

Patrons and clients, or redistribution between equals? A review of political clientelism and its contextual transpositions*

Patrões e clientes ou redistribuição entre iguais? Uma revisão sobre clientelismo político e suas transposições contextuais

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the ways in which a candidate running for city councilor and representing the Peronist party organized the distribution of public resources (social plans and food programs) in La Matanza, a district in the west of Greater Buenos Aires, during the 2005 election campaign. The first part describes the personal trajectory of the candidate and some of the neighbors dependent on him. The second part examines how this leading figure rallied election campaigners and the meaning invested in their behaviors during a series of events including the opening of a 'soup kitchen' and the election day itself. The text also identifies the constraints imposed on these actors and the implications associated with their compliance (or failure to comply) with mutual obligations. This analysis enables a clearer understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the processes regulating vast political circuits in which State resources are redistributed in exchange for votes on the outskirts of Greater Buenos Aires.

Key words: Clientelism, Politics, Campaigners, Neighbors, Visit, La Matanza

RESUMO

Este artigo enfoca o modo como um candidato a vereador pelo partido peronista exercia a distribuição de recursos públicos (planos sociais e alimentos) no município de La Matanza, a oeste da Grande Buenos Aires, durante a campanha legislativa de 2005. A primeira parte apresenta a trajetória do candidato e de alguns dos vizinhos que dele dependiam. A segunda parte examina o modo como o protagonista convocava a um ato político e os sentidos das condutas dos atores na sucessão de eventos entre os quais se contavam a abertura de um restaurante comunitário e o dia das eleições. Identificam-se também as coerções exercidas sobre eles e as implicações em relação ao cumprimento ou descumprimento das obrigações recíprocas. A análise permite uma melhor

compreensão da dinâmica e da complexidade dos processos que regem extensos circuitos de redistribuição nos quais os recursos do Estado são concedidos em troca de votos na periferia urbana da Grande Buenos Aires.

Palavras-chave: Clientelismo, Política, *Puntero*, Vizinho, Visita, La Matanza.

Introduction

A Few days after the election of Cristina Fernández as president of Argentina in November 2007, I paid a visit to Rubén,¹ a Peronist city councilman in the municipality of La Matanza, located in the western portion of the Buenos Aires Greater Metropolitan area. My first contact with Rubén had been in early 2005, when I arrived in Santa Rita, the *villa*² where he lived with his wife, ten children and three grandchildren. Rubén and his family were my hosts for seven long months during which I developed my field work in that neighborhood and which also coincided with the October 2005 electoral campaigns, in which Rubén was a candidate. The offer of an elected position had been made by Balestrini, Rubén's political boss and the city's mayor, then also a candidate for a position as a federal deputy. At that time, Cristina Fernández was a senatorial candidate for the province of Buenos Aires.

I had said goodbye to Rubén and his wife on election day. My later visit was more informal. I wanted to congratulate him on his victory, see how he was doing in “exercising his functions” and talk to him about how my work had advanced. In the new scenario in which we reunited, happy to be seeing each other once again, Rubén, told me something he knew would be of great interest to me: “On October 3rd, there bad storm here. During the morning, it only rained a little bit and we thought our roofs had been saved, but later in the afternoon, it started coming down hard. Everything went flying off and we had to go house to house afterwards... You should have been here...”

He then showed me a notebook in which people had been listed from one to 662. There he had jotted down names, I.D. numbers, address and finally, at the end of each line, a “yes” or a “no”. I looked at the notebook, a bit stupefied by the large number of people marked with “yes”. Rubén then said:

You're seeing the “yeses” and “nos”: that means whether or not the people voted, because I carried a ballot to each of them and made sure everything was in order. The ones who said “no” live in the capital and are *punteros*^{*1} who I took to the capital to prepare their documents. But what happened...? Many people don't like me, so on this page here [indicating a table] I only made visits to three or four of them, or Nina and her did [indicating Sara, his secretary, who was participating in the conversation]....

Then Sandra interrupted and asked me: “So do you see how it is now?” With a few words and gestures, Rubén and his secretary were revealing to me that which I had tried to uncover during my long stay in Santa Rita: the manner in which a Peronist public servant administered public resources, especially social plans (subsidies for the unemployed), metal sheets^{*2} and food during electoral campaigns.

Rubén's report was quite revealing regarding certain aspects of how resources are redistributed in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. People are visited by several different distributors who offer them resources in exchange for their vote. At the same time, immaterial aspects like affection and personal affinity were essential to this process and should be present in as one goes door to door amongst one's neighbors offering them, say, metal sheets in exchange for votes.

In general, the practices revealed in this circuit are labeled by politicians, analysts and the press as “clientelism”. This term is generally not used in any analytic sense, but rather as a pejorative descriptor or accusation used to disqualify these practices as “holdovers from the past”.

The use of this term is connected to an interpretative line of social research which deals with social phenomena understood to be “patronage” and “clientelism”, however. These concepts refer to a particular type of relationship between people who occupy unequal status, prestige and power positions in which there is a circulation and exchange of (im)material goods between “patrons” and their “clients” (Schmidt *et alli* 1977; Gellner *et alli* 1977).

