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Unprotected: Why Argentina’s Poor Turn to Peronism

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Argentines living below the official poverty line have once again supported a Peronist candidate for the country’s highest office—and, some would say, propelled him to victory. What happened during the four years of Mauricio Macri’s presidency that caused many of the urban poor who once hesitantly supported the center-right incumbent to return to Peronism and vote for his challenger, Alberto Fernández, in the October 2019 election?

No single factor can explain the voting decisions of such a large swath of Argentine society. Poor people’s lives, just like everyone else’s, are complex and diverse. And so is their electoral behavior. Attempting to reduce the heterogeneity and intricacy of poor people’s political action to one single element (be it deprivation, violence, protest, or clientelism—to name just a few of the tropes that are regularly used by the Argentine mainstream press) is bound to produce misrepresentations.

Macri, a prominent former businessman and mayor of Buenos Aires, won the presidency in 2015, beating Daniel Scioli, who was then the Peronist governor of the province of Buenos Aires and was backed, if lukewarmly, by the outgoing president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. A majority of voters saw Kirchner’s Peronist government as responsible for the deterioration of living standards. Although her administration was notorious for not making official figures available, poverty rates and inflation were clearly on the upswing by 2013. Voters also took note of the various corruption scandals that plagued her term in office.

Cristina had succeeded her husband Nestor as president upon his death in 2007. He had successfully steered the country out of its 2001 economic meltdown, after Argentina defaulted on its massive foreign debt, the peso collapsed, and the poverty rate reached a record high of 54 percent of the population. By all accounts, Nestor Kirchner’s welfare policies (from cash transfers to subsidized services) worked well to improve the daily lives of the urban poor during his tenure.

When Macri took office in December 2015, he promised zero inflation and zero poverty. He failed on both counts. During his presidency, the poverty rate rose from 29 percent to 34 percent, and inflation doubled to an annual rate of 54 percent. Foreign debt also more than doubled. In September 2018, Macri negotiated a $57 billion rescue package from the International Monetary Fund, which made the loans conditional on reductions in the fiscal deficit. This resulted in the implementation of austerity policies—mainly cutting subsidies to public services. Combined with recession and inflation, this proved disastrous for low- and middle-income groups. Overall, far from shrinking Argentina’s disparities between the poor and the rich—gaps that have been widening over the last four decades—Macri’s policies enlarged them even further.

For more than two decades, first on my own and more recently in collaboration with residents of the impoverished neighborhoods I study, I have been scrutinizing poor people’s lives and politics. During the past nine months, together with anthropology student Sofía Servián, I have held dozens of informal conversations and formal interviews with residents of La Matera, a squatter settlement in the southeast of the conurbano bonaerense—the metropolitan area that borders the capital city of Buenos
Aires is home to some 16 million people, including 37 percent of the country’s voters.

Since the return of democracy to Argentina in 1983, after seven years of dictatorship, every political contest in the conurbano has been regarded as the “mother of all electoral battles.” What our interlocutors told us provides a few clues about the recent election results, the Macri debacle, and the enduring appeal of Peronism. Since its origins in the populist leadership of President Juan Peron in the mid-twentieth century, Peronism has been at the center of Argentina’s political life, sometimes in a neoliberal variant (notably during the presidency of Carlos Menem from 1989 to 1999), and at other times associated with strong state intervention. Its standard-bearer, the Justicialist Party, is now the largest political party in the country.

Two tightly linked elements appear to take center stage in poor people’s evaluations of what has happened in the four years since Macri became president, and in their judgments about what needs to happen next. With respect to Macri’s tenure, although many of our interviewees acknowledge that some improvements were made to infrastructure (a paved street here, a bridge there), most stress that their basic needs remained unmet. They still lack enough food and money to pay for transportation and utilities. They complain of government inaction in the face of threats to their material survival.

What do they hope will happen now? Most of our interviewees perceive Alberto Fernández, the new Peronist president, as the man who will turn back the clock and return daily life to a time when although economic hardship was present, basic needs were generally met—a time when they felt that they were, more or less, protected by the state.

Poor people do not vote with their bellies. Their understandings of what constitutes an acceptable level of deprivation, and what governments should or should not do in the face of generalized suffering, must be considered in any analysis of their political behavior. These understandings do not emerge out of thin air, but are embedded in a complex web of relationships that has constituted poor people’s politics in Argentina, as well as elsewhere in Latin America, for some time.

**Punteros and Piquereteros**

In working-class neighborhoods, shantytowns, and squatter settlements, many of Argentina’s poor and unemployed address the pressing problems of everyday life—access to welfare benefits, food, and medicine—through patronage networks that rely on brokers locally known as punteros. They also participate in grassroots organizations of unemployed workers, who are called piquereteros (road-blockers) in reference to the barricades they frequently set up on important avenues and highways in order to make their collective claims heard. Often, poor residents turn to both types of problem-solving network to help them make ends meet.

