

# THE LOGIC OF CLIENTELISM IN ARGENTINA: An Ethnographic Account\*

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*Abstract: Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a shantytown in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, this article studies the workings of Peronist "political clientelism" among the urban poor. It analyzes the web of relations that some slum-dwellers establish with local political brokers to obtain medicine, food, and solutions to other everyday concerns. The article also explores the main functions of the "problem-solving networks," which are resource control and information hoarding, and pays particular attention to an underexplored dimension of the operation of clientelism: clients' own views on the network.*

Thirty-four-year old Norma lives in a slum in the city of C ospito, in the Conurbano Bonaerense.<sup>1</sup> She has no stable job, and her husband has recently lost his as a construction worker. They have a handicapped baby girl and a teenage boy who dropped out of the neighborhood public high school. In September 1996, they opened a grocery store in the front part of their house. Norma told me in our interview, "You know, things were not working very well, so I decided to open an *unidad b sica* (a grassroots office of the Peronist party) and see what happens!" Their decision coincided with the ascending career of Gustavo Pedele, a Peronist councilman trying to make inroads into the slum to launch his 1998 mayoral campaign. Pedele

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1. The Conurbano Bonaerense is the area comprising the nineteen districts in the Argentine industrial heartland surrounding the Federal Capital of the country. Names of locations and persons have been changed to ensure anonymity.

now pays Norma's utility bills and provides her family with small amounts of cash. Norma is now Pedele's broker (his *puntera*) and Pedele is Norma's political patron (her *referente*).

Every week, Norma's unidad básica (UB) distributes powdered milk from the Programa Materno-Infantil (a nutritional program funded by the national welfare ministry) and food from the local municipality to more than fifty slum-dwellers. Norma explained, "Every month, at the party meetings, the mayor informs us [the brokers of the 140 UBs who usually attend the meeting] of the date when they are going to give out food at the municipality. . . . We tell the neighbors." Because Norma is "just starting with this party thing," her access to state resources is for the time being restricted.

But Norma admitted that she "compensates" for this limited access "with other things," such as organizing short trips for the slum-dwellers and other recreational activities. Councilman Pedele provides her with a bus or two and with bread and meat sausages. Once a month, she takes approximately thirty children from the slum to a nearby beach resort or a park. "They are really happy," she told me. I replied, "They surely are, but isn't it a lot of work, to get the buses and the food and to take care of the kids?" Norma responded confidently, "It's not so difficult to obtain goods. You have to know how to pull the right strings, knock at the right door. The most important thing is to know the right person." For the present, Norma knows the right person, and if Councilman Pedele advances in the local political field, she will surely obtain access to more resources. If she is able to "mobilize people" for her political patron (mobilization means attending Peronist rallies and voting in internal elections), she will have more goods and more information. What happened to her awhile back would not occur again: "You know . . . , I missed the Plan Vida [food distribution program], but I have the Programa Materno."<sup>2</sup>

2. The Plan Vida (Life Plan) was inspired by the Chilean Plan de Alimentación Complementaria and the functioning of the Cuban Comités de Defensa de la Revolución. The Plan Vida is the largest food-distribution program currently operated by the government of the Provincia de Buenos Aires. As a pet project of the governor's wife ("Chiche" Duhalde), it was launched first in one of the poorest districts of the Conurbano Bonaerense in November 1994. According to official figures released in November 1996, the Plan Vida reaches thirty-eight districts in Buenos Aires that contain 644 poor neighborhoods and slums. The program is funded by state resources from the Consejo Provincial de la Familia y Desarrollo Humano, which is presided over by "Chiche" Duhalde. She is also the president of the Rama Feminina (Women's Branch) of the Peronist party. The Plan Vida distributes milk, cereal, and eggs to almost half a million preschool children and to pregnant women. They live in neighborhoods that the official "Mapa de la Pobreza" defined as areas with "unmet basic needs." The daily distribution of milk and the weekly distribution of cereal and eggs are carried out by "block delegates," who are known as *manzaneras* (blocks in Buenos Aires are called *manzanas*). The *manzaneras* receive no monetary remuneration for their work except a half-liter of milk per day and the weekly allowance of eggs and cereals allotted to all beneficiaries of the program.

During the summer of 1989, Norma attended the launching of President Carlos Menem's electoral campaign in Mar del Plata, the main beach resort in Buenos Aires. That was the first time that Norma saw the ocean: "It's so nice." The Partido Justicialista (the Peronist party) paid for her bus fare, and she stayed at the Transport Union's hotel where, Norma related, "we even had hot water."

Norma's story is a typical example of the workings of Peronist political clientelism in contemporary Argentina. In contexts of extreme material deprivation and sociocultural destitution, *la red peronista* operates as a problem-solving network that institutes a web of material and symbolic resource distribution. It functions as a source of goods and services, a safety net protecting against the risks of everyday life, one of the few remaining paths of social mobility, and a solidaristic community that stands in opposition to the hardship and exclusion visited on those living in poor and destitute areas. This net concentrates (monopolizes) information and depends to a great extent on state resources. My goal in this article is to provide an empirical description of the relevance of the Peronist problem-solving network within enclaves of urban poverty in Buenos Aires and to analyze its forms, functions, tensions, and resources.

"Political clientelism" has been defined as "the distribution of resources (or promise of) by political office holders or political candidates in exchange for political support, primarily—although not exclusively—in the form of the vote" (Gay 1990, 648). Such clientelism has been a recurrent theme in studying the links between the poor masses and political elites in Latin America (De la Torre 1992; Stein 1980; Menéndez Carrión 1986) and in analyzing the shortcomings of democratic institutions (O'Donnell 1996a; Fox 1994; Gunther, Diamandouros, and Puhle 1996). Clientelism has been examined as one of the possible relationships between political parties and organized popular groups, with a focus on the efforts made by popular organized groups to "bypass traditional mechanisms of political co-optation" (Cardoso 1992, 292; see also Escobar 1994; Vélez-Ibáñez 1983). Political clientelism has also been examined as a form of atomization and fragmentation of the electorate or "the popular sector" (Rock 1975; O'Donnell 1992).<sup>3</sup>

Specialists on Latin America and students of political processes in Argentina are familiar with the stereotypical images of a "captive clientelist electorate" conveyed by the mass media. This phenomenon has been depicted with more subtlety by novelists, as in Beatriz Guido's well-known description of a political boss in the Argentina of the 1930s in *Fin de fiesta* or the more recent oblique portrayal of the life of a Mexican cacique in

3. Gerrit Burgwald's ethnographic analysis of clientelist networks in a squatter settlement in Quito, Ecuador, showed that fragmentation and atomization do not inevitably result in cases of "collective clientelism" (Burgwald 1996).

Angeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida*.<sup>4</sup> Clientelist politics have also been portrayed by quasi insiders, like Alcides Greca in the little-known but outstanding *Cuentos del Comité*.

Despite such attention, the actual operation of clientelism at the grassroots levels remains largely unexplored in Argentina. To date, understanding of the workings of this "relationship based on political subordination in exchange for material rewards" (Fox 1994, 153) has been derived more from popular imagery than from serious research. No strong evidence exists of a quid pro quo exchange. Is it possible to detect empirically the exchange of "*favores por votos*" that much of the literature on clientelism takes for granted? How do researchers know that votes and loyalty come as a result of goods and services? The case analyzed here is Peronism, a social and political movement that has been in and out of state power for the last fifty years, has been a major political actor in Argentina, and has generated resilient sociopolitical identities among popular groups. In this case, the question is more problematic still. Can analysts single out an occasion on which clients voted for a given patron because of the favors performed by him or her, and not because of their general loyalty to or identification with Peronism?

Political clientelism is undoubtedly a form of social and political control (Fox 1994; Bodeman 1988; Mouzelis 1985; Guasti 1977) as well as a form of cultural domination (Scheper-Hughes 1992; see also Scott 1977). But to understand how clientelism takes form and reproduces over time, analysts must examine its sociocultural logic and its intricate mechanisms. A necessary first step in a rigorous sociology of clientelism is to resist resorting to the prefabricated and stigmatizing images of the exchange of votes for favors. Clientelism must be approached through its least known and least spectacular side: the everyday dealings of political brokers, the practices and perspectives of so-called clients, and the problem-solving network that links "clients," brokers, and political patrons.

The larger aims of this article are to contribute to the growing body of research on contemporary forms of political clientelism (Gay 1994, 1995; Burgwald 1996; Escobar 1994, 1997; Shefner 1997; Fox 1994; Vélez-Ibáñez 1983) and to shed light on the convergence of Peronism and clientelist politics. The *unidades básicas* are the sites of this convergence in providing its most crucial organizational support. Curiously enough, these institutions of popular life have been neglected in most studies of contemporary Peronism. The constricting view of political action that permeates much of the understanding of politics in Argentina has consistently overlooked this unspectacular and somehow hidden realm. None of the most cited studies of contemporary Peronism (or *menemismo*) have conducted primary field re-

4. For a review of the literary representations of brokers, caciques, and other manifestations of bossism in Latin American literature, see Nason (1973).

search in the areas of highest support for Peronism, the places where poor people live.<sup>5</sup> As a result, most of the studies are still dominated by the top-down view that permeated much of the research on the transitions to democracy.<sup>6</sup> Given the state-centered orientation of current political studies being done on and in Argentina, it is no surprise that everyday forms of clientelist problem solving are habitually overlooked. This article constitutes a first attempt to redress this one-sided perspective.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article centers on the relationship between brokers of the Peronist party and slum-dwellers in Villa Paraíso. The slum is located in the city of Cospito, in the southern part of the Conurbano Bonaerense bordering the Federal Capital of Argentina. Villa Paraíso is one of the oldest and largest slums in Buenos Aires, with some fifteen thousand inhabitants according to the last population census (INDEC 1993a). The article draws on materials gathered during a year of fieldwork in the slum, in the *unidades básicas* there, and in the *Secretaría de Acción Social* of the municipality of Cospito. Although the focus centers on five political brokers in one slum, I am confident that the validity of the analyses extends beyond the monograph. Recent research undertaken by other scholars (Levitsky 1996, 1997) confirms the findings reported here.

Fieldwork was carried out from December 1995 to February 1996 and from July 1996 to January 1997. It was based on participant observation in Villa Paraíso. I participated in many rallies of the Peronist party, attended party meetings, and interviewed local brokers, party activists, public officials, social workers, and community activists. I conducted more than forty in-depth interviews, collected fifteen life stories from residents of Villa Paraíso, and took a survey based on a stratified random sample of three hundred cases. The survey, interviews, and life stories focused on various aspects of individual and collective problem solving. Finally, I interviewed all the block delegates of the largest state-funded food-distribution program operating in Villa Paraíso, the *Plan Vida*. This article also draws on secondary resources such as statistical data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censo (INDEC) and my reading a year's issues (for 1996) of *La Unión*, the main local newspaper of the south of the Conurbano Bonaerense.

5. See, for example, Borón et al. (1995), Palermo and Novaro (1996), and Sidicaro and Mayer (1995). For a sympathetic view, see Munck (1997). For an exception, see Martuccelli and Svampa (1997). Although "electoral volatility" has increased during the 1990s, according to Levitsky, "such 'de-freezing' has occurred almost exclusively on the anti-Peronist side of the Peronist-anti-Peronist cleavage. . . . [T]he Peronist electorate, both in terms of its size and its composition, has remained relatively stable" (Levitsky 1997, 4). A majority of the Argentine poor continue to vote Peronist.

6. As Tilly perceptively noted, many of the theories of democratization have given little place to popular collective action and have accentuated instead "instrumental maneuvers and bargains among elites" (1994, 4).

First, I will provide a few empirical indicators to assess the exclusion and hardship faced by the inhabitants of Villa Paraíso and describe the process of increasing overlap of informal networks of survival and political networks in the slum. Then I will analyze the Peronist problem-solving network in the slum, the web of relations that some neighbors establish with local political brokers to obtain food, medicine, and solutions to other everyday concerns.

The second part of the article illustrates the two main functions of the problem-solving network in Villa Paraíso: resource control and information hoarding. Both practices have helped make the Peronist network a domination network. The third part of the article focuses on the clients' perceptions of the network and outlines for future research central elements in the everyday construction of the legitimacy of clientelism.

