# Poor people's lives and politics: The things a political ethnographer knows (and doesn't know) after 15 years of fieldwork

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on a decade and a half of ethnographic research on five different topics: patronage politics, the intricate relationship between clientelism and collective action, the role of clandestine connections in politics, urban marginality and environmental suffering, and poor people's waiting as a way of experiencing political domination. The paper examines the contributions that political ethnography can make to a better understanding of these themes and highlights areas for further empirical and theoretical work.

Keywords: *political ethnography, clientelism, collective action, environmental suffering, clandestinity*

It has been 15 years since I began my first long-term fieldwork project—the one that culminated in my first book, *Poor People's Politics*.[1] In these 15 years, I conducted (alone or in collaboration) five different, more or less ethnographic, projects. In this paper, I review the main substantive and analytical lessons learned while shuttling back and forth between "being there" (in the field) and "being here" (among academics), to echo Clifford Geertz's famous distinction. Moreover, I will highlight the challenges that still lie ahead and propose a series of avenues for comparative research.

Over the years, I have been undertaking a type of political ethnography that intends to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of central sociological concepts such as clientelism, power, legitimacy, habi-

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1    Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

tus, mobilizing structures, and the like.[2] By demonstrating the adequacy (or inadequacy) of these conceptual tools vis-à-vis a detailed description of the processes they are meant to describe, my work has attempted to show the virtues and/or shortcomings of these key concepts. This testing of the adequacy of concepts against empirical reality identifies the risks involved in an uncritical application of such concepts and clears the way for the development of more precise concepts and theories that provide a better fit with empirical data. While this sort of political ethnography is seldom able to test theoretical hypotheses directly, it is essential to a critical appraisal of the capability of the central organizing concepts employed by those who wish to test theories against empirical data. All too often, I should add, such theory-testing is performed on what might be termed "stylized facts," oversimplified descriptions generated by concepts and notions which usually fail to capture the fine-grained, micro-sociological processes at work. As a result, much macro-sociological work in political sociology rests on conceptually weak micro-foundations. All in all, the kind of political ethnography I undertake (and have been advocating by way of empirical studies) is an essential tool to provide a more solid foundation for sociological (both theoretical and empirical) work.

Political clientelism, its relationship with collective action, the role of clandestine connections in politics, urban marginality and environmental suffering, and poor people's waiting as a way of experiencing political domination—these are the five (admittedly, very broad) topics that, in roughly chronological order, I have been obsessed with over these 15 years. What did I learn? How do I think we can still improve our social scientific explanations of these subjects?

## Political clientelism

Political clientelism has been one of the strongest and most recurrent images in the study of political practices of the urban and rural poor in Latin America, almost to the point of becoming a sort of "metonymic prison"[3] for that part of the Americas. Used (and abused) to explain the reasons why poor and destitute people sometimes follow populist leaders, and at other times authoritarian or conservative ones, the notion of political clientelism has not only been understood as one of the central elements of the populist appeal, but also been defined as a mode of vertical political inclusion distinct from populism. Political clientelism is

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2    *Routine Politics and Collective Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Contentious Lives: Two Argentine Women, Two Protests, and the Quest for Recognition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); *Poor People's Politics*.

3    Arjun Appadurai, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1988).

also recurrently associated with the limitations of Latin America's unceasingly fragile democracies. It is seen as one of the pillars of oligarchic domination which reinforces and perpetuates the rule of traditional political elites, and as a practice that remains at the core of party behavior. With neoliberal emphasis on "targeted" social programs, political clientelism has been defined as one of the main obstacles that the now lean state has to overcome to reach the poorest of the poor.

Understood as the distribution (or promise) of resources by holders of political office or political candidates in exchange for political support, clientelism has exhibited, to cite Robert Merton's still insightful analysis of political machines in the US, "a notable vitality" in many parts of the modern world.[4] In the words of the authors of the most recent survey on this resilient socio-political phenomenon, clientelism is a particular form of party-voter linkage; it is a "transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen's vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods, and services."[5] According to these authors, patronage-based voter-party linkages are still operating (and sometimes expanding), not only in the new democracies of Latin America, post-communist Europe, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa, but also, and contrary to the predictions of those who saw clientelism as a "holdover from pre-industrial patterns that would gradually disappear in the modernizing West,"[6] in many an industrial democracy, such as Italy, Austria, and Japan.[7]

It is common knowledge that clientelist exchanges concatenate into pyramidal networks constituted by asymmetrical, reciprocal, and face-to-face relationships. The structure of what David Knoke has called "domination networks"[8] and the key actors within them (patrons, brokers, and clients) are well-studied phenomena of popular political life both in urban and rural settings.[9]

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4   Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1949), 71.
5   Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.
6   Ibid., 3.
7   For evidence of its endurance in Mexico, see also Holzner 2007, Tosoni 2007; in Brazil, see Arias 2006; in Argentina, see Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004 and Levitsky 2007; in Bolivia, see Lazar 2008; in Venezuela, see Smilde 2008; in Peru, see Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin 2005; in India, see Wilkinson 2007; for a general survey Roniger and Güneş-Ayata 1994.
8   David Knoke, *Political Networks: The Structural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
9   For examples of classic works, see James C. Scott, "Political Clientelism: A Bibliographical Essay," in *Friends, Followers and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism*, eds. Steffen W. Schmidt, et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); James C. Scott and Benedict J. Kerkvliet, "How Traditional Rural Patrons Lose Legitimacy (in Southeast Asia)," in *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism*, ed. Steffen Walter Schmidt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977);

One general agreement in the extensive literature on the subject is that patron-broker-client relationships are as far from any kind of Simmelian sociability ("the purest, most transparent, most engaging kind of interaction—that among equals"[10]) as from a Roman *societas leonina*, a partnership in which all the benefits go to one side. The vast literature concurs in that clientelist relations are a complex cocktail of the four different forms of social interaction identified by Simmel in his classic *On Individuality and Social Forms*: exchange, conflict, domination, and prostitution. Clientelist relations are seen as hierarchical arrangements, as bonds of dependence and control, based on power differences and inequality. Being highly selective, particularistic, and diffuse, they are "characterized by the simultaneous exchange of two different types of resources and services: instrumental (*e.g.*, economic and political) and sociational or expressive (*e.g.*, promises of loyalty and solidarity)."[11]

With their particularized favors, patrons and brokers offer alternative channels for "getting things done," while avoiding bureaucratic indifference. As Robert Gay[12] and Gerrit Burgwal[13] have convincingly shown in their studies of two *favelas* (shanty-towns) in Rio de Janeiro and a squatter settlement in Quito, clientelist mediation is an effective way of obtaining many urban services, otherwise unavailable to those without contacts. With its informal rules of promotion and reward (also in an informal party structure), and its low-cost access to state jobs, clientelist networks can also offer a channel for upward social mobility. In contexts of dwindling economic opportunities, sustained and loyal engagement in the party machinery can assure participants access to jobs and influence in the distribution of public resources.[14]

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for examples of recent work, see Auyero, *Routine Politics*; Jon Shefner, *The Illusion of Civil Society: Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low-Income Mexico* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2008); Claudio Holzner, "The End of Clientelism? Strong and Weak Networks in a Mexican Squatter Movement," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2004); Sian Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City: Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

10   Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 133.