Patronage and collective action networks—punteros and piquereteros—not only provide access to food on an individual basis or in communal soup kitchens, but also organize state-funded cooperatives that engage the needy in “productive projects”: building schools, constructing sidewalks, setting up community gardens and bakeries, and so forth. Both punteros and piquereteros depend on the (not always legal or overt) support of local, provincial, and national administrations. Although they demand different things from their participants, both kinds of networks function as webs that distribute resources and provide protection against the risks of everyday life.

Although political brokers tend to be linked to Peronism, there are also some who work for Macri’s party, Cambiemos (Let’s Change). In fact, many of these highly strategic actors work for one party at the local or municipal level, and for the other at the state or federal level.

During electoral campaigns, punteros canvass door to door, paint candidates’ names on walls, put up posters, and mobilize supporters to attend rallies. On election day, they “buy” turnout by distributing goods and services to individual voters. But working for campaigns and handing out resources to obtain votes or other forms of political support are not the only actions in which punteros (and their patrons) engage.

Brokers provide access to welfare programs, medicine, clothes, food, bricks for building or repairing homes, zinc sheets for roofing, and sometimes cash. Some, especially when the time comes to mobilize their younger followers, distribute alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs. They do all this year-round, not exclusively during the weeks or months before an election.

Both punteros and piquereteros organizations provide public goods and services—street lighting, garbage collection trucks, bus shelters, and more—for their neighborhoods. They run community soup kitchens, health care clinics, and sports centers. They coordinate the delivery of state welfare benefits. The dealings of punteros
and *piqueteros* with political parties are variable and negotiated affairs—never set in stone, always contested—making poor people’s political lives a vibrant patchwork of oftentimes competing actors and networks.

**ENDURING IMMISERATION**

A persistent economic recession, chronic unemployment, widespread trends toward more informal and precarious work, low wages, and increasing inflation were the driving forces behind the increase of poverty under Macri. How is this general immiseration experienced at the bottom of the social structure? To find out, for the past nine months Sofía and I have been listening to poor people’s descriptions of their daily predicaments.

Many of them are involved in one or more of the problem-solving networks described above. They detail drastic changes they have been forced to make to their diets because of skyrocketing prices for basic food items. “You can’t afford meat any more . . . forget about it,” said one person with whom we spoke, echoing similar laments from many others.

Our interlocutors also note the decreasing amounts (and worsening quality) of food on offer in the communal soup kitchens where they eat during the week, the rising utility prices that make it impossible for them to pay their bills, and the increased cost of transportation to go to work and to take their children to after-school activities. The welfare benefits they receive “each day cover less and less” of their basic needs. The problem-solving networks are strained, with fewer resources but more needs to cover. Over and over again, the poor describe urgent threats to their basic material subsistence.

The people we have been talking to grew up in neighborhoods with few paved streets, low-quality services, and high levels of violence. Most have always worked in the informal sector of the economy—as day laborers in construction, waiters, or domestic workers. If and when they had access to formal jobs, they never made enough income to move above the official poverty line.

In the many conversations we have had, they express a somewhat resigned tolerance, a sort of acceptance, of the material deprivation that has characterized their lives and those of their parents. Hopes of upward social mobility (hopes that were indeed common among the poor for most of the twentieth century in Argentina) have pretty much vanished. “I might end up seeing the suffering of my grandchildren,” one of them told us, encapsulating this widespread pessimism.

Although they say they are “used to” poverty, these same people express anger over the breakdown of what was once a widely held assumption that they could rely on state welfare provision: the government, they now believe, has stopped caring for them. The government (by which they meant Macri’s presidency) was allowing or “not doing anything about” price hikes for basic foodstuffs.

Government inaction or incompetence, they believe, is behind the devaluation (due to soaring inflation) of the welfare subsidies that had been helping them make ends meet for the past two decades or so. The government, they insist, is responsible for the disappearance of work and the general decline in their already poor quality of life.

**LIVING WITH VIOLENCE**

But the people we have talked with are not only preoccupied by threats to their material well-being. They also talk about worries for their physical safety. They feel endangered by the presence of young and often violent drug dealers in their neighborhoods.

“They cannot go to work without thinking you are going to get mugged,” says a woman about her commute to work from Ingeniero Budge, a poor neighborhood in the southern **conurbano**, where murder rates have quadrupled since 2007 (an increase, it is worth mentioning, that is even more noticeable in a context of rather stable homicide rates in the country as a whole and relatively low levels of violence compared with most Latin American countries). “There are kids who steal so that they can get money to buy drugs. I’m always watching my back. You cannot walk on the streets. Anywhere you go, you have to take a car service. We can’t live like that.”

Besides these menacing street youths, residents are also worried about gun violence, which often erupts in street disputes between rival drug dealers. The following is an excerpt from the field diary of one research assistant with whom I worked back in 2016:

Daira (10) lives with her mom and three sisters. Her father has been in prison for homicide since 2010. Daira, her mother, and two of her siblings were shopping on one of the neighborhood’s bus-
iest streets at noon when they heard gunshots. “I grabbed the kids,” Daira’s mom told me, “and tried to hide somewhere. I then saw that Daira was touching her head, and there was blood on it . . . I was desperate . . . we ran to the local hospital with the help of a neighbor.” Fortunately, the bullet only grazed Daira’s head. At the school, we organized a fundraiser to pay for her antibiotics and creams. Her classmates now tease Daira, calling her “leaky head.”

