

THE PIQUETEROS

ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGENCE OF AN ARGENTINEAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT

* FINAL PAPER *

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies in Latin America generated, among other consequences, a high level of unemployed people. In Argentina, these unemployed people started organizing in different groups to demand from the government social policies in order to improve their situation. This new movement is called "piqueteros." Who are the piqueteros, and what do they want? What explains their emergence? The purpose of this paper is to analyze the piqueteros from the perspective of social movements' theories: resources mobilization theory and political opportunity theory.

INTRODUCTION

My flight from the United States arrived on time. A few minutes on the highway and I would be at home again, after living outside of Argentina for more than a year. It was noon and the highway was really crowded. Suddenly, the vehicles started slowing down, and then no one could go a meter ahead. There they were: the *piqueteros*, their faces hidden by scarves and bandannas, setting fire to tires, stopping traffic, and blocking the road.

Piqueteros is the name given to a new and powerful social movement that emerged in Argentina in the late 1990s. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, picketer, the nearest word in English, means “a person engaged in picketing during a strike; also, one engaged in a demonstration at particular premises, etc.” (OED 2005). The *piqueteros* are an organization of unemployed people spread all over Greater Buenos Aires and other areas of the interior of Argentina, which is based on neighborhood social organizations, and which has its own rules. These rules include creating a social network for unemployed people and the homeless, and promoting a political strategy without violence. This is a remarkable point because blocking roads in the way they do can have violent consequences when the police become involved (Clarín, 2004).

Just to mention some examples of police violence against the *piqueteros*: on April 12th, 1997, Teresa Rodriguez, a 24 years-old housemaid, was killed by police while she was attending a blocking of a road in Cutral Co, a city in the province of Neuquén (Schneider Mansilla & et al 2003). Currently, one of the groups into which the *piqueteros*' movement is divided is named Teresa Rodriguez in her memory. By the end of the year 2001, five *piqueteros* were killed, others were injured by gunfire, and thousands were arrested by federal police in violent frictions all over the country (Petras & Veltmeyer 2003). In June 2002, Maximiliano Kosteki and Dario Santillán were killed by two policemen from Buenos Aires province during a *piqueteros*' manifestation. A TV reporter recorded that event, and supplied the tape which was the most important evidence during the trial against those policemen (Mazzetti 2004).

DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Who are these new protagonists of the Argentinean society? and, most importantly, why did they emerge? The dependent variable is the emergence of the *piqueteros* after 1996. The independent variables are the social effects of neo-liberal policies applied in Argentina, and the opportunity created by the political weakening of former president Menem's government during his second term. My purpose is to analyze the emergence of the *piqueteros* from the perspective of social movement theories: resources mobilization group and political opportunity. A few scholars have offered some general ideas on this topic as part of their studies of this

particular social movement in Argentina. The relatively meager academic research on this topic is supplemented by articles written by journalists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In search of a definition of a social movement among several scholars, I found more similarities than differences. Tarrow (1998: 4) defines social movements as “collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.” According to Giugni (1999: xx), “social movements are complex sets of groups, organizations and actions that may have different goals as well different strategies for reaching their aims”. Collective action is an element in both definitions.

Yet rational choice theory emphasizes the difficulty of achieving collective action. Jenkins (1983: 536) cites Mancur Olson’s theory of collective action (1968) to explain the cause of mobilization. According to Olson, rational individuals will mobilize only if they can assure what he calls “selective incentives”. These “selective incentives” are not offered to everyone but just to those who become members of “privileged” groups (Olson 1968). Unions are a clear example of the usage of “selective incentives” because they attract people who believe that they are going to benefit from the victories of the union. Olson (1968) studies the group size. He says that if the group is small, the benefits to individuals are greater. Jenkins (1983) considers that Olson’s theory is important although it does not offer an “adequate solution”. According to Jenkins, Olson is right: “movements can not be mobilized around collective material benefits, and that free-riding is potentially a major problem” (1983: 537). What Jenkins proposes is a solution by the “fusion of personal and collective interest” (1983: 537-538). In other words, following these scholars’ opinion, the success of a movement depends on the personal interests of its members. If members of movements see a concurrence of their interests, there will be more chances of success.