11   Luis Roniger, *Hierarchy and Trust in Modern Mexico and Brazil* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 3; representatives of the extensive literature include Y. Michal Bodemann, "Relations of Production and Class Rule: The Hidden Basis of Patron-Clientage," in *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, eds. Barry Wellman and Stephen D. Berkowitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Robert Gay, "Community Organization and Clientelist Politics in Contemporary Brazil: A Case Study from Suburban Rio de Janeiro," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 14, no. 4 (1990); Thomas M. Guterbock, *Machine Politics in Transition: Party and Community in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Sydel Silverman, "Patronage and Community-Nation Relationships in Central Italy," *Ethnology* 4, no. 2 (1965).

12   Gay, "Community Organization."

13   Gerrit Burgwal, *Struggle of the Poor: Neighborhood Organization and Clientelist Practice in a Quito Squatter Settlement* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1995).

14   As Kitschelt and Wilkinson have written, clientelism is usually carried out through multifaceted and enduring webs of reciprocal exchange: "In many systems characterized by relatively high levels of

Most of the studies still focus on clientelism as a form of getting the vote, as a form of political domination. Without denying the fact that this particular political practice is useful, even with its limitations, as an electoral strategy, as a way of solving organizational problems for the party, and as a form of political power over dispossessed populations, I think we miss a lot of "where the action is," to quote Goffman, thus remaining blind as to the reasons why clientelism persists and thrives, if we do not examine patronage as poor people's problem-solving strategies. We need—and herein lies one of the central analytical lessons I have tried to convey in my work, as well as a point for future comparative work—to shift the center of attention in studies of political clientelism and pay much more sustained attention to the place that this political arrangement occupies in the lives of the most destitute. How important is patronage as a problem-solving strategy among the urban poor? How does it compete (or fail to compete) with other problem-solving strategies, such as the market, state welfare, and the like? We know that patronage is, for party leaders and brokers, a way of buying the vote and/or buying turn-out.[15] What does clientelism represent for clients? Testimonies about the workings of clientelism are usually gathered from oppositional politicians, journalists or community leaders opposed to this "way of doing politics." We also "learn" about the pervasiveness of patronage through opinion polls that rarely go beyond the surface of the actual "exchange of votes for favors." Typical questions include: What's your opinion about clientelism? Did you or your neighbor ever receive a favor from a local politician during election times? Only sporadically does one listen to the so-called clients, about the reasons they give for their behavior (supporting a particular patron or broker, attending rallies, and so on), to their own judgments concerning what others label "anti-democratic" procedures. The clients' viewpoints are crucial to understand and explain both objective and subjective underpinnings of political clientelism as *both* a mechanism of political domination and as a problem-solving strategy among the urban poor. Another analytical lesson and avenue for further research I

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poverty—such as Thailand, India, Pakistan, or Zambia—patrons directly purchase clients' votes in exchange for money, liquor, clothes, food, or other immediately consumable goods [...] Much more frequently than single-shot transactions of this nature, however, are webs of exchange, obligation, and reciprocity sustained over a longer period, in which patrons provide private goods or club goods to their clients." Kitschelt and Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, 19.

15  Susan Stokes, "Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005); Simeon Nichter, "Vote Buying or Turnout Buying? Machine Politics and the Secret Ballot," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008).

learned is that we need to do more and better work to reconstruct and explain the clients' points of view.

Over the course of eight months of fieldwork carried out between 1995 and 1996, I reconstructed the form and function of problem-solving networks tied to the main political party in Argentina, the Peronist party.[16] In poor and working-class neighborhoods, shanty-towns, and squatter settlements throughout the country, many of the poor and the unemployed solve the pressing problems of everyday life (access to food and medicine, for example) through patronage networks that rely on brokers of the Peronist party (locally known as *punteros*) as key actors. Depending on the (not always legal, not always overt) support of the local, provincial, and national administrations, these problem-solving networks function as webs of resource-distribution and protection against the risks of everyday life. *Punteros* provide food in state-funded soup kitchens, broker access to state subsidies for the unemployed or to public hospitals, distribute food and/or food vouchers to mothers, children and the elderly, and occasionally give out toys manufactured by workfare recipients to parents who cannot afford such items. Steve Levitsky's work on the transformation of the Peronist party provides an exhaustive examination of the party's activities.[17] Based on a survey of 112 UBs (Unidades Básicas, the grassroots offices of the Peronist party) in La Matanza, Quilmes and the Federal Capital, Levitsky has shown that more than two-thirds of these engage in direct distribution of food or medicine.[18] Nearly a quarter of them regularly provide jobs for their constituents. Sixty percent of the UBs of Greater Buenos Aires surveyed by this author participate in the implementation of at least one government social program. In another recent study of three Argentine provinces—Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Misiones—Brusco et al. found that 44 percent of the 1,920 respondents "reported that parties gave things out to individuals in their neighborhood during the campaign.[19] The most common item respondents mentioned was food, but they also mentioned clothing, mattresses, medicine, milk, corrugated metal, construction materials, blankets, hangers, utility bill payments, money, eyeglasses, chickens, trees, and magnets."

This recent survey shows in unambiguous terms the extent of clientelist practices among the poor:

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16   For a detailed account, see Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*.
17   Steve Levitsky, *Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
18   Ibid., 188.
19   Valeria Brusco et al., "Vote Buying in Argentina," *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 69.

[M]ore than one-third of [the] full sample (and 45 percent of low-income respondents) would turn to a party operative [a *puntero*] for help if the head of his or her household lost their job [... M]ore than one in five low-income voters had turned to a political patron for help in the previous year [...] 12 percent of poor voters—18 percent of poor voters who sympathized with the Peronist Party—acknowledged having received a handout from a party operative in the 2001 campaign.[20]

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

Patronage politics is not solely about the distribution of material resources in exchange for political support. A line of research inspired by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu has noted that clientelism not only lives a life in the objectivity of network exchange, but that it also lives a second, subjective life in the dispositions it inculcates in some of its actors—dispositions that ensure the reproduction of this arrangement.[21] This work notes that the automatic appearance of the exchange of "support for favors" that is often noted in the literature should not be interpreted in mechanistic terms, but as the result of the habituation it generates in beneficiaries or clients. This body of research shows that the *everyday* workings of clientelist problem-solving networks produce a set of dispositions among those who receive daily favors from patrons and brokers. I emphasize the regular, routine operation of this network to highlight that this *relationship* transcends singular acts of exchange. In her analysis of the emergence of activism among Philippino workers, Rutten labels this dispositional toolkit "clientelist habitus."[22] These schemes of perception, evaluation, and action are, in turn, reconfirmed by the symbolic actions that patrons and

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20  Ibid.
21  Auyero, *Poor People's Politics; Routine Politics*; Rosanne Rutten, "Losing Face in Philippine Labor Confrontations: How Shame May Inhibit Worker Activism," in *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, eds. Lauren Joseph, Matthew Mahler, and Javier Auyero (New York: Springer, 2007).
22  "Losing Face."

brokers routinely enact in their public speeches, emphasizing the "love" they feel for their followers and their "service to the people," and in their personalized ways of giving—stressing *their* efforts to obtain the goods and thus creating the appearance that, were they not there, the benefits would not be delivered.[23] In other words, clientelist politics is not limited to material problem-solving. The "way of giving" that brokers and patrons enact—a way of giving in which the patron and/or the brokers (regardless of whether they are a Chicago precinct captain, a Mexican *cacique*, an Argentine *puntero*, or a Brazilian *cabo eleitoral*) portrays him- or herself as "just one of us, who understands what it's all about"[24]—is a central dimension in the workings and persistence of patronage. The "humanizing and personalizing manner of assistance to those in need," as Merton has famously put it, is therefore a constitutive element in the functioning and durability of clientelism. Much more detailed and systematic work needs to be done on the formation, reproduction of (and possible challenges to) the clients and politicos' clientelist habitus.

