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**'THE *PIQUETERO* MOVEMENT  
OF THE UNEMPLOYED:  
ACTIVE REJECTION OF AN  
EXCLUSIONARY FORM OF  
DEMOCRACY'\***

by

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## Preface

This paper was originally written in April 2002 as part of an MA in Anthropology of Development and Social Transformation at the University of Sussex in the UK. Previously, I had been working in issues related to social development interventions, their social consequences and political implications. This paper was an attempt to slightly change the scope through which I had been looking at development practices up until then.

I wanted to explore the consequences of the development model that was being implemented in Argentina by looking at a social movement –in this case, the Argentinean unemployed- who had directly suffered the consequences of the model and was fiercely trying to resist it. Thus, this paper was the first move towards an analysis of social movements and my first contact with the *Piquetero* Movement. I have worked for this paper essentially with secondary sources and only now I am planning a research on Social Movements in Argentina that includes ethnographic fieldwork. For this reason and to remain fair to the unemployed *Piqueteros* of Argentina, who had no saying in what has been written here, this paper should be taken only as a first attempt in a process of starting to understand the complexity of the *Piquetero* movement within the Argentinean reality.

A second issue that I want to bring up is that the Argentinean reality is currently going through very deep and severe transformations. As a result of ten years of unfulfilled promises, growing poverty and unemployment, on December 19 and 20, 2001, there were massive riots all over the country, looting and repression, ending up with the ousting of President De la Rúa and with the change of five presidents in 12 days. The prospect for Argentina is not clear yet. What is however clear, is that poverty and unemployment are the result of a deep economic structural reform that has benefited a few and worsen the standards of living of the majority of the population. Presidential elections will take place in March 2003. The vast majority of the population is heavily mobilised against this dwindling economic and political model, demanding a change in the direction of policy and a change in the political system; but the alternatives are not clear yet.

Within this context, the unemployed *Piqueteros* play a central role and their strategies, alliances and divisions are also going through permanent change in response to the many and rapid transformations that are constantly occurring in the larger macro-political context. Thus, this paper is only a snapshot of the Movement written in a certain period of their history, a history that is in permanent and crucial change.

Buenos Aires, September 2002.

## I. Introduction

The changing and dynamic character of collective action as well as the micro politics and complexities of each particular social movement need to be understood in their broader socio-economic and political context in order to thoroughly grasp their specificity (Gledhill 2000). In this paper I will consider a particular social movement: the Argentinean *Piquetero* movement of the unemployed, and address, by looking at their struggle, the transformations that have been set in motion in the Argentinean society as a result of the implementation of a neoliberal model with its consequent structural adjustment measures. I will focus on the trajectory of the Movement, how it came into existence and later became the symbol of the struggle of many Argentines against both political institutions and neoliberal policies. I will try to understand the Movement's objectives, its internal heterogeneity, changing identity/ies and forms of resistance, as well as the relationship that it establishes with other socio-political actors and the various discourses that are created around it. I will further discuss how the Movement has been transformed in the light of the current socio-economic and political crisis and I will also try to illustrate the role that the Movement has in defining the current realities and symbolising the present struggles against the model.

The *Piqueteros* emerged in a distinct moment of the Argentinean history in which a social and politico-economic paradigm is being questioned and particular social actors are struggling to define the new rules of the political game. As Jordan and Weedon argue "for marginalised and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society" (cited in Alvarez, Dagnino et al. 1998: 6).

In this regard, the literature on New Social Movements (NSM)<sup>1</sup> emphasises the cultural aspects of social movements, especially the production and significance of meanings and practises as well as the politics of identity (Adam 1992). Alvarez, Dagnino et al. stress that culture is "a dimension of all institutions –economic, social and political [and] a set of material practices which constitute meaning, values and subjectivities" (Alvarez, Dagnino et al. 1998: 3). It is in this sense that the cultural dimension of social movements can shed light on the meanings that "shape social experience and configure social relations" (ibid.).

