effectively work as unit. The emergence of political divisions as a result of differing political affiliations, ideologies, and expectations among PQOs created further rifts within the PQM. The creation of these divisions, a process I will examine more closely in following sections, allowed certain PQOs to dominate public discourse due to their particular political affiliation.

Thus, over time one of the movement’s greatest strengths, its decentralized structure, became one of its greatest hurdles in terms of the movement’s long term prospects to effect change within the political system. Lacking any central leadership, the PQM was thus less

⁷⁸ Petras, 2001

⁷⁹ Oviedo 153, 157.

susceptible to the patronage politics that had undermined popular protests in the past. Nevertheless, the splintering of the movement along political lines meant, “no organization had the support to assume any leadership role (even as each pretended to be self-sufficient) and define a political project toward eventually taking state power. In the absence of a unified and cohesive leadership, intellectual dilettantes and local leaders carved up the movements in the name of autonomist fetishism.”⁸⁰

4.5 Nationwide Picketeering (2001-2003)

In a previous chapter I described at length the economic and political events that surrounded the Argentine currency crisis in December 2001. I will not repeat that information here, but rather add a few comments as to how these events affected the trajectory of the PQM at the time of the crash and in the following two years. According to Roberta Villalon, there were two major developments during this period in terms of the PQM’s development. First, was a shift in scale in terms of the movement’s number of protests and active participants, and what she refers to as the “appropriation of sites of mobilization.”⁸¹ Second, was the process among PQOs in which “certain picketer organizations became dominant at the regional and national level and organized coordinated picketing across the entire country, [changing] the decentralized character of the movement.”⁸²

The movement’s shift in scale and “appropriation of sites of mobilization” is a result of the explosive growth of social unrest following the events of December 2001. The greatest

⁸⁰ Petras, 2003.

⁸¹ Vilalón, 257,

⁸² *Ibid*, 258.

impact of the 2001 currency crisis in terms of its effect not just on the PQM but on the growth of protest and collective action in general throughout the country, was the increased participation of the middle class that resulted. The 2001 crash meant that the middle class, who to some degree had only been marginally impacted by the nation's economic policies up to this point (compared to the working class), now had more in common with those men and women who composed the PQM than upper class elites. To use the words of James Petras, the period of December 2001 through July 2002 saw the middle-class "proletarianized" in living standards if not in outlook.⁸³ The result was the increased participation among the middle class in protest activities of all kinds. The *cacerolazos*, for example, that filled the streets of Buenos Aires following December 19th, were largely composed of middle class citizens whose savings had been confiscated in Duhalde's *corralito*. The financial crisis thus sparked a period of increased nationwide protests during which the piqueteros, as one of the many protest organizations active at the time, benefited from this period of increased social unrest.

For the piqueteros, the nation's economic state meant that movement activities grew in both scale and scope. Piquetero protests expanded in both its number of participants and the geographical area in which protests occurred. With the incorporation of the middle class, the PQM now enjoyed a high level of popular support among the middle class, whereas in previous years its activities had often been viewed as a nuisance. Now, however, students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and small business owners regularly joined with the poor and unemployed in a coalition encompassing a broad variety of socio-economic groups.⁸⁴ This is not to say that the middle class was never involved in PQ activities before this time, but that the 2001 crash acted as a catalyst that facilitated the increased incorporation of the middle class as a result of the

⁸³ Petras, 2003.

⁸⁴ Aguilar

economic crash. Thereby creating an environment in which the movement could more easily expand its number of participants and supporters. The second major development was the gradual establishment of an internal hierarchy among PQOs within the PQM. As Roberta Vilalón noted, it was during this time that “certain picketer organizations became dominant at the regional and national level” while others were pushed to the margins in terms of their visibility in the public eye and their influence in state-piquetero negotiations. As to why this happened, I believe this process was the function of the relationships different PQOs formed with traditional political institutions. Despite the emphasis placed on organizational autonomy and independence from traditional political institutions within the PQM, many PQOs formed formal and informal ties with various political actors such as labor unions, political parties, and neighborhood party-bosses. These relationships played a large part in creating this new inter-organizational hierarchy. How and why certain PQOs became aligned with these varying actors is a question that bears further examination since these alliances would greatly affect the future of the PQM. A discussion of MM&Z’s third and final frame, the political opportunities and constraints that shaped PQ actions and behaviors, will be necessary in order to explain how these relationships were constructed, the roles they played in mediating state-piquetero relations, and their impact on inter-organizational dynamics.