If I learned one thing after three years of fieldwork and writing is that patronage owes its durability to the consolidation and normalization of two (not one) types of practices, in two different but sometimes intertwined spheres, the political field and the daily life of the urban poor: (a) politicians' personalized distribution of goods and services in search of votes and/or participants for a political machine (including, as we will see below, shock troops), (b) poor people's survival problem-solving through the creation and reproduction of durable relationships with political brokers (via voting, attendance at rallies, participation in political machines, and/or in party's shock troops). More, much more, needs to be examined in terms of the emergence, strengthening, and legitimation of this way of doing politics and this way of solving pressing problems.

## Patronage and collective action

Among the most established findings in social movement and collective action research are the notions that "prior social ties operate as a basis for movement recruitment and that established social settings are the locus of movement emergence."[25] Existing scholarship agrees on the key role played by indigenous organizations or associational networks in the emergence of a movement.[26]

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23  For an analysis of this symbolic dimension of patronage networks, see Auyero (2000).

24  Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 75.

25  Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

26  Doug McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Doug

Far from being a realm of possible cooperation, patronage networks are, on the contrary, considered a *(de)mobilizing structure*.[27] Conceptualized as what Julian Pitt-Rivers[28] has famously called "a lopsided friendship," patron-client bonds are seen as the exact opposite of the horizontal networks of civic engagement that are said to foster a truly civic community and that, in turn, "make democracy work"[29] and social movement activity possible. *Embeddedness in clientelist relationships* is understood as a suppressor of participation in the more horizontal relational contexts that have been found "to be conducive to various forms of collective engagement."[30]

Research conducted in urban poverty enclaves—shanty-towns, *favelas*, squatter settlements, *colonias*, and the like—and on poor people's movements in Latin America show that patronage and collective mobilization can, indeed, co-exist in the same geographical place; usually in a conflictive way.[31] In their chronicle of the emergence and development of the *piquetero* movement in Argentina, a social movement that grouped the unemployed and used road-blockades (*piquetes*) as their main tactic, Svampa and Pereyra, for example, have asserted that picketers' organizations represent a "first concrete *challenge* against *punteros* (political brokers)" of the Peronist party's clientelist machine (my emphasis).[32] Another recent example is found in the work of Claudio

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McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Maryjane Osa, "Creating Solidarity: The Religious Foundations of the Polish Social Movement," *East European Politics and Societies* 11, no. 2 (1997).

27  Holzner, "The End of Clientelism?"; David Rock, "Machine Politics in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Radical Party, 1912-1930," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 4, no. 2 (1972); *Politics in Argentina: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Guillermo O'Donnell, "Transitions, Continuities and Paradoxes," in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992).

28  Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra* (New York: Criterion Books, 1954), 140.

29  Robert D. Putnam et al., *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

30  Diani and McAdam, *Social Movements*, 2; see also Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, "Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 6 (1994); Doug McAdam and Roberto Fernandez, "Microstructural Bases of Recruitment to Social Movements," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 12(1990); Florence Passy, "Social Networks Matter: But How?," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, eds. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ann Mische, "Cross-Talk in Movements: Reconceiving the Culture-Network Link," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, eds. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

31  Burgwal, *Struggle of the Poor*; Gay, "Community Organization "; Lazar, *El Alto*.

32  Maristella Svampa and Sebastián Pereyra, *Entre la ruta y el barrio: La experiencia de las organizaciones piqueteras* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2003), 93.

Holzner.[33] Writing about the "stubborn resilience of clientelist organizations and practices in Mexico despite a strengthening civil society and growing electoral competition at all levels,"[34] he has noted the emergence of "rival" forms of political organization—one that is hierarchical and clientelist, and another that emphasizes democratic participation and political autonomy and that *actively resists* political clientelism."[35]

Although pointing to the complexity of poor people's politics and the diversity of problem-solving strategies used by the destitute, all of these studies depict clientelist and mobilizing networks as *two different and opposing fields of political action*, two spheres of social interaction and exchange that seldom overlap and that usually "rival," "resist," or "challenge" each other.[36] The dominance of patronage politics among the poor, so the extant research agrees, frustrates collective claims-making, and isolates and atomizes citizens, thus preventing the organizational and relational work at the basis of collective action.

But the literature also agrees that in one particular case—that is, the break-down of clientelist arrangements—protest can indeed emerge from patronage, and it usually does so in explosive ways. When a well-oiled system of patron-client relationships, crucial for the survival of the local population, fails to deliver or suddenly collapses, "reciprocity [can] change to rivalry."[37] Scholars are familiar with these situations of mass mobilization originating in the abrupt malfunctioning of routine social and political relations: Political scientist James Scott has examined one of its iterations when writing about the collective revolts caused by the swift changes in the "balance of reciprocity" between landlords and tenants: a balance that, as Scott has examined in detail, was the normative foundation of clientelist networks in agrarian societies.[38] Historian E. P. Thompson has uncovered an analogous case while dissecting the eighteenth-century English food riots as manifestations of a rupture in the "moral economy of the poor"—the "consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community."[39] An affront to these moral assumptions,

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33  Holzner, "The End of Clientelism?"
34  Ibid., 77.
35  Ibid., 77, my emphasis.
36  For a recent and illuminating exception on the ways in which citizens, in their attempt to solve pressing survival problems, may shuttle back and forth between "opposing" networks, see Julieta Quiros, *Cruzando la Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2007).
37  René Lemarchand, "Comparative Political Clientelism: Structure, Process and Optic," in *Political Clientelism, Patronage and Development*, eds. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand (London: Sage, 1981), 10.
38  Scott, "Political Clientelism."
39  Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 188.

caused by an unexpected alteration in the "particular equilibrium be-tween paternalist authority and the crowd,"[40] was, in Thompson's view, "the usual occasion for direct action."[41]

Most of the scholarship on patronage networks points to their poten-tial malfunctioning as a generator of sudden grievances, which, in turn, creates an opportunity for collective action.[42] Only recently have well-functioning clientelist networks been analyzed as key relational sup-ports of collective action. In these studies, vertical networks do not need to break down in order for collective action to emerge; some of their key actors—patrons, brokers, and/or clients—may, for a variety of reasons ranging from threats over existing arrangements to attempts at improv-ing their position in the political field, become organizers of collective (and in some cases violent) action.