This analysis of the social logic of clientelism will present the reader with a paradox.<sup>7</sup> At a time when public discourse is dominated by neo-liberal rhetoric that stresses the salutary retreat of the state from markets, my article will illustrate one of the ways in which politics (and personal ties) are increasingly important for gaining access to resources. In fact, a strong functionalist argument can be made out of this paradox: clientelist networks are important precisely because they fulfill the functions that the state is abandoning.<sup>8</sup>

#### **SURVIVING IN THE SLUM: HYPER-UNEMPLOYMENT**

Widespread material deprivation, persistent joblessness and misery, and unmerciful economic pressure in the working-class neighborhoods and slums of Argentina have been caused by a combination of factors: the languishing of the wage-labor economy; the casualization of blue-collar jobs (Cieza and Beyreuther 1996; CEB 1995; Lozano and Feletti 1996; Murtis and Feldman 1996; Beccaria and López 1996); and the particular combination of malign and benign state neglect provoked by structural adjustment policies (Golbert 1996; Lo Vuolo and Barbeito 1993; Cetrángolo and Golbert 1995; Prévot Schapira 1996; Lloyd-Sherlock 1997). Widespread unemployment is the most significant defining characteristic of Villa Paraíso. Sixty percent of its economically active population are currently unemployed and underemployed, 50 percent have unmet basic needs, and about 70 percent have incomes below the official poverty line.<sup>9</sup>

7. This paradox was highlighted in the comments of one anonymous *LARR* reviewer.

8. Robert Merton made the same argument in his pathbreaking analysis of U.S. political machines (Merton 1949).

9. The data come from INDEC (1993a, 1993b) and from my survey based on a stratified random sample (three hundred cases), carried out in September and October in Villa Paraíso.

In this context of outright deproletarianization,<sup>10</sup> how do neighbors with little or no income and no pension or other benefits manage to obtain the means of subsistence: food and medicine? Are there any institutions or persons within the slum to whom they can turn to obtain help? What contacts do they establish to obtain these means of subsistence? Who has contacts with whom?

It is hardly news that networks of reciprocal help abound in poor neighborhoods in Argentina and throughout Latin America. Enzo Mingione coined the term *popular economy*, by which he means "the combination of activities undertaken for direct subsistence and for low monetary income" (Mingione 1991, 87). In Villa Paraíso, these activities include raising animals, operating food stalls, undertaking self-help repairs and buildings, and industrial home-working in subcontracting chains. Family and neighborhood networks "have always made it possible for these various activities to coagulate into a poor but socially protected way of life" (Mingione 1991, 87). Larissa Lomnitz showed in her study of a Mexican shantytown that social networks based on residence and kinship function as a surrogate system of social security for individual survival among the residents (1975, 1988). What Friedman and Salguero called "proximate networks of reciprocity with neighbors and kin" (1988, 11) are thus well-studied elements in understanding how individuals confront the challenge of survival and the kinds of relations they establish in the process. Those informal networks have been thoroughly examined in Latin America, often as the source of the survival strategies developed by the urban and rural poor (Lomnitz 1975, 1988; Hintze 1989). Political networks have also been studied in Latin America and all over the world (Conniff 1981; Burgwald 1996; Kornblum 1974; Guterbock 1987; Katznelson 1981; Knoke 1990). But the relationships between informal networks of reciprocal help and political networks have been underexplored.

In Villa Paraíso and many other poor neighborhoods in the Conurbano Bonaerense, informal networks of survival and political networks increasingly overlap. There the *unidades básicas*, political brokers, and state-funded programs have become the sources of resources that circulate in the informal networks of survival. The withering away of paid formal and informal work (most of those currently unemployed had lost their jobs dur-

10. The rate of unemployment in the Conurbano in 1995 was 22.6 of the economically active population (843,840 persons). Unemployment and underemployment amounted to 33.8 percent of the population. In the 1990s, the Conurbano Bonaerense lost 5,508 industrial plants; and between 1991 and 1995, the manufacturing industry eliminated 200,000 jobs (CEB 1995; Lozano and Feletti 1996). Due to the strong correlation between unemployment and poverty (Murmis and Feldman 1993), poverty and inequality have accompanied this growth in unemployment. In 1980, 11.5 percent of the households lived below "the poverty line" in Greater Buenos Aires. In 1994, 20.4 percent of the households were below the line, and in 1995, 25.8 fell into this category (Golbert 1996).

ing the previous two years and had not been able to find new ones) has drained the slum economy, causing informal reciprocal networks to bleed to death. The formerly employed, once able to support their relatives, friends, or kin who were temporarily jobless, are now unemployed themselves. Slum-dwellers resort to the local state or the nearest Peronist committee or broker (which almost amounts to the same thing) to obtain food or medicine. In other words, Villa Paraíso survival strategies are increasingly embedded in political networks.<sup>11</sup>

The expanding relevance of political networks does not mean that networks of reciprocal help have disappeared, however. In Villa Paraíso, these proximate networks remain central in the survival strategies of the slum-dwellers. Twenty-three percent of those consulted in a survey based on a stratified random sample of three hundred cases mentioned their relatives as sources of help when they need medicine. Thirty percent of those interviewed relied on kin and friends whenever they ran short of food. Thus reciprocal favors abound in the slum economy, much as they do in other poor neighborhoods across the Americas (Stack 1974; Edin and Lein 1997; Lomnitz 1975). But with the escalation of unemployment and underemployment and the generalized reduction of income, these networks are being progressively emptied of their resources. The avenues that formerly linked the slum economy to outside wage work are now disrupted, and the money that used to come into the slum as the lifeblood of those reciprocal networks has become a trickle. When rejection from the labor market ceases to be temporary and income reduction affects every job that the unskilled residents of Villa Paraíso can obtain,<sup>12</sup> the social economy of the slum loses its traditional function as a buffer that helps cushion the impacts of economic hardship.