However, the politics of identity and cultural perspective is only one way of looking at social movements; it misses some essential aspects of the phenomenon, namely the material basis of the struggles and the conflicts that oppose social actors holding divergent interests including the

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion around 'new' and 'old' social movements although relevant to the context, is not central to the argument of this article, therefore, I will not refer to it here. For a wide discussion on this topic: see Gledhill 2000, especially the chapter on Social Movements and Adam 1992.

struggles with the state and capital. I will use some elements of the NSM theory to analyse the process of conformation and change of the *Piquetero* movement and the meanings created and recreated around it by the members of the Movement and by the rest of the actors that directly or indirectly interact with it. However, I will also incorporate other visions that lay emphasis on the material struggles of social movements, in order to understand the unequal power positions that the different social actors occupy in the broader socio-economic and political context. As Alvarez et al. put it: "if there is always 'something else' beyond culture, something that is not quite captured by the textual/discursive, there is also something else beyond the so-called material, something that is always cultural and textual" (Alvarez, Dagnino et al. 1998: 5). Therefore, throughout this paper, I will try to capture and explain in all their complexities, the practises and meanings surrounding the struggles and demands put forward by the *Piquetero* movement bearing in mind their position in a hierarchy of power.

## II. Origins of the Movement – The context

The *Piqueteros* movement was formed circa 1997 by small groups of unemployed men and women after the closure of wide divisions of the YPF plants in two towns in Argentina: Cutral-Co, province of Neuquen in southern Patagonia and the town of Tartagal in the north-western province of Salta. YPF was the national Oil Company that was privatised and later sold to the Spanish Repsol. Both Cutral-Co and Tartagal had, effectively, grown around the oil industries, therefore the closure of the plants (for cost reductions and efficiency) meant the loss of the main income generating activity for the people of these towns leaving thousands of families unemployed. A report published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*<sup>2</sup> states that "in the Neuquen oil extraction area, where the localit[y] of (...) Cutral-Co is situated, the labour situation resulting from the non-planned privatisation of YPF is [the following]: Out of 4000 people employed by YPF, only 400 still continue to be employed" (Rofman 2000: 6).

The privatisations were part of a neoliberal model with its subsequent structural adjustment policies that started to be implemented in Argentina by the military dictatorship that seized power in 1976.

*Through the take over of the government by the military cadres, the financial capital was able to ensure the total control [of civil society] that allowed the implementation of policies convenient*

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<sup>2</sup> Southern Cone edition, my translation.

*to its own interests and that were needed to adequate the country to the conditions imposed by the economic crisis in the capitalist world.* <sup>3</sup> (Iñigo Carrera 2000: 24)

The continuation and deepening of the neoliberal model came with the two Menem presidencies starting in 1989. The national companies were sold to foreign capitals, national industries were devastated and the state drew back from its task of regulating prices and giving credits to small producers. Instead, the import markets were opened, resulting in an injection of foreign goods with almost no restrictions and the consequent ruin of local small producers, without time or money to become 'efficient' in order to play by the new rules.

Embracing the discourse of the need of an efficient state with small bureaucratic costs, the new measures privileged those who had more economic power and room for manoeuvre (big producers and holdings) and abandoned those small regional producers that couldn't 'compete' in the new conditions. "The state was there for a few privileged and absent for those who needed it most" (Rofman 2000: 6)<sup>4</sup>. The structural adjustment policies<sup>5</sup> accompanied by the flexibilisation of labour laws had a shocking effect on the most vulnerable groups of society.

In this context, the newly unemployed from the restructured oil company, plus those laid-off from other privatised companies, together with those left out due to the restructuring of the state, the contraction of national production, and the flexibilization of labour laws, resulted in a huge mass of unemployed workers that were 'kicked out' of 'the system'. Unemployment and under-employment summed up were 10,4% in 1974 escalating to around 30% in 1995 (Auyero 2001). Figures for May 2002 are 34,2% (Indec).