Students of civil wars have shown, for example, that disputes between operating clientelist networks can be at the basis of violent contention. Writing about the mass killings that took place in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966, Stathis Kalyvas has asserted that although they were "ostensibly articulated around the communism/anticommunism cleav-age [...] sustained examination of regional massacres unearthed all kinds of local conflicts [... I]n Bali they were associated with long-standing rivalries between patronage groups."[43] Patronage networks have also been identified as the crucial relational support of collective violence in Colombia. As Steffen Schmidt has argued, "Colombia's political violence [...] is in great part due to the existence of widespread, competitive, ag-gressive, patron-client based politics."[44]

But the relationship between patronage and contention need not necessarily take a violent form. In his study of environmental protest in eight communities in southern Japan, Broadbent has noted the pres-ence of what he calls "breakaway bosses"—that is, local leaders who

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40  Ibid., 249.
41  More recently, sociologist Magdalena Tosoni has dissected another occurrence, focusing her atten-tion on contemporary urban Mexico. She has described the process by which residents of *colonia* San Lázaro (a working class neighborhood in Mexico City) campaigned, supported, and voted for a candidate that had promised to help solve a land ownership problem in the district. On taking office the broker "forgot" about his clients and failed to deliver what had been agreed. As a result, the mul-titude mobilized and staged a massive road blockade and protest. Magdalena Tosoni, "Notas sobre el clientelismo politico en la ciudad de México," *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, no. 29 (2007).
42  On the variable nature of grievances as an important factor in mobilization, see Edward J. Walsh, "Re-source Mobilization and Citizen Protest in Communities around Three Mile Island," *Social Problems* 29, no. 1 (1981).
43  Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence': Action and Identity in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003): 478.
44  Steffen Walter Schmidt, "La Violencia Revisited: The Clientelist Bases of Political Violence in Colom-bia," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 6, no. 1 (1974): 109.

join protesters.[45] These bosses are indicative, in Broadbent's analysis, of the existing vertical ties between citizens and elites that shape local political opportunities. Local political bosses, so he writes, "formed a vertical structure of social control [which] penetrated into the community through the political party, government, and big business."[46] Much like a precinct captain in the Chicago political machines analyzed by Guterbock,[47] or a *cabo eleitoral* in a Brazilian *favela*,[48] these local bosses build their local power through patronage—by "presenting generous contributions at funerals and weddings, holding sake parties to build camaraderie, distributing small bribes at election time, finding jobs and even marriage partners for your children."[49] Patronage networks pose "a formidable barrier to mobilization in village context,"[50] unless a *break-away boss breaks free*: "[O]nce a traditional boss broke from his bosses in favour of resistance, he was able to carry much of his subordinate networks 'automatically' (structurally) into the protest movement."[51]

Thus more than two opposed spheres of action or two different forms of sociability, patronage and contentious politics can be mutually imbricated. Whether it malfunctions or thrives, clientelism may lie at the root of collective action—an embeddedness that studies of repertoires of contention have indeed anticipated but failed to explore in detail.[52]

The available evidence focusing on what I call the *support scenario* is limited and scattered for a reason. This form of recursive relationship between patronage and collective action has not been examined in depth, neither theoretically nor empirically. There is no need for a collapse or interruption in the flow of clientelist exchanges for contention to occur. Well-functioning patronage networks can be purposively activated to conduct politics by other collective (and, sometimes, violent) means. We need much more both empirical and theoretical work on the various ways in which patronage and contention are mutually imbricated. Inattention to the recursive relationship between both phenomena risks missing much of the dynamics of both routine and extraordinary

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45  Jeffrey Broadbent, "Movement in Context: Thick Social Networks and Environmental Mobilization in Japan," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, eds. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Environmental Politics in Japan: Networks of Power and Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

46  Broadbent, "Movement in Context," 219-220.

47  Guterbock, *Machine Politics*.

48  Gay, "Community Organization."

49  Broadbent, "Movement in Context," 222.

50  Ibid., 223.

51  Ibid., 221.

52  Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006); *The Contentious French* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

forms of popular politics. An empirical focus on the area in which they meet and mesh should afford a better view of two processes that have been identified as crucial in many a form of contentious politics. These two processes are *brokerage*—here understood simply as "the forging of social connections between previously unlinked persons or sites"[53]— and *certification*—here understood as "the validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities."[54] One particularly challenging area of research on this topic focuses on what I call the "gray zone" of popular politics.

## The gray zone

On December 19, 2001, hundreds of residents of La Matanza, one of the poorest districts in metropolitan Buenos Aires, looted dozens of local supermarkets and convenience stores. They were not alone. With the rate of unemployment hovering around 20 percent, poverty rates surpassing 50 percent, and a federal government paralyzed by internal disputes, between December 14 and 21, 2001 Argentina witnessed a sudden explosion of food riots. Thousands of citizens took part in the riots, locally known as "los saqueos." Twenty persons were killed and hundreds more injured in one of the most violent episodes in contemporary Latin America. In 2005, I returned to Argentina and conducted dozens of interviews with authorities, activists, store-owners and participants in the lootings in order to reconstruct the origins and dynamics of collective violence during these episodes.

The "food riots" were far from spontaneous events that erupted by shear dint of hunger or moral frustration about poor material conditions brought on by large-scale structural adjustments, as they were often portrayed in the media. Clandestine connections between authorities, political brokers and poor residents were at work. To begin to understand what happened, I examined local and national newspapers and created a catalogue of events (289 in total). What types of stores were looted? Who was present at the lootings? Were police present? Statistical analysis showed that (1) large chain supermarkets received ample police protection, protection that was generally successful in deterring looting; (2) in areas where there were small, local markets, police rarely showed up, and these markets suffered most of the looting; (3) Peronist party activ-

53  Ronald Burt, *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

54  McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*; see also Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Doug McAdam et al., "Methods for Measuring Mechanisms of Contention," *Qualitative Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2008).

ists were likely to be present at small market lootings where there were few or no police; (4) when big chain supermarkets were looted and activists were not present, the chances of police presence were statistically high; and (5) when small, local markets were looted and activists were present, the chances of police presence were very low.

This apparent relationship between store type, police presence (or lack thereof) and activist participation was hardly a statistical anomaly; it was a product of the underlying (in)visible connections at work in these episodes, between Peronist activists, members of the local communities, and police. But just how did these connections shape collective violence? This basic question guided my fieldwork in two sites of heavy looting activity. One informant, Susana, a Peronist activist, sketched out the basic process: "We [the members of the party] knew about the lootings beforehand. Around 1 a.m. [the lootings began by noon] we knew that there was going to be a looting. We were told about them by municipal authorities, and we passed the information along [among the members of the party]." Peronist activists did not take their followers to the stores, nor could they control their actions. Instead, they passed out fliers and relied on the most (in)visible of networks—that is, word of mouth in the local communities—to spread rumors about where the lootings would take place. For example, Peronist activists distributed flyers throughout poor neighborhoods in Moreno, a district located in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, which invited residents to join the crowds that would go on to loot several dozen supermarkets and grocery stores on December 18 and 19, 2001. One such flier read: "We invite you to destroy the Kin supermarket this coming Wednesday at 11:30 am, the Valencia supermarket at 1:30 pm, and the Chivo supermarket at 5 pm."[55]

A close examination of the 2001 lootings forced me to re-think some classic distinctions in the sociological literature on collective action and social movements and to dig deeper in the existing scholarship on collective violence. I then realized that the empirical evidence has been mounting for a while and has been (increasingly) unequivocal. What Charles Tilly has called "violent specialists"—that is, actors who specialize in inflicting physical damage—play a key, though sometimes not quite discernible role in the origins and the course of collective violence.[56] Some of these specialists (police and soldiers, for example) are part of the state apparatus; others (such as thugs, gangs, and vigilante groups), however,

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55   For a full account, see Auyero, *Routine Politics*.
56   Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

enjoy important but oftentimes clandestine connections with established power-holders. These "shadowy ties" between state actors and perpetrators of violence define what I call "the gray zone of politics"[57] and challenge the easy and simplistic state-society distinctions that most of the literature on collective action still takes for granted, among government agents, repressive forces, challengers, polity members, and so on.