Vasi & Macy (2003) also refers to the conflict between personal and collective interest which underlies rational choice theory. They affirm that the conflict has two origins: the “free-rider problem” and the “efficacy problem” (2003: 980). The “free-rider problem” emerges when an individual receives the benefits of someone else’s efforts (Vasi & Macy 2003). The “efficacy problem” explains that from all the actions of a individual member of a group, just a small portion of benefits obtained goes to him (Vasi & Macy 2003). According to these scholars, “the logic of collective action” makes every group member think that even though he makes a small effort or no effort at all, he “will enjoy the benefits of other’s efforts even if [he] fails to contribute” (2003: 980).

Giugni points out that scholars are more focused on the policy outcomes of social movements than any other aspect, and he adds that “policy changes are

easier to measure than changes in social and cultural arenas" (1999: xxii). He also affirms that for social movements to produce political changes it is important when these changes mean "collective benefits for beneficiary groups" (xxii). Following the analysis done by Giugni, there is a lack of deep study about the cultural aspects of social movements (xxiii). The organization of a social movement is not just based on political outcomes but cultural identity, solidarity and shared attitudes toward the same goals.

The resource mobilization theory affirms that individuals act and cooperate when they perceive that they have the necessary resources to be successful (Jenkins 1983). Jenkins defines mobilization as "the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action" (1983: 532). What is important here is that those resources are managed before mobilizing. There is no agreement about the significance of the resources. Jenkins (1983: 533) emphasizes the significant contributions from outside the movement and the cooptation of institutional resources by contemporary social movements. Basically, the most important resources that a group can have are money, people and a good connection to media which collaborate in making public the movement.

The political opportunity theory studies the relationship between the mobilizations made by social movements and the opportunity to utilize them (Meyer & Minkoff 2004). The political opportunities are not equally available for all groups. The opportunities can be more centered on one group than another or better in some areas than in others. Despite these differences, social movements rise when the conditions to mobilize are politically extended (Tarrow 1998). Tarrow affirms that "when institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims" (1998: 71). The conditions mentioned by Tarrow are external to the group which will use them to start its organization and mobilization.

Baldez (2002) analyzes women's movements in Chile using three theoretical concepts: tipping, timing and framing. In the development of the tipping concept, she explains that an individual participates in a protest depending on how many people will also participate. Baldez affirms, "... your decision to participate in an act of protest hinges on your beliefs about what others likely to do" (2002: 6). When explaining the emergence of women's movements, Baldez cites the political opportunity approach: she understands that movements rise and fall as a reaction to political changes. Her "timing" focus is on the appropriate moment for opportunities to become available; for instance, the divisions among political elites which result in the weakness of the political system (2002: 8). What Baldez calls framing, the third theoretical concept of her research, is the perception by which people know that the conditions are given to protest. Chilean women needed to

identify themselves in order to achieve their goals. The group's self-identification is very important because it helps to distinguish the group's needs. As Baldez cites, "Appeals to gender identity bridge women's different and sometimes contradictory interests: exclusion from political power" (2002: 10-11). As part of their self-identification, Baldez mentions that in her research "gender functions as a source of collective identity" (2002: 11).

Petras & Veltmeyer (2003) affirm that Latin America experienced three waves of social movements since the late 1970s. The first one, in the late 1980s, was concerning the issues of human rights, ecology, feminism, ethnic identity, social justice and democracy. From the mid-1980s to the present, the second wave revived those movements that dominated the political landscape of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements were united in their opposition to neo-liberalism and imperialism. Some examples of these movements are the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional) in Chiapas, Mexico, the rural landless workers in Brazil, the *cocaleros* and peasants of Bolivia, the National Peasant Federation in Paraguay, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), and the peasant-Indian CONAIE in Ecuador. The third wave of social movements emerged in the mid-1990s, and it is centered in urban areas, and includes the *piqueteros* in Argentina, the unemployed and poor in the Dominican Republic and the shantytown dwellers in Venezuela (Petras and Veltmeyer 2003).

CASE STUDY: THE PIQUETEROS

The *Piqueteros*, as a movement, emerged in two cities of the interior of Argentina: Cutral Co and Plaza Huincul (province of Neuquen) in June 1996 when workers were laid off by YPF (Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales), the state oil entity. The workers decided to block Route 22, an important road that linked Neuquen with the Patagonian region. These demonstrations were soon imitated by other workers, such as YPF's employees of General Mosconi, Salta, and in the Greater Buenos Aires areas (Masseti 2004; Petras & Veltmeyer 2003).