However, as Bezerra has already pointed out (1999:14-15), part of the classical political science literature regarding these phenomena (which seems to focus on the material side of these exchanges) seems to leave out such phenomena as favors, boons and tips. Because of this, political scientists tend to see “clientelism” as a category that permits them to identify personal relationships that are embedded within political institutions. Above all else, they focus on the notion that public benefits are exchanged for votes and political support (Diniz 1982; Schwartzman 1982). In this same line of work, we can also cite part of the Argentinean literature which appeals to “clientelism” in order to explain diverse aspects of a national movement that was transformed into a political party: Peronism.

This phenomenon reaches back to the 1940s and is centered upon the figure of the military leader Juan Perón. It has a particularly precise birth date, in fact: October 17th, 1945. On that day, large scale social mobilization involving the workers from the periphery of Buenos Aires led to a huge demonstration in the center of city calling for the release of their leader, who was then imprisoned on Martín García island. Perón had accumulated the positions of Labor Secretary, War Secretary and Vice-President. In other words, he became the strong man of a regime that was persecuted by the opposition. The demonstrations marked a turning point in Argentinean history and elections were duly called for which elevated Perón to the position of President of Argentina between 1946 and 1955 and, later, between 1973 until his death in 1974. Perón’s governments were characterized by giving pride of place to the working class, promoting full employment and fomenting national industry, as well as increasing workers’ rights to include such things as payment of salaries during vacation, Christmas bonuses, and maternity leave, among others.³ These policies were bitterly opposed on one hand, but also provoked a rare unanimity on other occasions, to the point where the Peronist movement was labeled, successively, “revolutionary”, “a national experiment”, “a Bonapartist dictatorship”, and “popular authoritarianism” (Neiburg 1998:15).

In this sense, seen from the clientelist perspective at the remove of five decades, Peronism became understood as the way in which “politics” becomes inscribed among the poor populations, especially those of the Argentinean capital, with poor “clients” receiving such resources as social plans, food and metal sheets via networks controlled by Peronist managers labeled *punteros*, who demand votes in exchange (Auyero 2001).

According to this line of analysis, clientelism is the way Peronism conducts its politics among the poor. The three terms “clientism”, “politics” and “Peronism” are thus transformed into interchangeable categories. In more recent analyses, clientelism becomes the lens through which one analyzes the network of those people who compose candidate lists and occupy elected positions for the Peronist party in electoral processes in places like Misiones province. In the particular case which I am thinking of, the people studied are no longer treated as inhabitants of poor neighborhoods, but as “militants”, “managers” and “candidates” in typically proselytizing scenarios, such as demonstrations featuring party speakers and candidate caravans (Soprano Manzo 2003). Approaching their object of study in this fashion obliged the author to pay less attention to the people who attended these events, who are understood to simply be “the clients” of one or another speaker and describes as “women, children and some humbly-dressed men... whose jobs were to tie balloons and hang banners and flags while they ate cookies and drank mate tea” (Soprano Manzo 2003:148).

As both Auyero (2001) and Soprano Manzo’s (2003) texts are ethnographies, they were inspired in classical anthropological texts which analyzed in particular the relationships between “patrons” and “clients” in the context of rural Africa (Schmidt *et alii* 1977). In other words, they are texts that analyze the dynamics which occur between people who are situated at opposite ends of the social scale from one another and in which the balance of power was heavily weighted in favor

of the powerful. In this manner, the literature dealt with the ties which united land-owners and peasants or cattle rustlers, or members of opposing castes such as the nobility, warriors and slaves – all these differences being reinforced by cultural aspects such as different languages, religions and dialects (Cohen 1977; Foltz 1977). In this sort of situation, it was the patrons' obligation to provide clients with aid and the clients were obliged to repay the patrons with work. It was the sort of analysis in which non-economic aspects, such as favors, explained an extremely economic relationship: work.

Summing up, then, if we were to look at the classical analytical schemes which have been used to understand clientelism in the social sciences, we see the following sequence being displayed: “patron”, “client”, “work”, “aid” and “vote. This is not a simple summing up of equivalent terms, however, whose order does not result in changes to the result or product. To the contrary: by promoting the obtaining of elected positions, the vote can, given the right context, introduce serious alterations in the circuits of exchanged favors and aid in function of debts contracted and the possibility of the cancelation of these debts.

This is an aspect of clientelism that has been meticulously analyzed by Heredia (1996) with regards to rural communities in Brazil, where politics is perceived as external to the community and linked to elections. In order to better comprehend the notion of the externality of politics, Heredia starts by looking at what the community considers to be work,⁴ a concept which brings “patrons” and “clients” together. For the rural workers of the sugar mills, the notion of work is linked to the participation of each member of the domestic group in activities on the domestic lot which surrounds the house. The father executes and orders activities on the lot in which the mother and children participate. The activities of the women and children, however, are not considered to be “work” but rather “help”. This same term – “help” – is used to designate the favors that politicians give during election time, such as the concession of a job in the postal system or city hall, or the furnishing of documents, among other things. This meaning of “help”, however, has other implications according to the author. And it's precisely here that “the vote” appears as a protagonist, introducing modifications. Like the help provided by family members, the help of politicians must be retributed in order to assure the continuity of the relationship. The help of the women and children are retributed with the work of the head of household and thus does not cancel out the debt the other family members have with the man who sustains them. In the case of help given by a politician, Heredia reports a significant difference. Although the vote allows the help to be paid back, it does not establish a relationship of equality such as the one between associates who exchange goods of the same type.