Forty percent of the slum population receive food for themselves or their children from one or more state-funded assistance programs serving Villa Paraíso. These programs distribute milk, eggs, noodles, and cereals from the Plan Vida; powdered milk from the Programa Materno-Infantil; noodles, corn oil, polenta, yerba mate, lentils, and the like from the Plan Asoma; and cheese, vegetables, noodles, corn oil, polenta, and several other products from the Plan Pro-Bienestar. In addition, some residents

11. My usage of *political networks* follows Knoke (1990) and Granovetter (1973): a set of regular contacts or similar social connections among individuals or groups in which at least one of those is a member of a political party or an official of the state. Survival strategies are thus embedded in a political problem-solving network because they are expressed in the interactions between party agents or local officials and slum-dwellers.

12. Jobs in domestic service and the construction sector were the predominant occupations among women and men in the slum. Workers in these sectors have been particularly hurt by what Kessler (1996) called "the epidemic disease" of hyper-unemployment. These two categories represent 13.9 percent of the employed population in Buenos Aires and 19.8 of the unemployed (Murmis and Feldman 1996).

go to the municipal building, where twice a month the Secretaría de Acción Social distributes eight items of food per person (sugar, rice, flour, noodles, polenta, lentils, corn oil, and yerba mate). Nearly half the population of Villa Paraíso (46 percent) know about this food distribution carried out in the municipal building. Thirty percent of those have gone to obtain the “nine kilos” at least once during the last year. For medicine, almost a third of the residents of Villa Paraíso rely on relatives (31 percent). Those who are employed (30 percent) rely on their *obra social* (social security related to their formal job). Others resort to the municipality, the local public health center (28 percent), or a Peronist grassroots committee or Peronist broker (11 percent).

Evidence of the dramatic deterioration in living conditions of the slum population is the opening of a soup kitchen by the Catholic Church. Nearly ninety children and women now eat their lunch there every weekday. It is important to note, however, that this soup kitchen is funded mostly by the welfare department of the municipality, where many local Peronist brokers work. Caritas, the charity organization of the Catholic Church, is also multiplying its activities.<sup>13</sup> Every month, Caritas assists about a hundred families with food and clothes, and it also sells donated clothes at low prices. Mariano, the local priest, and Nora, the woman in charge of Caritas, agreed that during the previous year, demand for food and medicine had substantially increased. Mariano commented, “In Caritas, we used to help some families for limited periods of time, let’s say for three months until they were able to resolve the difficult situation in which they found themselves, as when they were laid off. But now we don’t stop helping them, and there are more people coming, and we are overwhelmed.”

Although Mariano and Nora did not fully acknowledge their increasing dependence on state resources, they admitted that their own resources are decreasing. Both conceded that the Catholic Church is not keeping pace with the increasing demand for aid, and they point to the local Peronist grassroots committees (UBs) as the source of possible solutions for the extreme scarcity endured by the slum-dwellers.

In Villa Paraíso, as in many poor neighborhoods in the Conurbano Bonaerense, one of the most reliable means of satisfying the poor’s basic needs for food and health care is through the political party that has direct access to the state’s resources—the Peronist party. As Levitsky observed, this party “is deeply entrenched at the base level. . . . Peronism is linked to its mass base through trade unions, neighborhood associations, and soccer

13. At the national level, Caritas is also enlarging its activities rapidly. According to the director, Monseñor Rafael Rey, the number of children fed by Caritas in its soup kitchen has soared from fifty thousand in 1993 to four hundred thousand in 1996. See *Clarín Digital*, 19 Nov. 1996.

clubs. The party is also linked to working- and lower-class society by means of clientelistic ties to local and neighborhood bosses, who serve as brokers between the municipal and provincial Peronist governments and the mass base" (Levitsky 1996, 20).

In poverty-stricken neighborhoods, squatter settlements, and slums, the *unidades básicas* constitute a key place where basic needs can be met, through which basic problems can be solved. These UBs provide incredible organizational strength for the Peronist party (Levitsky 1998) and are the sites where Peronist brokers operate.

#### **BROKERS AND THEIR NETWORKS**

Villa Paraíso counts five Peronist brokers (known as *punteros*): Matilde, Juan, Cholo, Andrea, and Norma. Brokers usually do favors such as distributing food and medicine for their potential voters and others.<sup>14</sup> They are not alone in their work, however, because they almost always have an inner circle of followers. A broker is related to the members of his or her inner circle through strong ties of long-lasting friendship, parentage, or fictive kinship. Both Matilde and Juan (the two most powerful local leaders) maintain this kind of effective network around them, individuals with whom they interact regularly and intensely.

Matilde has a circle of men and women who visit her on a weekly basis. For example, forty-five-year-old Lucia used to be Matilde's cleaning lady. Two years ago, Lucia had a stroke, and Matilde (then the *Secretaría de Acción Social* of Cospito), obtained a pension of 110 dollars a month for her. Lucia now receives daily medicine for her high blood pressure from Matilde. She spends almost every afternoon at the neighborhood's *Centro Cultural* (where Matilde's son Paco serves as the president), in the front part of Matilde's house, a half-block from the UB. There Lucia makes puppets that the Cultural Center sells or gives away on special occasions among the children of the slum. Adolfo (Matilde's husband and the Under-Secretary of Public Works) got Lucia's husband a job at the municipality.

Lucia and her *comadre* Antonia fashion puppets with a sewing machine belonging to the Plan País. Launched almost ten years ago, this state-funded program is intended "to strengthen community organization" in poor neighborhoods through the subsidized development of productive micro-enterprises. In Cospito the brokers captured part of the funds of the program, thus acquiring an extra source for their inner circles. Matilde obtained one of the subsidies and organized a group of women to work with (and for) her at the Cultural Center. Lucia considers herself a friend of

14. An extensive classical literature exists on the role of brokers as central articulating figures in the operation of clientelist systems. See the seminal analyses of Eric Wolf (1977), Sydel Silverman (1977), and John Duncan Powell (1977).

Matilde: "She always lends you a hand." Lucia has known Matilde since 1984 and is a *manzanera* (block delegate) of the state-funded Plan Vida. Matilde also provides her with food.