Although far from being a clearly delimited area of inquiry, the relationship between clandestine political connections and collective violence has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention. For example, research on the origins and forms of communal violence in Southeast Asia has highlighted the hidden links between partisan politics and collective violence.[58] Paul Brass's notion of "institutionalized riot systems" appositely describes these obscure connections. In these riot systems, as Brass has pointed out, "known actors specialize in the conversion of incidents between members of different communities into ethnic riots. The activities of these specialists, who operate under the loose control of party leaders, are usually required for a riot to spread from the initial incident of provocation."[59] Sudhir Kakar's analysis of a *pehlwan*, a wrestler/enforcer who works for a political boss, further illustrates this point: the genesis of many episodes of collective violence is located in the area where the actions of political actors and specialists in violence are secretly intertwined.[60]

Steven Wilkinson's *Votes and Violence* is perhaps the most systematic study to date of the connections between party politics (electoral competition) and collective violence (ethnic riots).[61] Wilkinson has convincingly shown that:

> Ethnic riots, far from being relatively spontaneous eruptions of anger, are often *planned* by politicians for a clear electoral purpose. They are best thought of as a solution to the problem of how to change the salience of ethnic issues and identities among the electorate in order to build a winning political coalition.[62]

57  Auyero, *Routine Politics*.
58  Veena Das, ed. *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots, and Survivors in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
59  Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12.
60  Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
61  Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
62  Ibid., 1.

Throughout his detailed and insightful study, Wilkinson has called attention to the instances in which political elites "cause," "foment," or "instigate" riots "in order to win elections,"[63] and brings to the fore what is often the state's complicity in failing to prevent violence. The state's response, he has argued, is very much conditioned by the "instructions" that politicians give to other state officials, telling them "whether to protect or not protect minorities."[64] Political elites and organizers often "incite" violence and prevent repressive forces from responding once riots break out. Why? Wilkinson's conclusions are straightforward: Political leaders in some Indian states "impress upon their local officials that communal riots and anti-Muslim pogroms must be prevented at all costs,"[65] because of electoral incentives.

That party leaders and/or state officials might be "behind"—rather than against—such episodes of collective violence should hardly surprise students of Latin American politics. In a detailed study of "la violencia," the wave of political violence that killed 200,000 in Colombia in the 1940s and 1950s, historian Mary Roldán has shown that in the state of Antioquía "partisan conflict provided the initial catalyst to violence."[66] She has argued that not only did state bureaucrats "promote" the violence that shocked the region, but that police and even mayors themselves actively participated in the partisan attacks. Political elites, she has pointed out, did not simply tolerate or instigate the violence; they were its perpetrators. While party members organized attacks on places and peoples, the police acted as partisan shock troops. In words that should ring true to those studying political violence in other parts of the world, Roldán has stated: "while many citizens attributed the escalation of violence to the absence of official forces, these forces were so often the perpetrators of violence between 1946 and 1949 that one wonders why anyone bothered to suggest that the presence of the authorities could have been of much help."[67] Clandestine ties, Roldán has demonstrated, outlast specific episodes of violence and show durable, structure-like properties.

Historian Laurie Gunst[68] and sociologist Orlando Patterson[69] have unearthed the relationships between local patronage networks in Jamai-

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63   Ibid., 236.
64   Ibid., 65, 85.
65   Ibid., 137.
66   Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946-1953* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 22.
67   Ibid., 82.
68   Laurie Gunst, *Born Fi'dead: A Journey through the Jamaican Posse Underworld* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995).
69   Orlando Patterson, "The Roots of Conflict in Jamaica," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2001.

ca, or what the latter calls "garrison constituency" and gang violence. Patterson has pointed out how these gangs, which were "initially formed for political purposes, now also serve the drug trade [... and have] increasingly worked to generate unrest as a political tactic" (1). Gunst, meanwhile, has argued that the origins of Jamaican drug gangs in New York can be traced to these same *posses*, native to Jamaica itself, which were armed by party members linked to Prime Ministers Seaga or Manley. Goldstein's[70] and Arias'[71] ethnographies of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* have provided further evidence of the collusion between state actors, members of political parties, and violent entrepreneurs such as gang members who are associated with the drug trade. Finally, Luis Astorga's[72] historical reconstruction of the intertwining of the political field with the field of illicit drug production and trafficking in twentieth-century Mexico offers another excellent example of the (concealed and often illegal) connections between actors inside and outside of the official political system, relations that must be rigorously examined if we are to explain seemingly random upsurges of violence, both past and present.

What do all these cases have in common? They all portray the activation of clandestine connections among political actors well-entrenched within the polity and others located outside of it. When faced with "gray matters," most of the categories with which we as scholars of collective action routinely operate, categories that are very much informed by empirical analyses carried out in the US and Europe, have proven useless, if not misleading. As much as the literature agrees that the interactions between political elites, agents of social control, and protagonists of civil disorder matter, these remain discrete entities. The imaginary political anthropology of social movement and collective action scholarship, at least among sociologists and political scientists, lives in a world in which there are clear boundaries between insurgents and authorities, dissidents or challengers and state actors, located in different regions of the social and political space, as in the "protest side" and the "repression side." There is almost complete silence about the possible participation of authorities, either elected officials or police agents, in the direct promotion of mobilization and/or the straightforward perpetration of collective violence. In part, the notion of the gray zone of clandestine connections

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70  Donna Goldstein, *Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

71  Enrique Desmond Arias, "Trouble en Route: Drug Trafficking and Clientelism in Rio de Janeiro Shantytowns," *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 4 (2006); *Drugs and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

72  Luis Astorga, *El Siglo de las Drogas* (Mexico: Plaza y Janes, 2005).

seeks to address this problem by calling attention to the existing continuities between state actions, routine politics, and extraordinary massive violence.

Political analysts should do a better job at integrating "gray zone" relations into the study of "normal" politics. Inattention to these clandestine connections has effects analogous to the inattentiveness to "informal institutions" noted by political scientists Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky. In both cases, political analysis "risks missing much of what drives political behavior and can hinder efforts to explain important political phenomena."[73] Rather than dismissing them as aberrant phenomena or denouncing them on moralistic grounds, the challenge for a proper social scientific analysis is to feature such usually robust relations into our standard models of political action. This analytic integration should, in turn, allow us to better incorporate violence into the study of popular politics, something that, as the late Charles Tilly has argued, most political analysis still neglects. Much theoretical and empirical work lies ahead.

## Environmental suffering

Fieldwork research on clientelism, contentious collective action, and gray zone politics has taken me to some of the most relegated, destitute zones of my native country, Argentina: poor barrios, squatter settlements, and shanty-towns. Over many years I have hung out on street corners chatting with youngsters, talked to neighbors in their homes, accompanied them to meetings and party rallies, and played with kids in their backyards. One issue that until recently never managed to catch my attention was the miserable physical environment in which they live.

The "real grounds of [poor people's] history," to use Karl Marx's expression, remains a marginal preoccupation among students of poverty in Latin America, despite having been raised in some of the existing literature on urban environmental problems.[74] Neither a recent comprehensive review of studies on poverty and inequality in Latin America,[75]

73    Gretchen Helmke and Stephen Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics," *Perspectives in Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 725.