In this sense, the vote appears to be a coin of exchange which makes possible a shift from one circuit of exchange to another; from the circuit of reciprocal exchanges between social equals to that of “political clientelism”, in which the “client” is maintained in permanent debt to his “patron” (Heredia, 1996: 64). Consequently, the vote introduces inequality. For this reason, the community is also reluctant to put forth its own candidates, given that calling someone a politician is an invitation to invite them to stand out from the community. This means that the community must bring in “politics”, which is understood to be outside of it and which introduces inequality among equals.

A person who is elected automatically becomes an outsider. In other words she becomes lost to the community. The fact that a person votes for a relative or neighbor can be seen as a moment of relationship which unites the two, but also as a retribution for favors past via the vote – and such retribution via votes always means something more. After all, he who gives his vote to a neighbor contributes not only to situating them at a higher social level, but also indicates that the balance in the relationship which was hitherto maintained will no longer be so (Heredia, 1996: 68).

Summing up, the vote, seen as a good in the clientelist network, introduces inequality in a world of equals, an aspect which the ethnographies of Peronism do not touch upon. Do these networks in the metropolitan region and inner Argentina link Peronist donors with communities as actors which occupy extremely different positions on the social scale, or are they made up of people implanted in a community of equals, with few differences between person and another? Up to now, all we know is that the “clients” of the Peronist candidates are “humbly dressed men and women”.

We need to know who these people are, how and why they were convoked to participate in the event and also how participation in these sorts of events is inscribed in their quotidian lives.

Recent ethnographies show that the people who participate in the distribution of resources, either through Peronist party donors linked to the city government or the leaders of the *piqueteiro* movements, describe their involvement in transitory terms. They say that they “are (*estar*) with so-and-so” or they “are (*estar*) with the *piqueteiros*” (Quirpós, 2006). These people thus do not recognize themselves as members of a “clientele” of a given “boss” – they see themselves as without any links at all, working in a temporary or circumstantial capacity for a movement or political party. Thus, one of the key terms of this relationship (client) is shown to not be pertinent to the understanding of a universe created by the redistribution of resources in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region. These people were not “clients of...”, they were “with”, completely challenging the argumentative axis of the ethnographies dealing with Peronism.

Now, knowing what we now know happens with one of the agents of the “clientelist” relationship, what about the “bosses” or “patrons”? Do those who distribute the resources see themselves in this light? How do their neighbors understand the fact that they've now become candidates? Does candidacy introduce hierarchical differences that are so extreme that the candidates encounter resistance from their neighbors, as has been attested in rural Brazil? And, finally, what are the meanings that politics acquire for this community? More precisely, and working with the sequence of clientelist schemes, what are the meanings attributed to notions of work, vote and aid?

In order to answer these questions, I will briefly resume Rubén's life trajectory and, following that, I will identify his electors. I will then recount the first walk around the neighborhood that I took with him, when he introduced me to many of his neighbors. I will follow this up with my observations of a political demonstration and then comment on a visit which I paid with Nina to a community restaurant which had opened a month before the elections and where Nina was trying to enroll her children. Finally, I will discuss what happened on the Sunday of the legislative elections.

Life in Santa Rita

Rubén was 47 years old when I first met him in early 2005. He was born in Tucumán and came to the capital with his parents and nine brothers when he was still a child. Once in Buenos Aires, he moved through several of the city's *villas* before the government set his family up in Santa Rita. The move to the city meant the Rubén left behind his infancy, which was spent in the sugarcane fields of his province.

Santa Rita (or “Santa” as it's known to its residents) was a neighborhood constructed upon land given over by the State; property of the city government of Buenos Aires, even though the lots were located in the municipality of La Matanza.⁵ The community began in 1966, during the military regime of Onganía. It was constructed in order to “temporarily” shelter families that had been displaced from the capital's *villas*. According to Santa Rita's first inhabitants, in the beginning “all the houses were exactly alike”. Not much remains of that initial uniformity, however, because many of the residents have added on rooms as their families have grown and changed. A son marries, for example, and brings his wife back to the paternal residence, or someone decides to open up a small market in the front of their house. According to Rubén's last count, 662 families lived in Santa Rita in 2007. Water in the community was obtained from a municipal tank; electricity, however, was only obtained through clandestine taps. For this reason, the electric company tended to cut off the neighborhood from the grid for hours at a time.

Rubén has lived in Santa Rita since the neighborhood was founded, together with his wife Nina and his ten children in a house purchased from a neighbor who “left the neighborhood”. The house is located in front of his mother-in-law's residence. Rubén doesn't like to talk much about his life before he “entered politics”. He would only tell me that, in the beginning, politics consisted of “wonderful meetings with neighbors whom I've known all my life”, but that many of these

neighbors involved themselves in the *tomas* and moved to other places. The people involved themselves in occupying lands belonging to the nation⁶ or private property. The movement began in La Matanza in early 1986, with the goal of building houses in a neighborhood that respected the lot dimensions of ten by thirty meter and, in this way, distinguish themselves from the *villas*, where houses sprawl all over, often built right on top of each other. Rubén's life began to change in 1989, when Albert Balestrini took over the parliamentary secretariat in the Chamber of Deputies and asked Rubén's friend Gabriel to “get people together” in La Matanza in order to form a new group.