Brigitte has taken Lucia's place as Matilde's cleaning lady. She is also the secretary of the Cultural Center, where she distributes the medicine and food packages that Matilde brings from the municipality. Brigitte is also a *manzanera* of the Plan Vida.<sup>15</sup> Her grandmother recently suffered a heart attack, and Matilde provides her with part of the extremely expensive but vital medicine. Brigitte's mother told me that she hoped that Matilde would soon get a job at the municipality for her daughter. The hope of a job serves as important glue within the inner circle. Although not everyone is employed at the municipality, the fact that someone gets a fixed-term contract or a part-time job has an important demonstration effect. If the others in the circle are diligent and "know how to wait" (*saber esperar*, according to Brigitte), sooner or later they will be rewarded with posts. Alfonsina, a member of Juan's inner circle, got her job as a cleaning woman at a public school through his intervention. She told me in our interview: "When there is a rally, we (the people of the party) collaborate in any way possible. . . . So maybe you can get a job there, but you have to be patient. . . . Yes, I was patient, and with patience I got it. . . ."

Matilde's circle has other circles within it, like Cholo's network. Cholo explained that he "works for Matilde. . . . She coordinates what I have to do. . . ." Matilde provides Cholo's UB with food packages and medicines to distribute among "his people" in another area of the slum. Matilde is his *referente*, his political patron. Cholo is what Argentines call a *ñoqui*, a party activist who collects a paycheck as a ghost employee at the municipality of Cospito. He holds a fixed-term contract job that must be renewed every three months with the approval of Matilde. She also provided him with pipes to build the sewage system in "his area."

Cholo reported, "When I started working with Matilde, she told me that the UB should be open every day of the year." Matilde gave him a key resource to start. Through her contacts at the municipality, she managed to install the first public pay phone in the area in his UB. Residents go to Cholo's UB to use the phone, to get powdered milk from the Programa Materno-Infantil, or to ask for some antibiotic or pain reliever.

Cholo is what Matilde terms "a key component of the group." He is known in the area near his UB and has been praised by some as the one who has done the most to improve the slum. Cholo also works for the Plan Vida. Every morning (except Sundays), Cholo accompanies the Plan Vida's

15. See note 2. Although officials constantly emphasize "the political impartiality" of the Plan Vida and the fact that the *manzanas* emerge "naturally" from the community, twenty out of twenty-three *manzanas* in Villa Paraiso were recruited by a Peronist party broker. Most meetings of the program were held at Matilde's UB.

truck on its route through the slum and other poor neighborhoods of the area adjacent to Villa Paraíso. He and two other men distribute the milk, cereal, and eggs to the block delegates of the Plan Vida. He spreads news about the plan (such as a forthcoming rally to launch the program in which the governor or the governor's wife will be present). Cholo also distributes the program's newspaper and provides news related to the Peronist party (the time of the meeting for a rally, an invitation to a barbecue, *el asado peronista*). Cholo reports any problem a manzanera might have (a new member of the program, a dropout, a complaint about a shortage of food) to Mimi, Matilde's daughter-in-law, who is the area coordinator of the program. For doing this job, he earns fifty pesos a week.<sup>16</sup>

In structural terms, Juan Pisutti's inner circle is identical to Matilde's. Yet the number of persons who have close relationships with Juan is smaller, making his inner circle smaller. His family does not participate in his activities as Matilde's family does in hers. Alfonsina got her job at a public school through the intervention of Pisutti, Rosa receives medicine for her hemoplegy from him, and Carlitos gets packages of food through Juan's timely mediation. As in Matilde's inner circle, these problem holders provide problem solvers like Juan Pisutti with some services in return. The inner circle helps the broker to solve the everyday problems of slum-dwellers. They run the soup kitchens at the broker's *unidad básica* and are normally in charge of opening, cleaning, and maintaining the locale. Members of the inner circle usually announce when the broker will be available at the UB to the outer circle and spread the news when food is being distributed at the UB or the municipal building. Unlike Matilde, Juan Pisutti does not have another UB working for him. His area of influence is much more limited than Matilde's, covering only the four blocks that surround his UB.

Members of the outer circle (the potential beneficiaries of the brokers' distributive capacities) are related to brokers by weak ties.<sup>17</sup> They contact the broker when problems arise or when a special favor is needed (a food package, some medicine, a driver's license, the water truck, a friend in jail). But those in the outer circle do not develop ties of friendship or fictive kinship with brokers. Although they may attend some rallies or gatherings

16. Matilde's nuclear and extended families participate fully in her political activities. Her two daughters-in-law are the regional coordinators of the largest food-distribution program in the area. Her husband is the Under-Secretary of Public Works in the municipality of Cospito. One of her sons is the president of the neighborhood cultural center (which effectively operates as another UB), and her other son serves as her husband's private secretary at the municipality. In Peronist politics, this pattern is a common phenomenon. Further research is needed on the overlap between family kinship and political networks—and the prominent, although subordinated, role of women within them.

17. On the difference between strong and weak ties (in terms of the time, intimacy, and emotional intensity involved in the relationships), see Granovetter (1973).

organized by the broker or even vote for him or her in an internal election, they do not have an everyday intimate relationship with the broker. While the brokers' ties to their inner circles are dense and intense, their ties to the outer circles are more sparse and intermittent.

The bases for this strong relationship are multiple. Those who are part of the brokers' inner circle have known their brokers for a long time (usually more than four or five years), and the brokers have "lent them a hand" in a time of extreme hardship. In the life stories and interviews I recorded, most members of an inner circle highlighted a foundational favor that inaugurated this long-lasting and "very useful" relationship. Brokers are portrayed as "coming to rescue" them without ulterior motives. That foundational favor establishes a relationship of mutual help. The foundational transactions cluster into ties, which in turn concatenate into networks.