### III. Conformation, Visibility and Identity

The methodology employed by the *Piqueteros* is not new. The *piquete* was a barricade traditionally put up by striking labourers at the entrance of factories, it was intended to prevent other workers to enter the factories on a strike. Recently, however, the *piquete* has been transformed in the fighting practice of the unemployed -who are called *Piqueteros* after this practice- and it has been relocated to the streets. The direct action essentially consists of massive

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

<sup>4</sup> My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Structural adjustment policies had pervasive effects in all areas of social life; budgets in health, education and culture were enormously reduced with the excuse of reducing the state expenses to achieve the fiscal equilibrium. The effects of

road blockades on main national roads or on important highways, which sometimes last for days. The *Piqueteros* set up barricades made of burning tyres, nails and broken bottles, thousands of men and women sit on the road, preventing the traffic from passing and only allowing emergency vehicles through. They cook, eat and take turns to sleep. This form of 'symbolic action' has been effective in giving visibility to a group of people that were rendered invisible, outcasted, sent out of 'the system' by the system itself.

At first the unemployed were essentially organised by districts or provinces and the demands were restricted to very particular and short-term needs directed to the local governments such as jobs for particular groups of unemployed or food and medicine supplies. At the beginning of the protests, the *Piqueteros* were seen as an exception, a malfunction of the structure. But as the ruthlessness of the new policies started to drain through every crack in society, as unemployment rates grew higher and more and more workers were transferred to the informal economy, and the state relinquished its social responsibility; the *Piqueteros* rapidly became the movement that represented the whole country's unemployed. As Oviedo states "the *Piquetero* movement comes to the front, but now with a remarkable national projection. (...) It stepped from a purely claiming movement, demanding relief policies, to the formulation of political programmes (...) that demanded the social transformation of Argentina"<sup>6</sup> (Oviedo 2002: 3). As the protests spread throughout the country, the *Piqueteros* began to develop into a more organised movement, the group became internally more consistent and their proposals started to turn into broader and more politically sound claims. "The *Piquetero* movement (...) began as a sporadic and spasmodic protest against specific and inorganic interests; transforming, after years of sustained recession and government inefficacy, into the possible reconstruction of a public space of socialisation for the unemployed [and] excluded" (Pastore 2000).

During the trajectory and growth of the Movement, there was a transformation in the way in which the Movement was popularly represented. At the beginning the Movement was stigmatised and criminalised by both the government and public opinion, they were categorised as 'a marginal group of unemployed', 'the inevitable cost of the reform', etc. The main argument used against them was the illegality of their action; it was argued that a road blockade prevented people and goods from moving freely within the country, and that was against the law. Recently, however, a judiciary decision stressed that a "pacific road blockade is not a crime but a right to petition" (Rosemberg and Manzur 2001: 2). During the first years the (Menem) government responded using repression, furthermore, two people were killed by the repressive forces in the early *piquetes* in

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structural adjustment in all these areas of social life are pertinent to understand the Argentinean situation but will not be discussed in this paper due to a question of space.

Cutral-Co and Tartagal<sup>7</sup>. According to Ferrer (in Rosember and Manzur 2001), the stigmatised image of the *Piquetero* that was publicly constructed was that of a suburban character “with all the fears that that image entails for the middle classes (...) an image of poverty, dirt, subversion and criminality. The middle classes used to see a future in Miami and now the *Piqueteros* are showing them their own image in a mirror” (ibid.: 2). However, by 1999 the criminalising discourse had almost disappeared and not only was the *Piquetero*'s cause widely legitimised but their struggle was embraced and vindicated by political parties, trade unions, other social movements, and progressive politicians.<sup>8</sup>

I suggest that these changes -the fact that the Movement gained national political projection and the change in the way they were publicly represented- are the result of a double occurrence. On the one hand, at the same time as the politico-economic system grew more and more unsustainable, it became clearer that the *Piqueteros* were only the first emergent victims of the model that now became more evident to the rest of society. On the other hand the Movement itself grew from particular, local demands to a more organised and more effectively articulated national discourse denouncing not particular occurrences but the model itself as well as those who were implementing it. As Pastore argues, “the sustained claim allowed the reconstitution of a lost socialising space where the unemployed could recreate her/his loss without the guilt attributed to them by the neoliberal ideology that insinuated the uselessness of the excluded” (Pastore 2000: 5).