According to Rubén, Balestrini initially didn't promise anything. It was only necessary to “sweat a little” by convoking “neighborhood meetings”, arrange bus transport and take everyone to the party demonstrations and also to the polls. These meetings, however, helped Balestrini's career to rise meteorically. In 1991, he was elected federal deputy and promised to repay Rubén with a job in congress. According to our protagonist, however, “I'd be stuck there in Congress. I said, 'No, I will go with you'... and from then on, wherever Balestrini went, I went too.”

Rubén thus followed his “boss” into the provincial senate from 1995 to 1999 and then assumed a permanent position on the La Matanza payroll when Balestrini was elected mayor for the first time. For this reason, Rubén calls himself “one of Alberto Balestrini's first soldiers, because I've been with him ever since he was a humble secretary in Congress”. Gabriel, however, was able to abandon his post and continue on in the palace until he was able to situate himself as a Peronist city councilman from 1999 to 2003, shortly thereafter being rewarded with a secretarial post in a municipal organ. It was Gabriel who would tell Rubén when meetings were happening, what nights the streets needed to be painted, or any other news which he felt needed to be communicated to Balestrini.

During the 2005 legislative elections, it became Rubén's turn to occupy an elected position. He thus became a member of the Victory Front's candidate list, which had Balestrini as its candidate for national deputy. During this period, Rubén administered almost all the state resources received by Santa Rita. He was the man who controlled the confection of the socioeconomic reports that allowed his neighbors to gain a monthly stipend of market merchandise. In 2002, he also controlled some 80 people in Santa Rita and other neighborhoods who were enlisted in the “Heads of Households” program,⁷ a subsidy for the unemployed, where the subsidized men would work in community projects in exchange for their payments.

In order to organize these tasks, Rubén and Nina formed two groups. One was made up mostly of men and would clean schools, roads and hospitals. The second, directed by Nina, dealt with “handiwork” and mostly made napkin holders, dolls and other domestic products which would then be sold. Both groups would sign the attendance book at the Santa Rita Club, located in front of the community. It was there that Rubén also installed a soup kitchen a bit before the election, via a contract signed with the city's Social Action secretariat. Nina has lived in Santa Rita since she was four years old, when she arrived from the province of San Juan together with her family. She also accompanied Rubén in his diverse tasks. She was the one who controlled the 40 *manzanas* ⁸ who worked in the neighborhood, distributing the Life Plan's milk and dried goods to children under six. Via a contract with the Social Action Secretariat of La Matanza, Nina was also in charge of the Families Plan's operations which paid out benefit checks to six thousand people in the community.⁹ This was a per-child subsidy paid out every 90 days and, for this reason, labeled the “three month plan” by the residents.

During my first days in Santa Rita, I asked Rubén to take me around the neighborhood in order to get to know some of its residents. He thought a bit and said: “Hmmmm... Are you interested in meeting a woman with ten kids who's really in a jam?” I said he could choose the people, so he said “Let's go back there to Josefina's house...” Once there, Rubén introduced me to Josefina and asked her to talk a bit about “the neighborhood” and other, related things. Immediately, she asked me to come in and begged my pardon for the state of her house. We sat down at her table, which was still covered with the plates from her younger children's lunch.

Josefina was then 35 years old. She was married and had 11 children, but one of them had died a year ago due to respiratory difficulties. She also had one grandchild. Seven of Josefina's ten

surviving children were at home that day. They stared at me in alarm while I conversed with their mother around the dinner table. Josefina told me that she was a maid and that her husband was currently unemployed but sometimes did *changas**3 in the construction industry. She also told me that Rubén had signed her up in the Head of Households' Plan, as she had asked, because she promised that she “wouldn't fail him”. A little while later, Rubén “advised him that he had gone out to make payments” and could thus indicate a job for her in a school in Puerta del Sol a *villa* some 700 meters away from Santa Rita. Josefina was grateful to Rubén and respected him, calling him “Don Rubén” (Mr. Rubén). She referred to Rubén in this way when she told me that one day she asked him to “please” transfer her to school 47, which was situated at the entrance of Santa Rita, nearer her home. Rubén, “who always helps me out”, agreed to her request.

As we can see, Josefina wasn't a member of the handiwork group: she worked in the group charged with cleaning public property. As Rubén would comment, later on, Josefina was “one of the few who worked” because, at that school, they let the kids take home leftovers for lunch so that they'd have food for dinner. Josefina received monthly supplies from the city, as well as Life Plan milk for her children, which was passed along to her by a *manzanera* from her own *tira* (a term used to designate the narrow corridors between residences in the shantytown”).

Before I left that afternoon, Josefina showed me the “second hand” washing machine that she had bought on the day she received her Plan money. She had paid 50 pesos for it and with the remaining hundred had paid off her bill in a local store where she bought “on the cuff”. According to Josefina, the Plan money “didn't last a minute”. She said goodbye to me and very graciously accompanied us in the direction of Rubén's house. We met Rubén after walking less than 100 meters however. As soon as he caught up to me, he started heading back to his house, but he suddenly stopped, as if he were remembering something. Then he waved to me and said “No, come over here. We'll go to Eugenia's house”.