74    Peter Evans, ed. *Livable Cities? Urban Struggles for Livelihood and Sustainability* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Kathryn Hochstetler and Margaret Keck, *The Greening of Brazil: Environmental Activism in State and Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Maria Carmen de Mello Lemos, "The Politics of Pollution Control in Brazil: State Actors and Social Movements Cleaning up Cubatao," *World Development* 26, no. 1 (1998); Keith Pezzoli, *Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability: The Case of Mexico City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).

75    Kelly Hoffman and Miguel Angel Centeno, "The Lopsided Continent: Inequality in Latin America," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29(2003).

nor a symposium on the history and state of the studies of marginality and exclusion in Latin America published in the most prominent journal of Latin American studies[76] make mention of environmental factors as key determinants in the reproduction of destitution and inequity.

With few notable exceptions,[77] ethnographies of urban poverty and marginality in Latin America have also failed to take into account the simple fact that the poor do not breathe the same air, drink the same water, or play on the same playgrounds as others. Poor people's lives do not unfold on the head of a pin. Theirs is often a polluted environment that seriously affects their health and future capabilities, and about which scholars, myself included, have remained silent for a long time. This silence—another incarnation of what Sherry Ortner[78] has famously called "ethnographic refusal"—is shocking given the prominent place of the material context of poor people's lives, both in a founding text in the study of poverty and inequality, Friedrich Engels' *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, and also in one of the seminal texts on the lives of urban pariahs in Latin American cities. In *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, Carolina, a long-time resident of a *favela* during the 1950s, has provided a first-hand account of everyday life in a shanty-town located in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Carolina refers to her *favela* with words that will sound painfully familiar to the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods throughout Latin America and much of the Third World: "It is a garbage dump," she writes. "Only pigs could live in a place like this. This is the pigsty of Sao Paulo."[79] Throughout the book, she points to polluted waters and what she calls the "perfume" of "rotting mud (and) excrement,"[80] as defining features of the lives of the poverty enclaves. Half a century later, the shanty-town poor are still surrounded by filth, disgusting smells, and contaminated soil and waters.

How do poor people make sense of, and cope with, toxic danger? When and why do they fail to understand and act on what is objectively a clear and present danger? How and why are (mis)perceptions shared within a community? These were the general questions that took me to

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76   Mercedes González de la Rocha et al., "From the Marginality of the 1960s to the 'New Poverty' of Today: A Larr Research Forum," *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 1 (2004).

77   Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rigths, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Julia Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictarship Chile* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2001); Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1994).

78   Sherry Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995).

79   Carolina de Jesus, *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (New York: Signet, 2003), 27.

80   Ibid., 40.

Flammable, a shanty-town surrounded by one of the largest petrochemical compounds in Argentina, the site of the only oil refinery Shell has in South America, by a highly polluted river that brings the toxic waste of tanneries and other industries, a hazardous and largely un-supervised waste incinerator, and an unmonitored landfill.

What we witness in Flammable is, as we proposed in our joint work,[81] *durable inequality in the making,* an inequality that is being created not around the most commonly studied dimension (wages),[82] but around the relationship between environment and health. This is a facet that is, to reiterate, crucial for the well-being of the population, but has been traditionally neglected in studies of persistent inequity in Latin America.

The lesson for students of poverty and class inequality around the world that emerges from this case-study is the following: Any sociological sketch of urban marginality and its effects on socially organized suffering should pay sustained and systematic empirical attention to the more or less contaminated and/or hazardous environment where the urban poor dwell. It is crucial to put environmental (in)justice at the center of analyses of poverty. Together with income, employment, education and other conventional variables, social scientific analyses of the causes and manifestations of urban deprivation should take into account poor people's differential exposure to environmental hazards. Marginality is, to paraphrase geographer Doreen Massey,[83] constructed spatially, and that space is more or less burdened with pollution and risks. This spatial organization of marginality makes a difference in how it works and how it is experienced. In other words, given that living in constant danger and under unrelenting toxic assault leaves sometimes indelible marks on poor people's minds and bodies, urban research urgently needs a social geography of environmental danger and suffering.

In one of the last chapters of *Flammable,* we use the mythical image of Tiresias to describe one of the defining features of the lives of the residents living in this highly contaminated shanty-town.[84] Like the Greek seer, they are forced to become "mere onlookers of happenings beyond their control."[85] Shanty-town residents *are always waiting for some-*

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81   Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun, *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

82   Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1998).

83   Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

84   In one of the many versions of the Greek myth, early in life Tiresias surprises Athena while she is taking a bath. As punishment for having seen his daughter naked, Zeus blinds young Tiresias but comforts him with the gift of seercraft.

85   Alfred Schutz, *The Problem of Social Reality: Collected Papers 1* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 280.

*thing to happen.* These poisoned outcasts are living in a time oriented to and manipulated by powerful agents. They live in an alienated time and are obliged, as Pierre Bourdieu has so eloquently put it, "to wait for everything to come from others."[86] Domination works, we have argued, through yielding to the power of others; and it is experienced as a waiting time: Waiting hopefully and then in frustration for others to make decisions, and in effect surrendering oneself to the authority of others. In unexpected ways we found many versions of the Tiresias story among contemporary shanty-town dwellers.

Putting the finishing touches to the manuscript, I came to realize that even if the particular and somewhat extreme relationship between time, behavior, and submission dissected there is peculiar to Flammable, this dynamic may be applicable to many of the subaltern populations I have been researching over the years—hence, my recent interest in poor people's waiting.[87]

## Waiting

Waiting, so writes Pierre Bourdieu in *Pascalian Meditations*, is one of the ways of experiencing the effects of power. "Making people wait [...] delaying without destroying hope [...] adjourning without totally disappointing" are, according to Bourdieu,[88] integral parts of the working of domination. Although the links between power and time have been thoroughly examined in the social sciences, waiting (as both temporal region and as an activity with intricate relationships with the constitution and reproduction of submission) remains "hardly mapped and badly documented."[89] Understandably so: Attention to waiting and its (apparent) related inaction goes against the social sciences' preferred focus on individual and collective action, on the *event*—as that "historical fact that leaves a unique and singular trace, one that marks history by its particular and inimitable consequences."[90]

Writing precisely about this absence, Pierre Bourdieu has asserted that we need to "catalogue, and analyze all the behaviors associated with the exercise of power over other people's time both on the side of the powerful (adjourning, deferring, delaying, raising false hopes, or conversely, rushing, taking by surprise) and on the side of the 'patient' as they

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86  Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 237.
87  Javier Auyero, *Patients of the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
88  Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 227.
89  Howard Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.
90  Dumoulins quoted in Sidney Tarrow, "The People's Two Rhythms: Charles Tilly and the Study of Contentious Politics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, no. 3 (1996): 587.

say in the medical universe, one of the sites par excellence of anxious, powerless waiting."[91] Drawing upon 18 months of comparative ethnographic fieldwork, my current work seeks to make a first step towards the creation of a *tempography of domination*—that is, a thick description of the ways in which the dominated perceive temporality and waiting.