I will suggest that the processes of mobilisation and social legitimisation of the *Piqueteros* movement were crucial factors in allowing them to gain unity, visibility and ‘a present’ from where to try to modify the future. Bourdieu suggests in his article *Job insecurity is everywhere now*, that the unemployed, more concerned with the day to day subsistence tend to be demobilised and “competition for work tends to generate a struggle of all against all” (Bourdieu 1998b: 84). Job insecurity, according to Bourdieu, produces effects that become evident precisely in the case of the unemployed. He refers particularly to, what he calls, “the destructuring of existence, which is deprived (...) of its temporal structures and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space” (ibid.: 83). Thus, those who suffer unemployment, and whose existence is full of uncertainties with respect to their future, “are scarcely capable of being mobilised” [or

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<sup>6</sup> My translation.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa Rodriguez was killed in Cutral-Co and Anibal Verón in Tartagal by the repressive forces. Two sub-groups within the *Piquetero* Movement are named after the two ‘martyrs’.

<sup>8</sup> Although some conservative groups continued to see them as dangerous and illegal.



politically organised] (ibid.: 83). Bourdieu's scepticism on the possible political achievements of the unemployed seems appropriate to me when analysing the personal and social conditions of the unemployed *individual* deprived of any guaranteed future and concerned about his/her day-to-day survival. However, what the *Piqueteros* experience clearly shows is that in particular circumstances the unemployed can, and do, unite and are clearly capable of political mobilisation. Moreover, I suggest that the very act of mobilisation renders them visible to society, it exposes them as an integral part of the failed 'system', as a consequence of the economic policies; thus invalidating the image of pathological individuals unable to adapt to the new rules.

Further describing the fragmented condition of the unemployed, Bourdieu argues that "in order to conceive a revolutionary project, (...) a reasoned ambition to transform the present by reference to a projected future, one needs some grasp of the present" (ibid.: 83). In other words, Bourdieu suggests that the unemployed need some sort of material security and self-respect in the present (now), to be able to battle for a better future. I suggest that in the case of the unemployed *Piqueteros*, their mobilisation exposes them publicly as a symbol of the failure of the economic and political system, and of the urge for change. This very process of unification and mobilisation, not only allows them to gain visibility and unity, but most importantly, it confers them a *present*, not a material present, but a symbolic strength to mobilise against 'the system' and to stand in the centre of society as an icon of the social debt that the present economic system embodies. In other words, it is a moment of recognition of possibilities and power; the attainment of a political, and politicised *present*.<sup>9</sup>

*Even with an almost absolute lack of resources, the Piqueteros (...) were able to put up, for a period of six days, a replica of a city on the middle of the road. (...) The lack of water was partially solved by the provision of a cistern truck; the trade unions supplied ambulances, sanitary posts and even toilets. Some voluntary groups were in charge of the entertainment (...) The government should take note of this reality: (...) these people seem to be better prepared against adversity. They, to whom the very nothing is denied, have found lately new forms of doing politics without giving up their most vital quest for emancipation<sup>10</sup> (Gruss 2000: 2).*

I suggest that the visibility that the *Piqueteros* have acquired as a bloc, as a movement, allows them "to conceive the ambition of changing the present with an eye to the future" (Bourdieu 1998b: 83).

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<sup>9</sup> I am thankful to Jamie Cross for showing me this last point.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.