Eugenia's house was located a few meters away from Josefina's, in the same corridor. Rubén had warned me that a few months ago, one of Eugenia's son's had been killed by a gang of kids from “way back in there” and that our visit would be necessarily quick because “when she remembers her son, she breaks down and starts crying”. When we arrived, Rubén clapped his hands and Eugenia quickly came out to meet him. She was a woman of some 45 years, brown-skinned with long hair. Rapidly, Rubén explained why I was there and she thus invited me into her home.

When we were alone in her kitchen, Eugenia invited me to sit down at the table while she heated water so that we could have some mate tea. She was a widow and received a pension from her dead husband. Eugenia had four living children, two boys whom were in jail and two girls who still lived with her. Her fifth son, of course, was recently deceased. When she began to talk about him, her voice would change completely and her eyes would immediately fill up with tears. The she told me: “Every time I have go back there, 'in the deep back', I see the people who killed my son with my own eyes and every time they see me, they turn their eyes away. Shameless!”

As she dried her tears, Eugenia told me: “Aside from that, when he died I had no place to take his body for a wake. Thank God, Rubén loaned me the club so that I could have his wake there. My family is very big and everybody wouldn't have been able to fit in my house.”

Eugenia's words moved me deeply and I didn't know how to console her. She continued talking, however, somewhat resigned: “I always wanted to leave Santa... But here I am.” Facing so much pain, the only thing I could ask her is if she had friends in Santa Rita or people she could turn to when she felt depressed. Slowly, Eugenia's faced formed a tentative smile, as if my question had allowed her discover whom she could trust, in spite of the pain she felt. “Yes, yes...” she told me, relieved. “I have friends. Right here out front,” she said, indicating the front window of her house. “There's Fernanda. Do you want to meet her?”

“Yes,” I responded, without hesitation.

Before we left her house, however, Eugenia said something which anticipated what would, moments later, occur in Fernanda's house: “Well, look, seeing as how Rubén's involved in politics, a lot of people don't like him, but... Let's go?”

We left the house and crossed the corridor. Fernanda's house was built right up next to Josefina's. Eugenia called to her friend from the gate and Fernanda soon appeared: a short, stout woman with short blond hair who opened the door to let us in. We had barely set foot over the threshold when Eugenia introduced me to her friend as a young lady who was studying Santa Rita for a university in Brazil. I was surprised to find a wheelchair in the middle of the living room, which contained Juan, Fernanda's 11 year old and youngest son. Fernanda was 31 and a widow. Aside from her disabled son, who had recently undergone an operation, she had an adolescent daughter in high school.

Fernanda immediately offered us mate tea. She introduced me to her mother, who was visiting, and turned on the T.V. She then switched the T.V. Channel until she found an image of Luís D'elia, the president of the Federation of Land and Goods (Federação de Terras e Vivendas), the most important *piqueteiro* organization in town. Fernanda then said: "Hmmm... I'll leave it here because I was with them." Turning to me, she added: "Because I was once a *piqueteira*." ¹⁰

I was stunned that Fernanda identified herself with the movement because she was the first person whom I had met, since I had come to La Matanza, who did so. And La Matanza was, of course, the first city in the greater Buenos Aires metropolitan region where the first and most long-standing pickets had occurred.

Fernanda's self-identification awoke my curiosity and I started to anxiously interrogate her about how she had gotten involved with the *piqueteiros* in a neighborhood where most relief resources seemed to be controlled by people who had close ties to the municipal government and the Peronist party. Fernanda's story contained important information regarding the organization of the pickets and also regarding Rubén's trajectory. This is what she said when I asked her about her contacts with the *piqueteiros*: "Around 1997, '98, I began to hang out with the 'yellowcoats' because a friend of my mother's had said that, seeing as how I was a widow with a sick son, I should get involved in the mas struggle, go to the pickets and fight for a [social] plan".

The expression "yellowcoats" refers to the clothing used by the beneficiaries of the Work and Bonairense Plans, launched in 1996. These people would sweep and clean the streets and, for this reason, had become a sort of icon or visible mark of those who had access to a plan. With this reference, Fernanda showed her relative age with regards to her participation in the pickets and in certain modalities of gaining employment plans. That one "should go" to the pickets and "fight" for a plan: this was the way that Fernanda got her Work Plan after participating in several highway blockades. She then got a Head of Household plan do to Miguel, the movement's leader.

Among her first activities in the pickets, Fernanda took part in controlling the attendance of those people who'd go "work in construction" and also to the assemblies in the El Ingenio neighborhood, where the pickets were planned. In order to "help" the leadership, as an entry point to her work in construction, Fernanda at one point involved herself in taking down the names of those who went out to block the highways. She'd make up the lists herself, in two axis forms, placing the names of the people along one axis and the days of the week along another. In this way, she was able to tell who was and who was not present at any given day of the picket. Fernanda would then turn these lists over to the leadership, where they'd then be converted into an important instrument for the distribution of new plans.

However, Fernanda would also apply her own sanctions "because the pickets are encampments with tents and bonfires; if something gets burned, it needs to be cleaned up; and that's why... if someone were to leave early, when they returned, I'd make them sweep the whole roadway.." Fernanda then continued:

You get hungry and cold out in the pickets. I slept in these plastic chairs, here [indicates a pile of plastic chairs next to the dining table] which I took along with me together with blankets... Aside from that, we'd eat what we could get from the stores, which hated us and... also at that time I hardly ever was with my children... I left them with my mother.