4.6 Piquetero Development and Political Opportunities/ Constraints

In Chapter 3 I outlined some of the political events that characterized the few years preceding the 2001 peso crisis and some of the crisis’ immediate political effects. There I mentioned how a slow economy and the rising social costs of the Menem administration’s

economic policies had caused a decline in the Peronist Party's popularity. The Radical Party was thus able to claim the presidency in the following Presidential elections, but found itself unable to turn the country around as a result of a the nation's continued economic decline, divided legislature, and increased pressure from middle and lower class citizens for social assistance. The end result of these events was a political vacuum within the national government due to the Radical party government's lack of political and social capital to govern effectively. Groups such as the PQM consequently had an opportunity to fill this space by offering an alternative method of political and social representation: protest. These events informed the "big picture", or macro, processes that shaped Argentina's national political context during this period and thus influenced how the PQM oriented itself as a result of these circumstances.

This section, conversely, will explore how these macro processes shaped the PQM on a smaller, micro scale. As I explained in Chapter 2, MM&Z's idea of political opportunities and constraints can be utilized on both a macro and micro level. Having already investigated how these macro processes created certain opportunities for the PQM, I will now turn my attention to the consequences Argentina's political climate had on the piquetero's inter-movement dynamics. Specifically, how political context shaped the relationship between PQOs and traditional political institutions and actors, and how those relationships consequently affected the stratification of the PQM.

To this point I have talked a lot about the PQOs that compose the PQM in terms of their cohesiveness as a movement and the organizational and structural similarities that bind these groups together as a whole. And while these groups do share many traits that unify them under the umbrella of the PQM, there are also important differences between PQOs that divide the

movement into competing factions. These differences stem principally from the different connections individual PQOs have formed with traditional political institutions and actors and the different relationships with the national government that these connections have fostered.

The large majority of PQOs within the PQM fall into three categories based upon their connections (or lack thereof) to these political actors: 1) those organizations associated with the Argentine Workers Central (CTA). The CTA is a labor confederation formed in 1991 from dissenting factions within the CGT, Argentina's national labor union that has historically been closely tied to the Peronist party. The CTA was created "in 1992 to organize fragmented struggles against unemployment and for welfare provisions and to integrate the unemployed and those who were technically "socially excluded."⁸⁵ Two of the largest and best known PQOs that the CTA has integrated into its organization are the Land and Housing Federation (Federacion Tierra y Vivienda, FTV) and the Classist Combative Current (Corriente Combativa Clasista, CCC). 2) PQOs associated with El Bloque Piquetero Nacional (National Piquetero Block), an organization comprised of groups closely linked to left political parties. These groups, such as the Territorial Liberation Movement (Movimiento Teritorial de Liberacion, MTL), believe that Argentina entered a revolutionary situation as a result of the December 2001 crisis.⁸⁶ 3) Groups that formed locally and independently from labor and political organizations and continue to stress the importance of maintaining the movement's autonomy, independent of elite political influences. In summary, one could say that the PQOs of the PQM orientated themselves along three poles of political association: organized labor, the political left, and the independents.