#### IV. Heterogeneity and unity within

*The Piquetero movement unites a variety of exploited social groups: (...) from the trade union members to the poor masses (...), from young unemployed to housewives. (...) It is in this mixture that the strength and vitality of the movement stems from but also its heterogeneity. (Oviedo 2002)*

As the Movement grew bigger and spread across the country, internal political and ideological divisions started to emerge. "The movement is comprised of divergent groups, ranging from a revolutionary radical wing (...) to a petit bourgeois and bureaucratic faction that supports reform within the system. In between these extremes there is a vast array of greys" (Oviedo 2002: 3). In spite of the internal divisions -some groups being closer to certain trade-unions, others to certain political parties- there seems to be a consistency within the Movement that is epitomised in the internal horizontal organisation of the Movement. Decisions are made through assemblies and the leaders of the Movement negotiate with the government only what has been decided point by point and unanimously in the assemblies. "This methodology is the key to how factions with distinct identities [and] diverse political origins (...) can achieve such a high degree of political homogeneity" (D' Elia, *Piquetero* leader in Linea 2001: 2). In spite of the unified image they project to the outside, there are several internal divergences amongst the different factions that comprise the movement. However these disagreements usually don't show up at the time of negotiating with the government, in these circumstances they appear as a cohesive group.

As the movement grew bigger and the demands started to proliferate, the government implemented an aid plan called '*Planes Trabajar*'<sup>11</sup>. It was a subsidy for the unemployed that was channelled through the local political representatives, consequently giving rise to partisan biases: those who were closer to the political leaders received subsidies, but the rest did not. This resulted in a confrontation with the central government that was said to be attempting to fracture the Movement by causing divisions around the subsidies. The *Piqueteros* did not bow to the attempt of division and demanded that the subsidies be channelled through their own organisations. It was clear that they were turning their back on the clientelistic attempts of the government to disband the Movement; however, the patron-client relations were transferred to the interior of the Movement. The *Planes Trabajar* became a weapon by which the leaders of the *Piqueteros* ensured certain political favours in exchange for the granting of the *Planes* as well as massive attendance to

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<sup>11</sup> Working Plans. According to Burdman (s/d) the first distribution of *Planes Trabajar* among the *Piqueteros* occurred after a month of road blockades and demonstration that took place in Cutral-Co, province of Neuquén and later in Tartagal, Province of Salta during May and June 1997.

the *piquetes* (in their quest for personal political escalation). The *Piqueteros'* action does not only include road blockades; more recently they have also created a network of subsistence generating activities that includes school support, food provision in community dining halls, baking and brick manufacturing units, recycled clothes exchange etc. This network of subsistence also gives support to the unemployed to help them solve bureaucratic problems of accessibility to the government subsidies<sup>12</sup>. The network is in turn financed through a contribution paid by each unemployed out of the government subsidies that s/he receives.

As the *Piqueteros* became politically more consistent and internally organised, and as their demands started to be considered more seriously by the government, other political actors developed an interest in being associated with them. The government that had previously criminalised them, now invited the leaders of the Movement to negotiate with the high ranks, including the President and Labour Minister in the government's head offices. The different trade-union organisations as well as progressive political parties (many of which had previously disapproved of the *Piqueteros'* methods) seeing that the Movement was becoming strong and was internally consistent, tried to become closer to them, arguing that both their struggles were alike. But the *Piqueteros* were not willing to be co-opted by parties and trade unions, all of which were considered to be part of the institutionalised political system that had dragged them all to impoverishment and exclusion. While these institutionalised political groups were increasingly delegitimised as part of the Argentinean political corrupt classes, the *Piqueteros* were realising that the political potential of their struggle, their strength and 'freshness' laid precisely in their detachment from traditional political structures. The incidents that occurred in the First National Congress of the Unemployed<sup>13</sup> (organised by the *Piqueteros*), where 2000 delegates from across the country participated, illustrate the refusal of the Movement to pact with the traditional political organisations. During the Congress, debate was open to the public and any person could sign up to talk; at some point an announcement was made that national members of Parliament from the Peronist<sup>14</sup> party as well as Hugo Moyano -leader of the main trade union organisation- were present and wanted to address the crowd. They were never allowed to talk; they were shouted at, booed, and had to leave the place (Vales 2001).