For Fernanda, taking roll at the pickets was the sacrifice she made in order to get her plan and the control over that attendance was probably a way of making her own space within the

movement's organization. She herself said, resigned, that this task obliged her to be “one of the few people the leaders would listen to”. In other words, she knew that she was being employed to keep control over the behavior of her comrades, but accepted this, even so. Fernanda also told me that afternoon that her leader had died some years ago and now she herself was responsible for going down to the Ministry of Labor and turn in her “papers” in order to maintain her plan.

After responding to all of my questions, Fernanda asked me one of her own: “How did you come to be here in Santa Rita?” Eugenia quickly responded for me: “Rubén introduced me to her”. Fernanda responded, completely disillusioned, “Ooooooh...” I quickly reassured her that our conversation would remain strictly between us and that Rubén would not even know that I had talked to her. Afterward, when I felt more at home in my network of relations in the neighborhood, I dared to ask Fernanda about another of my informants: “Given that you live here in Santa, why did you participate in the pickets and not go to Rubén for a plan?” She responded with a smirk: “Because back then, Rubén didn't have anything... He was hauling around cooking gas bottles for a living”. Fernanda's answer shows in greater detail what Rubén did before he got into politics, a time he hated to talk about and about which Fernanda provided some details: she was working with the pickets in '97/'98 “when Ruben didn't have anything”.

In this way, via Fernanda's recollections, I learned that for many years Rubén had to alternate “politics” with other activities, such as the sale of kitchen gas. His full-time dedication to politics probably came about in 1999, when Balestrina was elected mayor of La Matanza and Rubén was put, full time, on the municipal payroll.

Attendance at a political demonstration

The Santa Rita Club is a large brick warehouse with a roof made out of metal plates, located at the entrance of the neighborhood. Outside, there's a small football field where the neighborhood children gather to play. It functions as the seat of the neighborhood junta Rubén presides over. “El Tucu” keeps watch over the installations.

“El Tucu” is a sixty year old man who's totally trusted by Rubén. He was charged with the club's tools and also Rubén's beloved blue pickup truck. El Tucu also took care of the “cleaning” and “handiwork” attendance lists, which the beneficiaries of the Chiefs of Household Plan had to sign. One morning in July, 2005, as each person came into to sign their list, El Tucu advised every beneficiary: “Friday, at 10AM, there's going to be a demonstration. Come here, because Kirchner will be here.” He passed the same message on to one and all.

Rubén stayed at the club all that morning, but did not participate in convoking the beneficiaries. He hovered about the place,. Apparently unconcerned, working on his pickup. Once, when Tucu abandoned his post at the Club's entrance in order to renew the water in his mate tea, a new person came into the club. Rubén, from below his pick-up, called the watchman swiftly back to his post: “Tuuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

On the day of the demonstration, two micro-buses were sparked early on at the club entrance; the invitees started to slowly arrive. Rubén and Nina went back and forth between the club and their house, some 100 meters away, in order to advise their oldest daughter on what she should do while the two were away. As usual, Tucu was the one who advised people on how the attendance lists were to be applied on this day, saying: “They're only going to sign the list inside the bus, because if they don't it'll be like the other times: people will come in, sign the list and hurry home”.

Among those present was Sandra, who Nina had introduced me to as the future manager of the soup kitchen. Some women came up to Nina in order to personally explain why they couldn't get to the demonstration, to which Nina responded: “Don't worry. Come back on Monday and sign the list.” The men kept themselves apart, telling jokes, until Sandra turned to Nina and said: “Your husband says it's time to go.”

There were two micro-buses: one for the men and another for the women. Rubén had to show the drivers how to get to the demonstration site, often ordering them to stop so that other buses from other groups could catch up. He'd also switch from one vehicle to the other during the trip.

There were only two speakers at the event: Balestrini, who was the host, and Argentinean president Kirchner. Before setting off for home, Nina asked the women if they didn't want to meet the First Lady, Cristina. All accepted with pleasure and, following the meeting, we wended our way back to the micro-bus that would take us home to Santa Rita. When we arrived, Nina counted off the women (and a few men) and asked them to sign their attendance on a piece of paper which she handed them. We then got into the vehicle and started home. We drove in the direction of the highway and Rubén, now much calmer, sat in the middle of the bus. Bit by bit, people came up to him to talk. This seemed to be sort of an implicit rule of a game known to all: showing up at the demonstration was the time when one could personally talk to Rubén. Many came up. When we arrived at the club, an elderly lady who talked to Nina during the trip stayed back, shyly looking at Rubén until Nina finally said “Go on, ask him now!”

That afternoon, I said goodbye to Nina and Rubén and walked back to the bus-stop to catch a bus back to Buenos Aires. Along the way, I met Josefina, the first resident of Santa Rita whom I had met through Rubén. She came up running and a bit agitated. She was surprised to see me and asked, anxiously, if I had gone to the demonstration and how many people had been there. I said that there had been some 20 people in the two micro-buses, two which Josefina replied: “That's nothing, what with all the people Don Ruben has on the lists...” She then asked, worriedly, “Do you think Don Rubén was angry with me? Today there were giving out birth-control pills for a Plan a long ways from here,” she explained. “I already have ten and don't want any more, but anyhow, I couldn't make it... I'm going to go talk to Don Rubén”.