Shortly, thousands of unemployed workers began mobilizing in protest against job cuts and plant shutdowns resulting from the privatization process. When neo-liberal economic principles were adopted in Latin America, many countries implemented the IMF's conditions: market-based economic reforms and a strong austerity in public budgets. All these conditions aimed at foreign investments to improve the economy of the region, but they also had negative consequences for many social sectors. In their study about the failures of neo-liberalism in Latin America, Huber and Solt affirm that poverty "fell from 48.3 percent of the population in 1990 to 43.8 percent in 1999, but still remained above the level of 40.5 percent in 1980" (2004: 152). Despite the small level of

improvement, the 43.8 percent mentioned is serious given the lack of social programs implemented by the governments (Hubert and Solt 2004).

An article from NACLA Report on the Americas says, "Financial security replaced social security; social inequality grew; income was redistributed upward; and the working poor, to lower the costs of doing business, were deliberately deprived of options and social mobility" (2005: 13). As Petras & Veltmeyer cite, "privatizations led to the closure of work sites and massive expulsions of the labor force, while the state and federal government failed to comply with its promises to finance alternative employment, largely because of budget cuts to meet IMF fiscal requirements" (2003: 208). If we look for an underlying cause of the emergence of the *piqueteros*, it is the neo-liberal policies applied in Argentina during the Menem administration (1989-1999) and its social effects. With the liberalization of its economy, Argentina experienced high levels of poverty and an increasing inequality with the population.

Carlos Menem was elected president in two consecutive periods: 1989-1995 and 1995-1999. Menem took office facing an economic crisis inherited from the Alfonsín administration. Soon, he appointed businessmen and liberal politicians as members of his Cabinet. He "announced a program of orthodox reforms to open up the economy and reduce government intervention" (Treisman 2003: 95). The key of his first period of government was the privatization of the state owned companies. One of the most obvious consequences of the process of privatization was an increasing rate of unemployment which was over 18% when Menem was re-elected in 1995 (Tedesco 2002: 477). The economic crisis that had begun was affecting social and political aspects in Argentina. It was the beginning of what Tedesco calls "the politics of informality". She explains that "the economic crisis gave the political leadership the perfect excuse to implement the politics of informality" (2002: 479). In other words, Argentinean politicians were "a self-serving democratic political class". The democratic culture was affected and the popularity of the politicians started decreasing. That was the economic, political and social reality in Argentina when the *piqueteros* emerged.

The *Piqueteros* were born of the association of urban and rural unemployed and underemployed workers, artisans, and professionals. Members of these groups joined their efforts in order to obtain the same benefit: in some cities, if working-class people do not exist, merchants can not sell their products and professionals will not receive money for doing their jobs. As with many organizations, the *piqueteros* are divided into different groups and follow the orders of each group's leader (Mazzeo 2004; Massetti 2004; Schneider Mansilla & et al 2004). Some of these groups are CCC (Corriente Clasista y Combativa), FTV (Federación por el Trabajo y la Vivienda), MTD (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados) and MTR (Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez). Each of them is characterized by the political

ideology of its leader; for instance, a few groups are linked with the Communist Party (Mazzeo 2004). Some leaders, like Raul Castells from MIJD (Independent Movement of Retirees and Pensioners), have been jailed for long periods of time for the methodology they applied in their protests. In December 2004, an article was published in Clarin, one of the major Argentinean newspapers, about the *piqueteros* from the group led by Castells; they went to a location of a McDonald's in the downtown of Buenos Aires demanding 50,000 combo meals! (Clarin 2004).

The *piqueteros* strict internal organization is based on obligatory community work financed by the government's welfare programs and monthly payments that the *piqueteros* contribute to the organization. Members pay their monthly Argentinean pesos \$3 (approximately us\$ 1) quota to finance their organization's expenses (Young, Guagnini & Amato 2002). From what I have experienced in Argentina, which is also supported by newspapers and scholars such as Mazzetti (2004), the *piqueteros* decide a certain day to block a road or highway, but they keep it secret from the press and public opinion. Then, they gather early in the morning at crucial places near highways, train stations or in the intersection of main avenues from where they march stopping traffic until a specific place where they block the road for hours while setting fire to tires. Sometimes drivers can use alternative roads, but on occasions the blocked roads do not have any alternative way, so they have to wait for hours until the *piqueteros* finish their protest.