⁸⁵ Dinerstein, Ana C. "Power or Counter Power: The Dilemma of the Piquetero Movement in Argentina post-crisis." *Capital & Class* 81 (2003): 1-8. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 14 Oct. 2009. <<http://0search.ebscohost.com.umiss.lib.olemiss.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=11534340&site=ehost-live&scope=site>>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

How did these specific political poles form? In their article on the connections between the MTL and Argentina's Communist Party, Isabella Alcañiz and Melissa Scheir suggest that the presence (or absence) of piquetero coalitions with labor or political organizations was a result of "pre-existing partisan networks linking unemployed workers to institutional political forces."⁸⁷ In this article, Alcañiz and Scheir argue that, in the case of the MTL and the Argentine Communist Party, political coalitions were created as a result of pre-existing social and organizational links that opposition organizations, such as the Communist party (CP), possessed among the poor and unemployed. Following the 2001 crash, opposition organizations, such as the CP, possessed resources (e.g. financial assistance, political connections, and organizational experience) that would be attractive to piquetero groups looking for ways to broaden the scope of their activities and extract government assistance. Thus, utilizing pre-existing networks that the party had established via its involvement in labor struggles in the years preceding December 2001, the CP was able to establish ties with those piquetero groups that fell within the regional areas in which those pre-existing networks were strongest.

I would argue that Alcañiz and Scheir's logic could be extended to the whole of the PQM. The formation (or at least the likelihood of formation) of coalitions between PQOs and certain labor/political organizations could thus be explained in terms of the pre-existing relationships and connections these organizations possessed within the barrios of Buenos Aires and the possible resources these organizations could offer to PQOs. To talk in terms of the three PQ political poles, those areas in which the CTA and/or leftist political parties had strong pre-

⁸⁷ Alcañiz, Isabella, and Melissa Scheier. "New Social Movements with Old Party Politics: The MTL Piqueteros and the Communist Party in Argentina." *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-first Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy*. Ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Glen David. Kuecker, and Harry E. Vanden. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 273.

existing ties to the urban poor would thus be more likely to embrace a partnership with these groups and accept the resources and connections these groups had to offer. And thus, conversely, those areas in which these organizations did not have a strong pre-existing presence would be more likely to maintain their independence from these institutions. I do not suggest that the presence or absence of these pre-existing networks in certain areas would inevitably produce groups more or less open to creating coalitions. But only to suggest a possible explanation as to why certain PQOs might consider aligning themselves with these groups in some areas while not in others.

The presence or absence of these coalitions would prove to be an important issue within the PQM because these “social networks [shaped] the way the unemployed understood their political context and developed political strategies.”⁸⁸ The influence of these alternative organizations would thus lead to a diversity of political discourses and expectations within the three aforementioned poles; subsequently leading to a divergence within the PQM as to how each group approached its interactions with the government.

To demonstrate this process, I will once again return to the example of the MTL and its relationship with the CP. According to Alcañiz and Scheier, “the central tenets of the MTL piquetero identity were rejection of neoliberal capitalism...distrust of the traditional institutions of interest aggregation (state, party, and union politics) dominated by Peronism, and a revolutionary interpretation of the events of December 2001.”⁸⁹ Of these first two tenets (rejection of neoliberal capitalism and a distrust of traditional institutions), one could say that these were characteristic of all PQOs to a certain degree. But what distinguishes the MTL from the other two political poles within the PQM, and what would greatly shape the trajectory of the

⁸⁸ Alcañiz, 275.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

MTL, and those PQOs closely aligned with it, was its revolutionary interpretation of the events of 2001. And according to Alcañiz and Scheier's, this position was directly informed by an understanding of the national political context as influenced by the Communist party.⁹⁰ This revolutionary interpretation would subsequently affect the MTL's attitudes toward and interactions with the government. If, as the MTL believed, Argentina was indeed in a pre-revolutionary state, protests' efforts and goals should not be geared towards the reformation of the current political system, but rather towards engineering its downfall. This line of thinking made the MTL, and other PQOs like its, less likely to negotiate or compromise with the national government compared to those affiliated with the CTA or those who chose to remain independent.