### *Domination Networks: Controlling Resources and Information*

One standard English-Spanish dictionary defines *network* as *red, malla, retículo*. *Red*, in turn, has several meanings in English. The first is "net, particularly for fishing and fowling," but another meaning given is "snare."<sup>18</sup>

Problem-solving networks are neither frozen timeless structures nor the intended outcome of a politician's calculated or cynical action. They result from long-term regular interactions that, although usually inaugurated by a founding favor, must be continuously cultivated and practiced. Much like a university professor in the United States, Juan Pisutti holds his office hours at the UB twice a week. He spends most Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings assisting the stream of persons who show up at his UB. His inner circle is usually there, preparing *mate*, distributing powdered milk, catching up on recent news. Juancito takes time to listen to every dweller who comes to his UB. Although most come to ask him for something that is out of his reach (like jobs), he gives them some kind of useful information: a tip for finding food at the municipality, or the precise date when food will be distributed at the municipal building and how to proceed to obtain the "nine kilos of merchandise." Juan also uses his contacts at the local public hospital or his own health insurance to obtain medicine in an emergency.

Within the Peronist problem-solving network, Peronist brokers function as gatekeepers, acting as go-betweens between the flow of goods and services coming from the executive branch of the municipal power (the mayor) and the flow of support and votes coming from the clients. As in many other historical and geographical settings, gatekeeping is the most important function of Peronist brokers. As Carlos and Anderson observed,

18. See *New Revised Velázquez Spanish and English Dictionary*.

“a political broker can either obstruct or facilitate the flow of demands, favors, goods and services to or from some constituency” (1981, 172–73). Yet significant differences emerge among brokers. These differences stem from their control of resources from above (goods and services), which in turn determines the amount of resources from below (human beings) they can “control.”

Resources (food and medicine) move from the municipality to the *unidades básicas*, where the brokers have discretionary power to do what they want with the resources. The information concerning food distribution at the municipal building also circulates through the UBs, as the broker Norma explained. Employment at the municipality and membership in the Peronist party provide brokers with the access to knowledge about resource distribution. Although neighbors know in general about the food distribution at the municipality, they do not know the precise date on which the distribution will be carried out. Nor do they know the ever-changing procedures to obtain the “nine kilos.” Brokers know the dates and have the specially designed cards required to obtain the food. These cards are small tickets with a number on them, indicating the date when the holder can go to the municipal building. Whether the general population’s ignorance is “deliberately created” or “just happens” (Erickson 1996) I cannot know. The following episode from one of my first journal entries illustrates that on occasion, brokers intentionally confuse individuals to set themselves up as the only channels of information between the slum and the municipality.

At the beginning of August 1996, Juan Pisutti got in touch with the coordinator of the soup kitchen operating in the local Catholic Church, a women named Nora. He introduced himself as a municipal official who “is able to obtain dairy products and vegetables for the better functioning of the soup kitchen.” The Secretary of Social Welfare does not provide the soup kitchen with milk, cheese, or vegetables. Nora told him that she usually asks Graciela (a social worker at the Secretary of Social Welfare) if and when the soup kitchen needs anything. For whatever problems they have at the soup kitchen, Nora tells Pisutti, “we get in touch with Graciela.” Pisutti replies, “it’s exactly the same thing. You can contact me or Graciela.” The social worker was indignant about this episode. She believes that there is a lot of “confusion” concerning the “place” each one (she and Pisutti) should occupy.

This episode depicts the typical movement of Peronist *punteros* or *referentes* pursuing the core of brokerage: setting themselves up as the (only) channels that facilitate transactions or resource flows (Gould and Fernández 1989, 91).<sup>19</sup> It also illustrates the obstacles that they have to con-

19. This constant effort to acquire and control most links between the community and the government is a major characteristic of other types of political brokers. As Cornelius described the Mexican urban *cacique*, he “seeks to monopolize all links between the community under his control and political and bureaucratic structures in the external environment” (Cornelius 1977, 347).

front in this task. Social workers, nongovernmental organization agents, and other community activists are usually the most outspoken opponents of Peronist brokers.<sup>20</sup>

Whether the ignorance is deliberately created or just happens, it is structurally induced. In neighborhoods now almost devoid of social organizations, where dwellers are increasingly isolated from each other, individuals have few networks for obtaining information. Brokers and their inner circles, in contrast, have access to helpful, even vital information.

To the extent that many slum-dwellers depend on the broker for information and material resources not available elsewhere, it can be asserted that brokers enjoy “positional centrality” and thus “positional power” (Knoke 1990, 10). They occupy a structural location similar to a large banking or credit institution that from its monopolistic position can impose its own terms in its own interest for granting credit. In this way, brokers exercise what Weber would call “domination by virtue of a position of monopoly.”<sup>21</sup> Brokers pursue their own political careers and try to accumulate as much political power as they can. To do so, they gather resources and hoard information vital to solving problems: they become “problem solvers.” They do not command directly the actions of poor people who must solve pressing survival needs (what Weber would call “domination by virtue of authority, i.e., power to command and duty to obey”). Yet only an approach that focuses on individuals rather than relations fails to perceive the structural domination effects in the position of Peronist brokers. In pursuing their own interests (ascending to higher positions in the local political field), some become quasi monopolists in solving problems. In so doing, they increase their capacity to constrain the possibilities of problem holders.

The relationships that brokers establish with their respective inner circles compose an intriguing qualification of the way in which domination is carried out. By supplying information and goods that appeal to their close followers’ self-interest, voluntary compliance is secured at low cost. In this sense, brokers’ power is economical. Yet the expectation of a larger benefit (like a public post) is also present in this relationship of authority.

20. Cardoso (1992) documented this same tension between clientelist politics and local neighborhood groups in São Paulo. For a similar argument in the case of Guadalajara, see Shefner (1997).

21. According to Max Weber, this type of domination is “based upon influence derived exclusively from the possession of goods or marketable skills guaranteed in some way and acting upon the conduct of those dominated, who remain, however, formally free and are motivated simply by the pursuit of their own interests. . . . The potential debtors, if they really need the credit, must in their own interest submit to these conditions and must even guarantee this submission by supplying collateral security. The credit banks . . . simply pursue their own interests and realize them best when the dominated persons, acting with formal freedom, rationally pursue their own interests as they are forced upon them by objective circumstances” (Weber 1968, 943).

In the latter sense, Peronist problem-solving networks resemble the classic party machines in U.S. cities. Both are “systems of domination, relying on both rewards and punishments to keep their entourages in line” (Knoke 1990, 4). To get their problems solved, problem holders become increasingly ensnared within the Peronist web. That is to say, brokers’ power derives from their position within the network and from the position of the network itself in the larger social structure of the slum. The Peronist problem-solving network keeps expanding its influence, spreading within the slum like an oil slick that disperses gradually in the water.