The success of the *piqueteros* movement in mobilizing thousands of unemployed workers and trade union activists and in securing concessions from the regime has expanded the movement from the local to the national sphere. It seems the *piqueteros* are achieving their goals. Argentinean government helps them by giving Argentinean pesos \$150 (approximately us\$ 41) monthly, and supports their community kitchens where children and parents are fed daily (Young & Guagnini 2002).

Zibechi (2005) points out that the existence of new "progressive" governments in Latin America, such as Kirchner in Argentina, Lula Da Silva in Brazil and Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, have been possible due to social struggles that debilitated the neo-liberal model; however, despite the sympathy of these governments for these movements, they also see the need to reduce the power of social movements. "These governments are now devoting themselves to providing renewed legitimacy to the state. To do so, they work to co-opt and divide the movements along with their most capable leaders, because active and mobilized movements necessarily undermine a government's capacity to govern" (Zibechi 2005: 15). By doing that, the government guarantees its capacity to govern. In Argentina, for instance, President Kirchner has contributed to fragmentation within the *piquetero* movement by getting closer to Luis D'Elia, one of the most influential

leaders. As one analyst notes, “D’Elia opted to become the *piquetero* arm of Kirchner government” (Zibechi: 16).

Zibechi (2005) differentiates movements’ autonomy in Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia. He mentions that Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST) is actively dynamic being autonomous from the government. According to Zibechi, the reality in Argentina and Bolivia is different because the governments from both countries have taken advantages of internal conflicts of the social movements “to develop policies partly reflecting differing social groups’ demands” (2005: 15).

By the year 2001, and after 20 days of keeping the roads blocked, there was an agreement between the *piqueteros* and the government. The *piqueteros* received 7,500 welfare programs, medicines, tools to work, and money to repair schools and hospitals among other benefits (Iriarte 2003). When the government does not keep its word, the *piqueteros* block again the roads until the next agreement. This is their methodology: block, negotiate and form agreements.

FINDINGS

The *piqueteros* is a social movement which emerged in Argentina during the 1990s, as a consequence of the social effects of neo-liberal economic policies under the Menem administration. Most of the members of the group are middle class people who were displaced by unemployment and an increasing rate of impoverishment. Based on this situation, people demanded that the government provide more social programs. They started organizing and mobilizing to protest for better living conditions.

Following the political opportunity theory, the *piqueteros* perceived the right opportunity to emerge: the Argentinean government was weak and the politicians’ public image was decreasing. People experienced the prejudicial consequences of policies implemented by the government, and this impact was reflected in the decreasing level of popularity of politicians. Politically, the opportunities for mobilization around the country (an occurrence that Tarrow 1998 mentions in his theory) were not equal. *Piqueteros* from Buenos Aires and its nearby areas had a better organization because the population is bigger than in the rest of the country. The number of unemployed people grew, and they started becoming an influential movement whose methodology of protest is to block important roads and highways. This organization has demonstrated how powerful movements can be when they form to challenge the government. As any other big movements, the *piqueteros* are divided into different groups; many of them are close to current President Kirchner, who is using the internal conflicts of the movement for the benefit of his government. A debilitated social movement makes the government stronger.

Resource mobilization theory suggests that the *piqueteros* at the time of their emergence were powerful in mobilizing people because people represented the only important resource “owned” by the *piqueteros*. They did not have money until later when they asked for a monthly quota which was destined to the movement’s expenses. Thus, resource mobilization theory is not sufficient to explain the emergence of the *piqueteros*.

CONCLUSION

Latin America has recently experienced the emergence of new social movements. In Bolivia, social movements converged to force the overthrow of the former president Sanchez de Lozada in 2003, and had an active participation on the events that occurred in October 2003 during the struggle to nationalize gas (Zibechi 2005). In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONADIE) united the indigenous communities of the highlands, the coast and the Amazon region, and at the same time it developed a form of social action that has led to several uprisings (Petras & Veltmeyer 2003; Zibechi 2005). Argentina was not the exception in the emergence of social movements as a result of neo-liberal economic policies. The *piqueteros* are currently the most powerful social movement in Argentina.

The *piqueteros* members are receiving from the government monthly welfare programs for a certain amount of money which is not enough because their needs increase constantly. What will happen when blocking roads becomes ineffective? Or if the government refuses to accede to *piqueteros* demands or discontinues the assistance? Will this be the end of the *piqueteros* as social movement?

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