A political continuum of sorts was consequently established among PQOs according to which political pole they belonged. The CTA was well versed in state-labor negotiations, as a result of its previous associations with the CGT and its previous interactions with the government over the previous decade. The CTA was thus far less radical in its political discourse and expectations for political reform; its more vertical organizational structure also being more conducive to working within and through the current political system to extract the resources they wanted from the government. Those further along the continuum, such as those who maintained their independence from any formal political/labor organization, were far more wary of the possibility of political cooptation and more forward in their call for political change; PQOs connected to the Bloque Piquetero even more so. These last two groups were thus less likely to cooperate with state institutions, calling for continued action as opposed to tempering their protests in exchange for government subsidies.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*

The effect of these distinct political approaches is such that the Bloque Piquetero, with 90,000 members, is said to control only 10,000 government subsidies. In contrast, the CTA affiliated FTV and CCC (120,000 and 80,000 members) are said to control 75,000 and 40,000 subsidies respectively.⁹¹ As I said in a previous section, one of (if not *the*) most important mechanisms that drove PQO growth (if only in influence and visibility if not in actual members) was an organization's ability to win government *planes*. For those PQO associated with more radical groups such as the Bloque Piquetero, this became a difficult task despite its large membership numbers, as evidenced by the distribution numbers of government subsidies. Since government subsidies functioned as the most important form of political and economic capital the PQM possessed (both in terms of inter-movement PQO competition for potential members and as a reflection of a PQO's rapport with the national government), the unequal distribution of *planes* meant an unequal distribution of political influence and visibility within the PQM itself. Politically moderate organizations, like the FTV and CCC, were thus advantaged over more politically exigent PQOs in both material and political resources because of their cooperation.⁹² As a result, these PQOs and their CTA affiliates came to dominate much of the public discourse within the PQM. Contrastingly, the more radical extremes of the political continuum were pushed to the margins of the movement, limiting their material resources as well as their political exposure.

In the political stratification of the PQM during this period, we see the impact that the nation's larger, macro political processes had on the inter-movement development of individual PQOs. Macro political process (increased visibility of government corruption, the rising social costs of Menem's economic reform, and the new Radical party government's incapability to alter

⁹¹ Alcañiz, 279.

⁹² Epstein

the nation's socio-economic trajectory) eroded the credibility of political traditional institutions and actors in the eyes of the public. As a result, these sentiments would preclude the possibility that popular grievances could be addressed via traditional state-society channels (i.e. organizations, such as the CGT, that had served as the working class's political voice in the past). The breakdown of these state-society channels would leave room for alternative groups (e.g. CTA, Bloque Piquetero) to take advantage of the political vacuum. The resulting coalitions these groups formed divided the PQM into competing political poles, stratified these poles according to each pole's relationship with the state, and allowed the more moderate PQOs to rise to preeminence within the PQM. However, the rise of CTA affiliated PQOs within the internal hierarchy of the PQM did not create a more focused and effective movement. In fact, it produced quite the opposite effect. This lack of political solidarity within the PQM ultimately allowed the state to reassert its power by rewarding those PQOs with more moderate political aspirations with additional government assistance; while prejudicing those organizations that pushed for stronger political reform.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned at the beginning of this investigation, when I first started investigating the PQM and thinking about the kind of topics and questions I wanted address over the course of this thesis, two questions seemed to hold my attention. First, I was curious as to how the urban poor of Argentina had managed to mount such a massive campaign considering the lack of resources that were available to them. What perfect storm of events had made such an undertaking possible for a group that had so easily been coerced and/or manipulated by party politics and politicians over the past several decades? This was a question of development strategies. And to this end I began to investigate how social scientists have attempted to analyze the processes that make movements, such as the piqueteros, possible. By way of this investigation, I began to explore the theoretical mechanisms and structures that form the skeleton of our understanding of social movement mobilization and development. Answering my question thus became a manner of appropriating the suitable theoretical framework and comparing these theoretical models with the PQM experience. For that reason, many pages have been used over the course of this investigation to define, explain, and apply these theoretical ideas to the PQM story in the hope of understanding the variables and processes that were involved in its birth, organization, methods, and growth.

The second question that piqued my interest, however, was one of the movement's national contexts. The piqueteros emerged in a time of tremendous political and economic transition in Argentina's history. Only a short time after the fall of the dictatorship that had so closely regulated Argentina's political and economic spheres during the 1980s, the country was

trying adjusting to a newly restored democracy and a swift transition in terms of its economic development strategies. The PQM appeared in the midst of these two key changes and in many ways its influence would seem exaggerated by the instability that they produced. Consequently, one of my central research topics was concerned with exploring how Argentina's national context might have influenced, or even generated the PQM? And in such a case, what might the piqueteros have to tell us about SM mobilization in Latin America in the midst of these transitional contexts?