#### THE CLIENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

On delving into the intricacies of grassroots clientelism, one can detect certain regularities that form a pyramidal structure of relations in which “clients,” brokers, and patrons interact. But to understand fully the logic of clientelist interactions (and the conundrum of their resiliency), one must focus on the objective meaning of practices but also investigate the subjective purposes of the actions of the actors involved (“ensnared”) in the web. Once the empirical focus of the analysis is not only relations but experiences, it can be seen that clientelist problem solving involves constructing personalized ties, an imagined solidaristic community, and a protective and predictable network that buffers the harsh everyday reality of the slum. The last section of this article will outline key elements of this “subjective” side of clientelism by focusing on the beliefs and evaluations of the members of brokers’ inner circles, elements that require further research.

#### *Nice and Helpful Friends*

Relations of clientelist domination exist in practice as relations that are useful from the clients’ perspective for solving problems, obtaining protection against the risks of everyday life, and making friends with someone who “really cares.” To the members of the brokers’ inner circles, brokers are not the unscrupulous and corrupt politicians whom most neighbors talk about. They are “helpful” and “sacrificing” and “good people” with whom problem holders have a personal relationship sometimes described as “friendship” but always as worth keeping.

Both Juan Pisutti and Matilde are viewed by many neighbors as “using the people” and thus “bad and corrupt” politicians who “play their own game.” They are sometimes blamed for the limited amount of resources that social assistance programs distribute in the neighborhood because “they always keep the goods for themselves.” Brokers are always accused of “deceiving the people.”

This view contradicts that held by those who solve most of their everyday life problems through a broker's intervention. Rosa pointed out what an "excellent person" Juan Pisutti is: "the way he takes care of people, he is an exceptional human being. . . . He suffers because those who go there [to the UB] never leave without a solution to their problems. He has a solution for everyone. He willingly advises everyone. Many people ask him for money . . . , and he uses his own money. He never tells them that he doesn't have any money."

According to Carlos, "Juancito sacrifices himself for the people of the slum." Helpful and self-sacrificing are also characterizations applied to Matilde: "She is always there when something happens." "She is so good." "Matilde pays attention to every single detail."

The main point of agreement among members of inner circles about their brokers is that the brokers are personally responsible for the distribution of things. The organization that grants a pension, offers a job, or gives out medicine or a food package is not the local, provincial, or national government but Matilde or Juan. They are the ones who really care, who feel for others, who are their friends and are always available. Hundreds of pages of interview transcripts and field notes testify to one essential fact: it is not the state that is perceived as the distributing agency but Matilde or Juan or some other broker. And because they are the ones who distribute the goods, they are viewed as having no obligation at all to do so. They do it because they really want to, because they care, because they "sacrifice for the people." Roberto, part of Matilde's circle, summarized this belief: "People think it's her obligation to give out things, and it's not an obligation. She does it because she wants to. What's her obligation? Who is she? Is she your mother? People get confused a lot. You do them a favor, and it seems like it is an obligation. And it is a favor." And because Matilde is the one who dares to deliver the goods without having any obligation whatsoever to do it, the beneficiary cannot invoke any right to the thing given or the favor granted. There is no third party to which one can resort in order to enforce one's claim, or what might constitute a right (see Tilly 1994). But in a personalized relationship out of which nothing can be obtained, no problem can be solved.

### *Brokerage as an Everyday Practical Activity*

Some slum-dwellers believe in "a time of elections" when demands can be satisfied quickly and goods obtained promptly because politicians are eager to win their votes. As in many other settings throughout Argentina and Latin America, "the time for politics" is seen as something that occurs once in a while, something that breaks up the routine of everyday life in the slum (see Hirschman 1984 and Heredia 1996).

Rogelio, president of one of the few neighborhood associations, told me: "Matilde shows up when it's the time for politics, when there are elections. That is when politicians show up. . . ." Horacio, president of one of the many soccer clubs in the area, agreed: "If we want to get something [like a sewage system], we will have to wait for the elections. At that time, we can demand something . . . ; we provide so many [votes] that we might get something in return." The belief that electoral times are an opportunity to solve problems is anchored in personal experiences. Both Rogelio and Horacio got aid for their respective organizations shortly before the past two elections. Horacio related, "Through politics, we got a plot of land for the club. . . . Now we need the bricks, so I will have to wait for the next election." Whether restricted to electoral times or limited to the multiple rally days, politics are viewed as a discontinuous activity. Politics are also seen as "dirty" and "corrupt": "a lucrative business," "an opportunity to get ahead," an activity that is "deceitful and manipulative."

Such observations are hardly new. But in the same destitute neighborhood, strikingly contradictory evaluations of politics coexist. Almost everyone shares the idea that politics is something "I don't do"—by implication, something that "others do." All agree that politics constitute a universe with its own rules and might serve to improve one's own lot, regardless of the common good. Yet some slum-dwellers highlight certain aspects of politics as worth exploring.

Some residents praise the work that brokers and the municipality do for the neighborhood, especially with the distribution of food, sheets of metal, and mattresses. As one interviewee elaborated, "There is a lot of help . . . , the municipality always has an answer, not only with the food. If you need a metal sheet, they'll give it to you. . . . In a UB, they used to give milk with a piece of bread. Here, there is a lot of help, anyone who says there is no help is lying. . . . What happens is that you have to go there and wait. Everything has its own time."

Consonant with the perceived steady accessibility of the brokers of the Peronist party, some slum-dwellers do not believe that the aid coming from politicians increases during election periods, rather, "assistance" is an everyday personalized issue. When I inquired, "Some of your neighbors told me that the aid comes quicker during election time?" Victoria replied, "No, I don't think so." Adela added, "From my point of view, it's always the same."