The manifold ways in which human beings in their life-worlds think and feel about (and act on) time have been the subject of much scholarly work in the social sciences, from general treatment[92] to more empirically informed ones, many of them based on ethnographic work.[93] The relationships between the *workings of power*[94] and the *experiences of time* have also been the object of many a social scientific analysis. Time, for example, has been examined as a crucial dimension in the workings of gift exchanges[95] and in the operation of patronage networks.[96] In both of these cases, the objective truth of these (usually unequal) exchanges needs to be *misrecognized* so that the exchanges can function smoothly.[97] Time, as these analyses demonstrate, is responsible for the veiling.

Temporality, as historical and ethnographic works illustrate, can be manipulated. It can be the object of a "continual process of bargaining," as Julius Roth[98] has shown in his insightful ethnography of the ways in which patients and doctors jointly structure the passage of time in a tuberculosis hospital; it can be the object of frantic "marking," as Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor have examined in their phenomenology of the security wing of an English prison.[99] Time can also be the target of

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91    Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 228.
92    Michael Flaherty, *A Watched Pot: How We Experience Time* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (New York: Polity Press, 1986); Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Nancy Munn, "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1992); Schutz, *The Problem of Social Reality: Collected Papers* 1; Pitirim Sorokin and Robert Merton, "Social Time: A Methodological and Functional Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 5 (1937).
93    Michael Flaherty et al., "Variation in the Perceived Passage of Time: A Cross-National Study," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2005); Gerardo Young, "La Trama Política de los Saqueos," *Clarín Digital*, December 19 2002; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Leon Mann, "Queue Culture: The Waiting Line as a Social System," *American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 3 (1969); Julius Roth, *Timetables: Structuring the Passage of Time in Hospital Treatment and Other Careers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963); Eviatar Zerubavel, *Patterns of Time in Hospital Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).
94    Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).
95    Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
96    Scott and Kerkvliet, "How Traditional Rural Patrons Lose Legitimacy (in Southeast Asia)."
97    Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Ortner, "Resistance."
98    Roth, *Timetables*.
99    Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972).

a constant onslaught, as Paul Willis[100] has illustrated in his dissection of the *lads'* rejection of the school's arduously constructed timetable; or the medium through which discipline is imposed and negotiated, as E.P. Thompson has demonstrated in his classic analysis of the changes in the inward notations of time at the early stages of industrial capitalism.[101] Collective time-senses are deeply intertwined with the workings of (and resistance to) social domination. Time, as these works expose, is the locus of conflict, but also of acquiescence.[102]

Waiting, as a particular experience of time, has not received the same scholarly attention. Highlighting the ubiquity of this experience, essayist Edna O'Brien has written: "Everyone I know is waiting." Hinting at the sense of powerlessness that comes with waiting, she continues, "and almost everyone I know would like to rebut it, since it is slightly demeaning, reeks of helplessness, and show we are not fully in command of ourselves."[103] *Pace* O'Brien, waiting does not affect everybody in the same way, nor is it experienced in a similar fashion. Sociologist Barry Schwartz has probably done the most to show that waiting is stratified, that there are variations in waiting time which are socially patterned and which respond to power differentials. The unequal distribution of waiting time tends to correspond to that of power.[104] To be kept waiting, Schwartz has written, "especially to be kept waiting an unusually long time, is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and therefore, one's social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait."[105] Schwartz's now classic book established the basic contours for a sociological analysis of waiting. Since then, however, the differential experiences of that (unequally distributed) waiting time—and the activities that, appearances to the contrary, go with it—have received little empirical attention and no systematic treatment.

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100 Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

101 Thompson, *Customs in Common*.

102 See also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind* (New York: Holt, 2001); Gretchen Purser, "Waiting for Work: An Ethnography of a Day Labor Agency," (2006), http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/5vg5do5d; Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, *The Time Divide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jeffery Thompson and Stuart Bunderson, "Work-Nonwork Conflict and the Phenomenology of Time: Beyond the Balance Metaphor," *Work and Occupations* 28, no. 1 (2001).

103 Edna O'Brien, "Waiting," in *The Best American Essays*, eds. Jamaica Kincaid and Robert Atwan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 177.

104 Barry Schwartz, "Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 4 (1974); *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

105 "Waiting, Exchange, and Power," 856. On the demeaning effects of waiting, see also Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Extensive waiting periods, as the scant research on the subject shows, "weary people"[106] and/or act as obstacles to access particular programs.[107] If frequent contact with long queues molds people's subjectivities,[108] how is it that, to quote from Bourdieu,[109] the "interested aiming at something greatly durably—that is to say for the whole duration of the expectancy—modifies the behavior of the person who 'hangs,' as we say, on the awaited decision?" If delays are *not only suffered but also interpreted*,[110] what meanings do those who are routinely forced to wait attribute to the waiting? And, if waiting makes the waiter feel "dependent and subordinate,"[111] how does waiting produce these subjective effects of dependency and subordination? In other words, how does objective waiting become subjective submission? These are the general questions that guided my comparative ethnography in three different sites where the urban poor await decisions from state agents: the waiting area of the main welfare office in the city of Buenos Aires (*Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*), the line outside the RENAPER (*Registro Nacional de las Personas*) where legal aliens wait to apply for their identity cards (*Documento Nacional de Identidad*), and Flammable, the shanty-town where I recently conducted an ethnographic revisit.

Economic globalization and neoliberal hegemony notwithstanding, the state—downsized, decentralized and/or "hollowed out"[112]—still is a key actor in the lives of the destitute. Even when badly functioning and lacking in basic resources, the Argentine state still grants access to citizenship and provides (limited but vital) welfare benefits. It is, in other words, deeply "implicated in the minute texture of everyday life" of the poor.[113] We need more and better work on the set of relational practices linking daily forms of state operation with the lives of the subordinate under neoliberal regimes. Because they give "concrete shape and form

106 Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 160.
107 Cristina Redko et al., "Waiting Time as a Barrier to Treatment Entry: Perceptions of Substance Users," *Journal of Drug Issues* 36, no. 4 (2006).
108 Comfort, *Doing Time Together*.
109 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 228.
110 Schwartz, *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay.*
111 Ibid., 856.
112 Bob Jessop, "Narrating the Future of the National Economy and the National State: Remarks on Remapping Regulation and Reinventing Governance," in *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); George Steinmetz, "Introduction: Culture and the State," in *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
113 Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995): 375.

to what would otherwise be an abstraction ('the state'),"[114] everyday encounters with state bureaucracies are a key ingredient in the routine construction of the state and in the patterning of class relations.[115] The state is thereby both an abstract, macro-level structure and a concrete, micro-level set of institutions with which the urban poor interact in direct and immediate ways. Far from simply being a more or less functional bureaucratic apparatus, the state is also a powerful site of cultural and symbolic production.[116] States, in other words, "define and create certain kinds of subjects and identities."[117] They do so, not simply through their police forces and armies, but through "(their) offices and routines, (their) taxing, licensing, and registering procedures and papers"[118]— humdrum routines of bureaucracies and bureaucrats' encounters with citizens which, according to anthropologist Akhil Gupta, remain "remarkably under-studied in contrast to the predominant focus on the machinations of state leaders, shifts in major policies, regime changes, or the class basis of state officials …"[119]

In my current work, the state and its different institutions become personified in what Michael Lipsky[120] has famously called "street-level bureaucrats"—public employees who "interact directly with individual citizens in the course of their jobs."[121] Key to my argument is the fact that in the recursive interactions between the poor and street-level bureaucrats, the state "teaches political lessons contributing to future political expectations,"[122] socializing "citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community."[123] In its apparent ordinari-