We can see that the *Piquetero* movement is essentially heterogeneous within. In fact, the different political factions (*bloques*) that compose it (i.e.: *Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC)*, *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA)*, *Bloque Piquetero*, *Coordinadora Anibal Verón*) disagree

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<sup>12</sup> The *Planes Trabajar* were changed to *Planes para Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* (Plans for unemployed heads of households), essentially a similar subsidy, during the Duhalde administration that took office in 2002.

<sup>13</sup> *Primer Congreso de Desocupados*, was celebrated in La Matanza district, Province of Buenos Aires on July 24 2001.

about important matters and their political agendas are divergent. Moreover, they are divided into groupings that respond to different names and interests. At the beginning, when the Movement was criminalised and ostracised, the *Piqueteros* tended to be partnered; although the differences already existed, they were minimised in favour of showing themselves as a bloc when confronting the outside. However, as the Movement became politically more powerful and the subsidies turned into weapons that could give access to significant amounts of resources, the internal divergences became more noticeable. Nonetheless, the unity and disagreement within the Movement seem to fluctuate according to external and internal circumstances. For instance, on June 26 2002, two young *Piqueteros*<sup>15</sup> that belonged to the *Coordinadora Anibal Veron*, one faction within the Movement, were savagely murdered by the repressive police forces during a *piquete*. At that moment all the *Piquetero* organisations came together to repudiate the brutal act. When threatened by 'the outside', the *Piqueteros* leave aside their internal factions and tend to become united as a group again. This oscillation illustrates the permanent changing nature of social movements as they undergo different circumstances; each signed by distinctive power configurations.

## V. The *Piquetero* Movement in the current crisis: Towards broadening the concept of Democracy

*Piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola ...*

*'Piquete' and pots<sup>16</sup>, the struggle is only one ... (Popular chant heard on the streets)*

The last months of 2001 and beginning of 2002 were crucial for Argentinean society. The De la Rúa government was ousted after months of recession and unemployment, corruption and ineptitude. The last component of the "exemplar neoliberal prototype" was crumbling to pieces. These events opened a window to new possibilities in the restructuring of the national economy but also in the reformulation of democracy, hegemony and citizenship. In this section I will look at how

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<sup>14</sup> The Peronist is a populist party that historically represented the working classes although its policies were always clientelistic.

<sup>15</sup> Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillan.

<sup>16</sup> The middle classes that went out to the streets massively in December 2001 were banging pots and pans (*cacerolas*) as a means of protest.

the *Piqueteros* reacted to this situation and how they incorporated themselves in the wider national struggle.

As from December 19<sup>th</sup> 2001, the political scenario in Argentina has incorporated social actors that were not organised as such before. The middle classes<sup>17</sup>, animated against the measures that locked their savings in the banks, without possibility of withdrawal; but also outraged with the political and economic system that ruined the country and their standard of living, joined the popular classes on the streets banging pots and pans. There were massive mobilisations all over the country, looting, rioting, *piquetes* and repression. The mobilisation didn't stop with the ousting of President De la Rúa, or with the change of five presidents in 12 days, popular assemblies multiplied in every neighbourhood of the main cities, people met every week to decide upon their future.

Now, not only the working classes and the unemployed were demonstrating against the model, people united forces against 'the system' and against the corrupt political class that allowed the debacle to happen. The main slogan is "*Que se vayan todos*", (All the politicians out), the proposals are not clear yet, but what is however clear is that a national solidarity movement is developing all along the country and that the project of a new nation is being debated. The current situation parallels Gramsci's proposal that the hegemonic construction requires "the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world" (cited in Dagnino 1998: 42). The *Piqueteros* that were feared and repulsed a couple of years ago are a crucial actor in the bigger movement that is being formed. "With the '*cacerolazo*'<sup>18</sup> the middle classes joined the struggle of the popular classes. The only thing that bonds them is that they are all victims of the same economic model" (Uranga and Aruguete 2002).