Problem solving becomes personalized and part of the habitual knowledge of members of brokers' inner circles. Those who receive things know that they have to go rallies and support their brokers. They are part of a universe in which everyday favors imply some expected return as the rule of the game, a rule understood as a "scheme immanent in practice" (Bourdieu 1977, 38), as a mandate that exists in a practical state. Relations between problem holders and problem solvers are "practical" insofar as

they are routinely “practised, kept up, and cultivated” through the distribution of things and the granting of favors (Bourdieu 1977, 38). Attendance at a rally is part of the stock of practical knowledge.

I asked Coca, “So when Matilde gets the medicine you need, does she come and tell you, ‘You have to come with me to the rally?’” Coca explained, “No, I know that I have to go with her instead of with someone else. Because she gave me medicine, or some milk, or a packet of yerba or sugar, I know that I have to go to her rally in order to fulfill my obligation to her, to show my gratitude. Because if I do not go to her rally, then when I need something she won’t give it to me. [She would say,] ‘Go ask the person who went to the rally with you.’”

The extensive literature on political clientelism has shown that trust (Roniger 1990), solidarity, “hopes for the future” (Ayata 1994), familistic orientations (Tellis Novak 1983), and reciprocity (Gouldner 1977; Scott 1977) indeed exist in the relationships established among patrons, brokers, and clients. These experiences and feelings are verbalized by both clients and brokers when asked about them. They are remarked on time and again in brokers’ public speeches. Brokers of the Peronist party present their gate-keeping function as a special relationship with the poor, a relationship couched in terms of debt and obligation, special care for them, “the love they feel for them” to the point that bureaucratic indifference is to be eliminated (Auyero 1999a). Embodying and enacting a persistent Peronist tradition—that of Eva Perón as the “bridge of love” between Juan Perón and the poor masses—Peronist brokers present their political work not as a job but as “a passion for the people.” Their work is “all sacrifice” to the point of exhaustion in the post. The brokers insist, “We care about them.” Some of the clients say, “The brokers care about us.” Those outside the networks say, “The brokers care only care about themselves.”

This discursive emphasis on trust, solidarity, reciprocity, caring, and hope has particular effects. Insofar as the solutions, services, and protection provided by brokers (inseparable material and symbolic exchanges, in which a thing is given, a favor granted, and something is communicated) are inclined to legitimate a *de facto* state of affairs that is an unequal balance of power (a domination network), they can be described as ideological machines (following Bourdieu). The act of giving, the caring actions of brokers, and the trusting response of their inner circles transform (or attempt to transform) a contingent social relationship (helping someone who is in need) into a recognized (acknowledged as lasting) relationship: We solve our problem, and by the way, we recognize Matilde or Juan as our problem solver. This recognition underlies problem solving through political mediation. In an ideological environment of cooperation, companionship, and solidarity, ties are constructed that freeze a particular balance of forces.

The acceptance that members of the inner circle confer on the world

of problem solving through political mediation undoubtedly constitutes the strength of the brokers' position. Ultimately, it is the expression of their legitimacy. Yet at the same time, such acceptance represents a major weakness. This legitimacy is produced by a close everyday bond between problem holder and problem solver, a relation that must be constantly upheld, personally practiced, and directly exercised. Keeping up the relationship depends on the capacity of the broker to maintain the strength of this tie, something largely contingent on his or her capacity to deliver. As it turns out, this capacity is finite and dependent on other factors. A broker can get jobs, deliver medicine, do "essential" favors, and assist someone as if he or she were part of the recipient's family, but only for a restricted number of persons. The most powerful broker in the slum, Matilde, has no more than a hundred individuals bound to her through strong ties, out of a voting population of more than seven thousand. The broker's capacity to maintain each tie is also contingent because it depends on the broker's relationship to a third party (in this case, the mayor of Cospito), who provides the broker with the goods to be distributed.

The scope and limits of the brokers' capacities belie the presumably all-powerful character of clientelist politics. The image of an extended "captive" clientelist electorate (stereotypically portrayed by the media, and sometimes adopted unreflectively by scholars) is in this sense empirically shaky. The size of brokers' inner circles, although significant, can scarcely account for the "conquest of the vote" and the "building of electoral consensus" usually attributed to clientelism. Yet this conclusion does not mean that scholars should stop studying political clientelism. This type of network reproduces domination and inequality and guarantees a somewhat stable number of hard-core voters who might prove decisive in internal elections.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the literature on political clientelism is varied and extensive, little is known about the actual workings of clientelist networks at the grassroots level in contemporary Latin America. In Argentina almost nothing is known about Peronist networks in areas of high poverty.<sup>22</sup> The *unidades básicas*, the sites of convergence between contemporary Peronism and clientelist politics, have never been seriously studied.<sup>23</sup> By focusing

22. Levitsky's recent research (1996, 1998) may be the only exception to this lack of first-hand knowledge.

23. Bianchi and Sanchis's (1988) study of the women's branch of the Peronist party is, to my knowledge, the only serious research that includes some reference to the *unidades básicas* during the first and second Peronist governments (1946–1955).

on the form, functions, resources, and dynamics of the Peronist problem-solving network, I have sought to provide an initial analysis of the practices of real-life brokers and the experiences of real-life clients. The first part of the article examined information hoarding and resource control as two equally important practices in the functioning of clientelist networks.

The article also explored the "subjective dimension" of Peronist clientelism. The experience of clientelism proved to be a decisive element in the workings of this hierarchical social arrangement. Clientelist relations are experienced as legitimate, habitual, and taken for granted by a small portion of brokers' followers, those clients with strong and everyday ties with Peronist local politicians. Thus the study has shown that the scope of the clientelist network is limited. Consequently, it appears that other kinds of politics are operating in conjunction with "clientelist politics" in the conquest of the Peronist vote.

Engaged participation in Peronist problem-solving networks reinforces sociopolitical identities as much as it provides goods and favors. The structure of relations among brokers, clients, inner circles, and state officials as well as the location of individual actors in the network are the bases for exploring their behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes. Problem-solving networks are one of the relational supports of the heterogeneous political cultures of the urban poor. Further research is needed on three issues: the perceptual and behavioral consequences that the location within these networks (and the relations between positions) engenders for agents involved in them; the capacity of these networks to reproduce and reconfigure an always ambiguous "Peronist identity"; and the effectiveness of this type of clientelist arrangement as a mechanism of electoral mobilization.

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