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114 Ibid., 378.
115 "Narratives of Corruption: Anthropological and Fictional Accounts of the Indian State," *Ethnography* 6, no. 1 (2005); Lynne Haney, "Homeboys, Babies, and Men in Suits: The State and the Reproduction of Male Dominance," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996); Anna Secor, "Between Longing and Despair: State, Space and Subjectivity in Turkey," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 1 (2007).
116 Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Derek Sayer, "Everyday Forms of State Formation: Some Dissident Remarks on 'Hegemony'," in *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, eds. Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," in *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, eds. Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Steinmetz, "Introduction"; Shu-Yuan Yang, "Imagining the State: An Ethnographic Study," *Ethnography* 6, no. 4 (2005).
117 Roseberry, "Hegemony," 357.
118 Ibid.
119 Gupta, "Narratives of Corruption," 28.
120 Michael Lipsky, *Street Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1980).
121 Ibid., 3.
122 "Bureaucratic Disentitlement in Social Welfare Programs," *The Social Service Review* 58, no. 1 (1984), my emphasis.
123 *Street Level Bureaucracy*, 4.

ness then, state practice provides the poor with political education: daily crash courses on the workings of power.[124]

Jessica is 19 years old, born and raised in Argentina. We met her at the welfare office in the city of Buenos Aires. She came to renew her housing subsidy. She has been waiting for four hours and, like most of the people we talked to, she does not know if and when she will receive the benefit. "You come here and you don't know at what time you'll leave." As we are speaking with her, a state agent tells her, from the counter and in a very teacher-like manner, "stay seated." She turns to us and says: "If they are in a good mood, they treat you well." Like many other recipients of the housing subsidy, Jessica first heard about the state benefit from a social worker who was present when state officials and policemen were evicting her and 15 other families with children—"we were all women, with children in tow"—from her room of "wood and metal shingles" in a squatter settlement. She still remembers the day of the eviction as a highly traumatic experience. Jessica thinks the welfare benefit is an "aid because with the scavenging, I can't pay for a room. These days, it costs at least 450 Pesos a month [roughly USD 110] and with the scavenging I collect for the day to day, I can't pay the rent with it." If she is lucky, the subsidy will cover six months of rent in a run-down hotel in the city. After those six months, she will be homeless; the subsidy cannot be renewed.

Echoing what we heard countless times, Jessica says that obtaining the benefit takes "a long time… you never know when they will pay you." And like many others, she conceives of the waiting time as an indicator of the clients' perseverance and thus of their "real need." If you "really need," she and others believe, "you will wait for a long time," you will "keep coming," and you will show state agents you are worthy of aid. This is how she puts it: "you have to wait, wait, and wait… They will not give it to you until you come here three, four, five, ten times, to check, to talk, to ask, with this official and then with the other official…"

Like many people to whom we talked, Jessica compares this long and uncertain wait to that at the public hospital. In a statement that captures one prominent way in which poor people relate to the state, she adds: *"Here and in the hospital, they tell you the same thing, 'sit down and wait'… and what do you do? You sit down and wait…"* (my emphasis).

In a nutshell, the argument I made in *Patients of the State* is the following: Far from being simply a negative practice, a combination of words

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and deeds that merely tell poor people that it is not yet their time, making the dispossessed wait has some "possible positive effects, even if these seem marginal at first sight."[125] Chief among these positive effects is the everyday manufacturing of subjects who know that, and act accordingly, when dealing with state bureaucracies they have to *comply patiently with* the seemingly arbitrary, ambiguous, and always changing state requirements. This is the appropriate place to recall that the Latin root of the word patience, "the quality of being patient in suffering," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is *pati*—"to suffer, to endure." In the recursive interactions with the state, documented in ethnographic observations and interviews, poor people learn that they have to remain temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed. True, the poor comply because they do not have an alternative; but they comply silently, if begrudgingly, because they also learn that there is no use in protesting publicly. Comparative ethnographic work in three different "waiting sites" reveal poor people who *know*, because that knowledge has been instilled in them in repeated encounters, that, if they are to obtain the much needed "aid"— in the form of goods, a welfare benefit, or a service—they have to show that they are worthy of help by dutifully waiting, they *know* they have to avoid making trouble, and they *know* they have to, as many people told me, "keep coming and wait, wait, wait." In their frequent encounters with politicians, bureaucrats, and officials, the urban poor learn, I argue, to be *patients of the state*. In recurrently being forced to accommodate and yield to the state's dictates, the urban poor thereby receive a subtle, and usually not explicit, daily lesson in political subordination. Interpreted in this light waiting ceases to be a "dead time," and making people, the poor, wait turns into something more than a mere "repressive" action. The subjective experience of waiting and the regular practice of making the destitute wait become productive phenomena.

## Political ethnography

Thus, many are the substantive and analytical lessons I have learned over all these years of conducting ethnographic research among the most destitute. Many of these lessons could become, I hope, tools for other researchers working in other parts of the world.

Over 15 years of field research, I have come to appreciate further the value of ethnography to look microscopically at the foundations of political behavior and institutions. One would expect that ethnography— based as it is on the close-up, on the ground observation of people and

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125  Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 23.

institutions in real time and space[126]—would be one of the preferred tools among those for whom the study of politics is their profession, such as political scientists and political sociologists. After all, ethnography is uniquely equipped to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant sets of practices, just as it is ideally suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life. But here, as with many other scholarly matters, common sense serves as a less than reliable guide. A closer examination reveals that ethnography is far from the favorite mode of analysis among political scientists and political sociologists, for whom surveys, secondary data (usually culled from newspapers), formal modeling, and statistical approaches constitute the standard methodological tools.[127] In concentrating almost exclusively on the models, charts, regressions, and correlations of standard political research, the social sciences have missed a significant aspect of the ongoing reality that is politics: namely, it has missed the nitty-gritty details of politics, its "day-to-day intricacies,"[128] its "implicit meanings,"[129] its passions and its sacrifices;[130] in other words, the pace of political action, the texture of political life, and the plight of political actors have all been cast into the shadows created by the unnecessary and deleterious over-reliance on quantitative methods in both political science and political sociology.

The lessons I have learned about the value of ethnography to understand and explain politics came with a forewarning, best articulated by my former mentor, Charles Tilly, who, in response to a manuscript I had sent him, wrote in a personal correspondence that political ethnography was a...

[R]isky business, at once intensely sociable and deeply isolating. On one side, its effective pursuit requires close involvement with political actors, and therefore the danger of becoming their dupes, their representatives, their brokers, or their accomplices. On the other, bringing

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126 Loïc Wacquant, "Ethnografeast: A Progress Report on the Practice and Promise of Ethnography," *Ethnography* 4, no. 1 (2003).

127 See, Edward Schatz, ed. *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

128 Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 16.

129 Paul Lichterman, "What Do Movements Mean? The Value of Participant Observation," *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (1998).

130 Matthew Mahler, "Politics as a Vocation: Toward a Sensualist Understanding of Political Engagement," in *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, eds. Lauren Joseph, Matthew Mahler, and Javier Auyero (New York: Springer, 2007).

out the news so others can understand depends on multiple translations: from the stories that political participants tell into stories that audiences will understand, from local circumstances to issues that will be recognizable outside the locality, from concrete explanations for particular actions to accounts in which outsiders will at least recognize analogies to classes of actions with which they are familiar.

If political ethnography is your thing, you are now warned.

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