On the one hand, this unification has strengthened the fragmented causes (of the middle classes and the unemployed) and allowed them to become stronger under an 'umbrella' objective; leading to the possible de-articulation of an old -and eventual re-articulation of a new- hegemony. But on the other hand, such unity may be limited in the sense that the objectives and interests of the different social groups are very heterogeneous. Currently, in this critical situation, unity is possible but the question remains if it will be possible to maintain the concord once new rules of the game are set. The question remains open; the results will very much depend on how the new rules are set, by whom, and how the power relations between the actors that belong to the current

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<sup>17</sup> The Argentinean middle classes were inclined to demobilisation after the reign of terror imposed by the military dictatorships. With a few exceptions, the tendency was towards conformity and individualism.

<sup>18</sup> The act of going out banging pots and pans.

groupings are reconfigured in the new circumstances. Moreover, this can illustrate the permanent changing nature of social movements as they undergo different circumstances; each signed by distinctive power configurations.

*[T]he common people blinded by their desires (...) do not understand their own happiness –and in particular their good fortune in being governed by men who (...) understand their happiness better than they do. – That is how the technocrats think and that is their notion of democracy. And, not surprisingly, they do not understand it when the people, in whose name they claim to govern, have the supreme ingratitude to go into the streets and demonstrate against them. (Bourdieu 1998a)*

*First came the military terrorism, then the economic terrorism. Now people are talking about (...) the end of democracy. But no! It is the end of **this** form of democracy. (Argumedo in Uranga and Aruguete 2002)*

What becomes clear from the current crisis in Argentina is the fact that there is a crisis of representation. Citizens no longer feel represented either by the political and institutional system nor by the politicians that occupy positions of power within it. This is a strong criticism of a form of democracy that can only formally be given such name, but that is felt to be empty of meaning. It is in this sense that Argumedo points to a “questioning of a form of democracy and political representation” (Uranga and Aruguete 2002). She suggests that “what is in crisis is the political apparatuses in which politicians - that were elected to represent the voters - believe that their post is their own private property, allowing him/er to (...) obtain personal benefits out of it” (ibid) thus overlooking the electors that have put them in that place. Not surprisingly, therefore, what the horizontal forms of decision making of both the *Piqueteros* assemblies and the neighbourhood assemblies of the middle classes point to is the collapse of a form of representation. The self-convening of neighbours, *Piqueteros* and those whose savings were locked in the banks refers to direct forms of democracy, people form their own assemblies to discuss the matters that are important to them and need solution. The delegates have to respond to what electors decide; if they don't execute the mandate, they have to leave the post (ibid). This questioning of the forms of representation also implies a quest for the broadening of democracy, towards a more inclusive and truly representative democracy. Alvarez et al. suggest that “an alternative conception of citizenship (...) would view democratic struggles as encompassing a redefinition not only of the political system

but also of economic, social and cultural practices that might engender a democratic ordering for society as a *whole*" (Alvarez, Dagnino et al. 1998: 2)<sup>19</sup>.

The introduction of a neoliberal program and the consequent structural adjustment policies that implied the retraction of the state and its functions, introduced a transformation in the relationship between citizens and the state, thus affecting more generally the meaning of the category of citizenship within democracy. The massive unemployment, privatisations and retraction of the state from public service delivery contribute to unveil the limited meaning of democracy in the context of neoliberal policies, the "fiction of democracy as the arena where all citizens have equal rights before the law" (Oviedo 2002: 1). Some citizens (in this case the unemployed) are rendered invisible before the law and are atomised and fractured through unemployment. The shrinking state sets in motion the transformation of the meaning of citizen to that of client. The privatisation of public services modifies the status of citizens -as bearers of rights to access certain basic services and goods- to that of client – who holds right only in terms of what s/he pays (MTR 1999). This second version guarantees access and quality only to those who can pay for services, thus moving away of the meaning of 'public' as the collective.