The soup kitchen opens

About a month later, in early September, Nina finally had gotten together everything she needed to open up the soup kitchen in the Santa Rita Club. She asked Tucu to set up a meeting with the women from the handiwork group and also hung some posters on the walls describing how one could sign up for the kitchen: “To sign up for the community soup kitchen, seek out the municipal delegates with your children's documents in hand”. Another poster said, “Food can only be delivered to those with extreme necessity, such as a medically-proven disease, disablement, or the elderly with transportation difficulties. Nina was insistent at the meeting. When she walked across the neighborhood with some of the women, she declared in no uncertain terms: “You need to come work in the soup kitchen or you won't receive your benefits”. Her categorical insistence was probably due to the fact that she needed to cover all posts in the kitchen: food preparation, child-and elderly care and cleaning. There was also another motive: due to some of Nina's jobs with the Social action Secretariat, such as the organization of payments to the beneficiaries of the Families Plan, the handiwork group was currently inactive. Something needed to be done to get it moving again.

In order to announce the opening and sign up the children, Nina had several options aside from postering the Club. She also put out an announcement on the neighborhood's FM radio station. She also used, however, Rubén's favorite tactic and went door to door, campaigning for the kitchen. One morning when I was with her and Sandra, I accompanied her on her journeys. Sandra had her own list of places to visit, so Nina and I went together, moving through the neighborhood's corridors.

Our first visit was to a house located some 70 meters away from Nina and Rubén's. There, a girl met us at the door. She was taking care of three younger boys. Nina asked her: “Do you want to sign the children up for the soup kitchen?”

“Yes,” the girl responded. “But I don't have any documents. They're my sister's children and she's locked up”.

“Well, I'll put down that the documents are being expedited,” said Nina. “What's the house number?”

“Uhhh... I don't really know,” the girl said. “We've only been here a little while.”

“OK, I'll put down 'corridor 30' and next week you can send them down to the Club.”

We left and went to visit other houses. Nina led us through several different places throughout the neighborhood, but finally we started towards the deep back and Josefina's house. Once we got there, Nina clapped her hands and Josefina came out to meet us and ask us to come inside. Neither of the two mentioned the Kirchner demonstration which took place a month earlier. Nina limited herself to asking for Josefina's children's documents so that they could be signed up for the soup kitchen. Josefina responded, a bit worried: “I don't have any documents but my own. I lost the ten [of the kids' documents] when I went to settle some problems in the capital”.

“Well,” said Nina. “I'll see if we can't get a new set from Social Action, for at least the youngest. They can't be without their documents. I'll put down that they are being expedited.”

Josefina thanked Nina and we left. Upon leaving, we passed the neighboring house where Fernanda lived with her two sons, but Nina didn't stop there. She went on to another neighbor's house, located nearer the neighborhood's main street. I noted that Nina didn't sign up Fernanda's son, who was disabled. I remembered when I went to visit her with Eugenia for the first time, the first thing I saw was Juan's wheelchair in the middle of the living room. I was even more surprised because, shortly before starting to go door-to-door, Nina had put up posters in the Club saying that the disabled were authorized to have food delivered to them. This was cast as a specific right (only disabled and the elderly could have food delivered); in other words as something which was granted to only a few people. Consequently, the fact that Nina didn't invite Fernanda to participate in the program signaled some degree of enmity or misunderstanding between the two, something which led to Fernanda not being called to receive resources, even though she met all of the requirements stipulated by the municipal Social Action Secretariat. Vice-versa: people were being invited to participate even though they didn't have all the formal and necessary prerequisites laid out by the secretariat. Even people who had not come to the political demonstration were being asked to send their kids to the soup kitchen.

Election day

Election Sunday of October 2005 saw the action transferred to the Santa Rita Basic Unit, located at the neighborhood's entrance, along the street where the principal bus lines ran. On that day, I saw all of the people that I had met during those long months I was in the neighborhood gather together. There were the “handiwork girls”, the cleaning men, the boys who helped Rubén with the nocturnal graffiti... Sandra wasn't at the Basic Unit because she was working as a poll observer in a school nearby. There was a festive climate, almost a communion, and also some tension. Some people arrived, saying, “There were no ballots at School 47... Lookout, because the opposition is coming!” Chávez, Rubén's old political comrade quickly took up this cry.

Nina, together with her two daughters, advised everyone who came by as to which school they should go vote at, aided by a computer which held the electoral data. She simultaneously ran the micro-buses that took the residents to the schools. She took special care to make sure that the buses stayed until 3:00PM, which was the deal her husband had cut with the drivers. Rubén, in turn, rode around in a car driven by one of his son-in-laws, verifying that there were enough ballots in the several area schools. He seemed tired and excited. His day had begun at 3AM, so that he could get all the preparations in order. It was no wonder: an event was occurring which would mark a further step in his political career: as a result of his work for over two decades with Alberto Balestrini, he would occupy a legislative position.

A little after 3:00PM, Josefina arrived at the Basic Unit, hand in hand with her two youngest daughters. I was surprised by how she looked: tired and half asleep. She looked like she had just gotten up. She went over to Nina to ask where she should vote and Nina, a bit irritated, responded “But Josefina, the last bus left at 3:00PM...” Josefina then asked, disconcerted, “Yes, but isn't the election supposed to go until six?”