As I near the end of my investigation it now seems appropriate to consider how what has been discussed concerning the piqueteros might enlarge our understanding of social movements in regards to these two areas of investigation. Through my research, I hope to have provided sufficient evidence that the PQ's do indeed bring something new to the table. This section will consequently be used to expound upon how the PQM offers a new perspective on traditional theoretical frames used to study Latin American SMs mobilization.

A New Theoretical Perspective

In terms of a theoretical contribution, the piqueteros serve as a good example of what MM&Z call "transgressive political contention."⁹³ Transgressive political contention refers to broad collective action within a society in which at least some groups that are party to the action are either a) new political actors or b) employ innovative collective action⁹⁴. As I suggested at

⁹³ MMZ, 7.

⁹⁴ MMZ, 7-8.

the outset and have proven over the course of the previous chapters, the piquetero movement fits this description on both counts.

One contribution of the piquetero movement was its utilization of the *corte de ruta* as a powerful new means of popular protest. Though this style of protest did not originate with the piqueteros, the piqueteros were the first to demonstrate its power and effectiveness when coordinated on a large scale. Moreover, the *corte de ruta* served as a powerful tool, both symbolically and logistically, in the hands of the piqueteros. The roadblocks served the practical purpose of disrupting national commerce and trade in an effort to extract concessions from the government; but also as a symbolic means by which piqueteros could protest the policies of unbridled economic development that had debilitated the country in the first place.

More importantly, however, in terms of a theoretical contribution, the PQM introduced new actors in the form of the empowered urban poor. The traditional urban peasantry that occupied the outer *cordones* surround Buenos Aires was largely unemployed, uneducated, and lacking in access to basic social services. As a result, these individuals were completely reliant upon state social assistance. Since the urban poor lacked the social networks, financial resources, job skills, and political connections to re-integrate themselves into the national economy or effectively voice their needs, they were forced to turn to alternative methods of representation. And in doing so they were not only able to voice their grievances, they were able to capture the attention of the national government by successfully demanding resources (albeit insufficient resources) and assistance from the government. This is one of the novelties of the piquetero story – they have realized the effective mobilization of a people group that had heretofore remained isolated from each other and from contentions political action. However, though the PQM feigns to dispel the notion of the atomized poor, I have also shown that many of

the mechanism PQOs employed were only made possible by the convergence of numerous political, social, and economic processes over which piqueteros had no control.

The obstacles that have always hindered SMs among the traditional poor were still present, and were only overcome by assistance from outside actors, namely the state. Menem's economic reform policies provided the necessary economic strain for piquetero mobilization. Government resources, such as subsidies and *planes*, provided the mobilization mechanisms PQOs needed in order to continue growing their operations. And even as PQOs used the threat of *piquetes* and *cortes* to extract additional state resources, these handouts only served to re-establish state influence over the PQM in the long run by rewarding those PQOs who were most willing to cooperate with the government; pushing those who had hoped for deeper and more profound political and economic change to the outskirts of political and economic influence.

Piquetero mobilization was rather a result of the congruence of several key external conditions that dismantled and/or immobilized state controls over the urban poor. The consequences of Menem's reform on the national economy sufficiently paralyzed the patronage networks that had heretofore kept the lower class contented and dependent upon government aid for their livelihood. The state's eroding political legitimacy and instability would give rise to alternative forms of social representation, such as PQOs. And the rising social costs of economic reform would increasingly stratify Argentine society, leading to the impoverishment of much of the middle class, consequently bolstering national support for protest organizations and increasing participation in collective action.

The timely congruence of so many variables does not suggest that such success could be easily repeated. And though we cannot consider the PQM to be truly revolutionary in the sense that it was a self-sufficient movement of the urban poor; Argentina's social, economic, and

political conditions provided the piqueteros, for a time, a narrow window of opportunity in which these new actors were given a platform from which they could influence national institutions.