Alejandra, a 35-year-old woman, was not as lucky as Daira. On January 8, 2017, in the adjacent Barrio Obrero (a few blocks beyond the limits of Ingenierio Budge), she was killed when a stray bullet hit her in the head as she was walking down the street with her four-year-old son. According to preliminary police investigations, she was caught in the middle of a dispute involving two drug-trafficking gangs.

Far from feeling protected by law enforcement, residents of poor barrios believe that the police are, in fact, responsible for the increasing levels of violence. As we heard repeatedly from different neighbors, “The cops don’t do anything. The cops are all dealers [La policía es toda transa]. They catch a dealer on this street and they let him out on the next corner.”

No longer in the business, 47-year-old Mario recalled his days as a street dealer in Ingenierio Budge and provided a straightforward account of police–trafficker collusion:

“When we first started drug dealing, we had an arrangement with the police. Every weekend they would come to “pick up the envelope” [collect their bribe]. The cops knew we were selling drugs, but they didn’t bother us. They would turn the area over to us. Now, if you don’t pay them every weekend, you are in trouble. You’ll end up in jail. Then we moved to another neighborhood. We were selling cocaine there, lots of it. But there, the National Guard protected us. The cops worked with a dealer from a different neighborhood. We were with the National Guard. See . . . it’s all about [different] territories, some for the cops, others for the National Guard.

Over the past three decades, the illegal drug trade has expanded substantially in Argentina. In addition to its growing domestic market, the country has become an important point of departure for shipments of cocaine to Europe. Cocaine hydrochloride for domestic and European markets arrives from neighboring Bolivia and Peru, and marijuana is increasingly imported from Paraguay in response to local demand. A recent government report on drug consumption in Argentina found both more users (a 130 percent increase in use of illicit drugs between 2010 and 2017) and a rising perception that drugs are becoming more widely available and cheaper.

Drug-dealing organizations in Argentina are relatively small groups, in many cases composed of extended families based in extremely poor and marginalized neighborhoods in metropolitan areas, like Ingeniero Budge or La Matera. They often count on police protection. The involvement of members of Argentine state security forces in the drug business is well documented. Major daily newspapers regularly report on the arrest and indictment of federal and state police agents for participation in illicit drug distribution. For the past two decades, widespread police corruption in Argentina has persisted despite recurrent and mostly ineffective attempts at police reform.

**Poor people’s political lives are a vibrant patchwork of competing actors and networks.**

**HOPING FOR RELIEF**

When residents of poor neighborhoods speak about feeling unprotected, as they often do, they are usually referring to both material deprivation and a lack of physical safety. Their poverty is an insecure condition. They perceive those in charge of protecting them as either incompetent (elected state officials) or complicit with criminals (the police).

In the many conversations we had before the last election, we tried to leave the issue of politics, and more specifically, our interlocutors’ voting intentions, to the very end. We did not always succeed—this was an election year, after all. Poor residents had very strong opinions about the Macri presidency, and they grabbed the opportunity offered by the interviews to voice their opinions and vent their frustrations.

When it comes to politics, residents of poor neighborhoods change their tune from the generalized hopelessness described above to a cautious anticipation. There is a sense of urgency in their voices. They do not believe that a new Peronist government will bring radical changes in their material conditions, much less in their physical safety. (They know full well that drug-related violence and police–trafficker collusion existed long before
Macri’s presidency.) But they believe, or they want to believe, that a new administration will put a stop to their downward slide.

They hope—they want to have hope (quiero tener esperanza is a phrase we repeatedly heard)—that they will be able to make ends meet, to “eat meat more often,” to go to the supermarket and fill their carts; that maybe they will be able to eat at home again rather than relying on the communal soup kitchens. They told us that they would vote to put an end to their current predicament because, as one of them put it, “I don’t know how long we can keep going like this.”

Noticeably, the issues of drug violence and police collusion with drug dealers take a back seat in their electoral judgments. They do not believe that much would change with a new administration. Faced with narcopolicias (as cops who collaborate with drug dealers are known), they think that there is not much either they or the politicians can do—and they suspect (rightly, I believe) that elected officials are also entangled in the market for illicit drugs.

The generalized feeling among the poor people we talked to was that since Macri took office, their daily lives—the money they bring home, the food they eat—had gotten worse. And in a context of few job opportunities and skyrocketing prices, the poor believed that dwindling state support indicated that the government had ceased to protect them. They were ready to make these feelings heard at the ballot box.

If we take poor people’s shared understandings of their living conditions seriously, we should not be surprised by the overwhelming support for the Peronist candidate among the most dispossessed. On December 20, 2019, Argentina’s House of Representatives approved President Fernández’s emergency economic bill of tax hikes to fund increased social spending. This will likely bring some much-needed short-term relief to poor people’s lives. But given that it inherited a highly indebted state and a contracting economy, what difference the new Peronist administration will make in their daily predicament beyond such immediate alleviation is anybody’s guess.