In this sense Bourdieu stresses that "the return to the individual [as opposed to the collective] is (...) what makes it possible to 'blame the victim' -who [ends up being] entirely responsible for his or her own misfortune- and to preach the gospel of self-help [as opposed to state responsibility]" (Bourdieu 1998c: 7). Therefore I agree with Oviedo in that "the *Piquetero* movement, by organising those who are disorganised, acts as a brake to stop the attempts of (...) atomis[ing] the working class through unemployment"<sup>20</sup> (2002: 1). In other words, after having their status changed from citizens to individuals -with a personal, rather than collective relation to the state-, after being atomised and blamed of their own 'misfortune'; the *Piqueteros*, through their mobilisation, were able to become a collective force again. Moreover, I suggest following Alvarez et al. that the *Piquetero* movement (and the dissatisfied middle classes that recently joined in the fight) are "struggl[ing] to resignify the very meaning of received notions of citizenship, political representation and participation, and as a consequence, democracy itself" (1998: 2).

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<sup>19</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> My translation

## VI. Conclusion:

Throughout this paper I have tried to illustrate the changes that the *Piquetero* movement has gone through in a context of growing social and economic exclusion. In terms of the Movement's achievements, I would argue that a revolutionary change has taken place at the micro-level. The unemployed men and women of the entire country have managed to organise against the pervasive individualism introduced by the neoliberal politics. Confronted with fragmentation, invisibilisation and criminalisation, they have built a group identity, achieved visibility and managed unity around common goals.

It is clear from the trajectory of the *Piquetero* movement and from how they acquired legitimacy and room for negotiation and manoeuvre, that power (in a Foucauldian sense) cannot only be understood as "blobs of institutional power located just at the institutional level" that simply dominate and manipulate social subjects (García Canclini cited in Dagnino 1998: 11). Rather than a "mechanism for imposing order from the top downward, [power is a complex] social relation diffused through all spaces" (ibid.). However, Garcia Canclini warns us about the fact that "a decentred view of power and politics (...) must not lead us to ignore how power sediments itself and concentrates itself in social institutions and agents" (ibid.).

Although the *Piqueteros* gained power and acquired some agency and space for negotiation, the dominant structures of exploitation in which social relations occur are pervasive. In this sense, the limitations encountered by the Movement are enveloping as well, this is illustrated by the fact that even though five presidents were changed through the collective action of the masses, the neo-liberal model seems far from dying. The IMF is already imposing new conditionalities that the Argentinean government will have to accept before some new loans will be delivered; those conditionalities are, of course, more adjustment and reaching the fiscal equilibrium.

Therefore, on the one hand, the challenging of hierarchies and the demand for rights will not, in themselves, change the material distribution of wealth and the structural constraints that position subjects in a field of forces. However, on the other hand –and as we have seen through the *Piqueteros*- they can, and indeed do, challenge the conception of democracy and social exclusion that the society puts forward. In this sense, "discourses and practices of social movements might destabilise and thereby –at least partially- transform the dominant discourses and exclusionary practices of actually existing Latin American democracy" (Alvarez, Dagnino et al. 1998: 11). By doing this, the very "symbolic order which is the condition of the functioning of the economic order" (Bourdieu 1998b: 82) might start to crack down. Dagnino calls our attention to the



fact that "it is in the terrain of culture [or what Bourdieu calls the symbolic] that *active consent*, the specific mode of operation of hegemony (and that distinguishes hegemony from domination) is (...) produced." (Dagnino 1998: 37) It is this *active consent* that the *Piqueteros* and middle classes are fiercely unmasking; and that might be the first step to subvert a whole hegemonic order, the power relations amongst social, economic and political forces.

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