Rethinking National Contexts

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the PQM also provides us a new perspective on SMs in regards to their interaction with national and regional contexts. By this I mean that by looking at the historical, political, and economic strains that produced the PQM we can see a deviation from previous patterns of Latin American SMs. History seems to suggest a series of recurring strains that have often spawned SM within LA nations such as struggles over land distribution, ethnic tensions, democratic transitions, and labor struggles to name a few. The root of these strains lies in the political, economic, and social imbalances that many LA nations have had to deal with over the past century. In light of Argentina's experience during the 1990s and 2000s and emergence of the PQM, I would like to add one more category to the list of strains: strains of economic development.

The novelty of the PQM's context is based upon the idea that the PQM was derived from strains associated with Argentina's economic development and modernization. Social strains produced by economic hardship are not a new phenomenon in LA nations. However, the PQs offer a unique perspective in that the boundaries and contexts in which these economic strains developed and the nature of the response to these strains are different. First, the context is that of the economic development within what most would call a modern industrialized nation. As the world economy continues to become more and more fluid, more and more LA nations will be looking for effective economic models upon which they can build economic policy. In

Argentina's case, officials looked towards the neoliberal economic model as a possible solution. This approach differs from Argentina's trajectory over the past fifty years in that previous development efforts focused on ISI strategies, an emphasis on self-sufficiency, and a turning inward towards domestic markets. In the 1990s, however, the Argentine government fully embraced the capitalist economic model without reserve, and though the results were decidedly mixed, the abrupt change brought new challenges to the dynamic of state-society relations.

The strains caused by development initiatives within a global, free-market system are thus a new challenge that many LA nations will have to face. Many are facing it right now, yet they have not all suffered as Argentina. Argentina is well known for being the exception to the rule in many areas and in many ways represents the extreme experiences of certain phenomena. This is certainly true in the case of its attempts at economic development. Countries such as Brazil and Chile have adopted many of the same economic philosophies that Menem adopted during the 1990s, yet they have not suffered as Argentina. The novelty of the strain caused by economic development seems limited to the Argentina's specific national context.

However, the PQM offers us a unique perspective on the interaction between SMs and their national contexts not only in terms of the origin of the conflict (neoliberal economic policies), but also in nature of the popular response to these strains. The PQM offers a unique perspective on collective action in that protesters, who were first mobilized in response to locally limited socio-economic strains, broadened the scope of their protests to challenge the logic behind an entire economic system. One of the central dilemmas behind the creation of the PQM is the question of how societies balance the opposing forces of economic growth and social equality. The piqueteros, by virtue of identifying their hardships as a product of the capitalist

system, rather than just bad government policy, began questioning the traditional logic (such as the neoliberal model set out by the IMF) behind economic development.

Piqueteros (at least on a discursive or ideological level) became a movement concerned with the idea of equitable growth, as much social as economic. They saw the Menem administration's efforts to promote one type of growth over the other (economic over social) as a breach of the state-society contract in which the government had traditionally functioned as a guarantor of economic and social opportunities. The government's subsequent abandonment of its social obligations and the inequalities that were produced as a result consequently fueled the mobilization of the lower classes.

The broader implications of the PQM experience thus lie in its possible application to other Latin American nations where similar state-society contracts exist. This question of socially equitable growth is one that faces all nations. Yet I would argue that in Latin American nations this question is particularly poignant because of the large role state institutions have often played in providing social and economic assistance to the lower classes in many Latin American nations. Argentina's economic development efforts and the subsequent emergence of the PQM during the 1990s and early 2000s can thus serve as an example of the possible consequences and/or outcomes of similar projects in other Latin American nations under comparable economic, social, and political contexts.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTA-	Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentine Workers Central
CP-	Communist Party
MTL-	Movimiento Teritorial de Liberación (Territorial Liberation Movement)
MM&Z-	McArthy, McAdams, and Zald
PQM-	Piquetero Movement
PQO-	Piquetero organization
SM-	Social Movement