“Yes,” responded Nina. “But we only had the micro-buses until three. Now you're going to have to catch a bus”.

“Ohhh,” said Josefina, worried. “But I don't have money for the bus.”

Nina didn't pay her any further attention, but turned to deal with some new neighbors who had arrived. She asked one of the lads if he could use his pick-up to take the late-comers to vote, because the nearest acceptable polling station was twenty minutes away from Santa Rita.

The visits: the personalized character of redistribution

A woman with ten children and a mother whose son had been murdered by a pointblank gunshot were the two neighbors Rubén first decided to introduce me to: I, an outsider, interested in getting to know the neighborhood where he had worked and lived for more than four decades. The way Rubén introduced me was the same way he used to distribute social benefit resources: by going house to house. These sorts of visits were a common practice among the political activists of the Peronist party when they try to convince people to vote their slate (Rosato 2003:75).

However, these visits revealed to me not only the relationships that Rubén maintained with his neighbors, but also the social properties of the community in general. The inhabitants of Santa Rita are a community of unemployed or underemployed people who are involved with such occupations as domestic work, street sales and the construction business.

The community depends for its reproduction, in large measure, upon the resources which the State gives it, intermediated in their distribution by Rubén. In this context, the concept of work is linked to carrying out communal tasks established by the several social plans and to appearance at political demonstrations. The same notion is also applied to the tasks carried out by the activists: convoking demonstrations, organizing transport, controlling attendance lists and visiting voters is likewise considered to be work. This does not even begin to touch on the formal jobs such activists obtain for themselves, often after decades of political work: political tasks were all referred to using the same category and referenced in terms of identity. In this way, a person who occupies a formal post as a city employee becomes “a municipal [worker].”

This was the career trajectory of Rubén, his friend Gabriel and Sandra, the secretary Rubén acquired when he became a city councilman. None of these people, however became outsiders in the community when they became “municipals”. Rubén continued to reside in Santa Rita and continued to undertake the same sorts of task that he done before becoming a candidate: largely speaking, house to house visits offering social resources.

“Politics” in Santa Rita thus cannot be seen as an external activity. It was, by contrast, an activity linked to the provision of State goods for the residents' welfare, said goods being distributed via Rubén's intermediation. In other words, we find here that notions of “work” and “politics” are intimately interlinked to the point where they become synonyms under certain circumstances. Both terms also allude to concrete tasks involved in resource redistribution. However, as we have seen, it was quite difficult for the residents to meet all the formal requirements that were supposedly necessary for them to receive State benefits, particularly with regards to showing proper documents and proving residency. For this reason, without favors and aid on the behalf of the distributors, the circuit of exchange would have been extremely fragile, with the residents at constant risk for loss of benefits. This, in turn, would have affected Rubén, who would have seen a precipitous drop in the number of voters whom he could mobilize in support of his candidate. In this situation, the “favors” permitted the maintenance of the residents to as active participation in the redistribution network. These created debts which could be repaid by votes. Here, however, we do not find that the circuit of reciprocity among equals becomes “political clientelism”, marked by a division of the circuit into “clients” and “patrons”. To the contrary: the fact that their neighbor has been elected city councilman was understood by many of the residents as a cause for celebration. For others, it was a cause for indifference, but not a situation to which they were inherently opposed.

It was clear that after his election, Rubén had more power. In other words, he had more resources to redistribute. For this reason, he did indeed rise in the local hierarchy, but not to the point where he stopped being seen as a resident of Santa Rita. He continued to live in the same house and undertake the same tasks which he had done prior to becoming a candidate.

Conclusions

The relationship between appears to be key in identifying members of circuits that redistribute public goods and in which votes are seen as a key object of exchange. In the case of Santa Rita, a community of largely un- and underemployed people which relies on the State for the resources necessary for its reproduction, concepts of work and politics are strictly interrelated. As we have seen, the inhabitants of this small neighborhood in the greater Buenos Aires metropolitan area alternated periods of unemployment with informal activities in the domestic work sector or as workers in construction or street sales. This situation affected both the regular residents of the neighborhood and the man who was principally charged with the distribution of social resources and who eventually ended up as a city councilman on the Peronist party ticket.

For this reason, the concepts of “client” and “patron” are not relevant for the analysis of the universe of redistribution in the urban periphery of Buenos Aires. What becomes relevant when we follow the trajectories of the people who we have dealt with here is the recognition of profound transformations which have taken place in the world of labor.

Rubén arrived in Buenos Aires from Tucumán in 1966, just when the military government began to eliminate the subsidies and quotas paid out to small sugarcane farmers. It was at this very moment that the sugar mill where Rubén’s father worked closed. Rubén’s formal education was precarious. He worked at several informal jobs, such as selling kitchen gas, until he “entered into politics” in the 1990s. A decade of political activism allowed him to achieve a formal job as a city worker and, later, to transform himself in a political candidate in his own right.

When we look at this story, we find it to be similar to that of the people who took part in the movement of October 17th, 1945: migrants from the interior of Argentina, recently arrived in the metropolis and transformed into a new working class. More precisely, formally unionized workers who, armed with the right to strike, went out into the streets to demand that their leader be freed. Rubén’s formalization as a worker would not come via industrial unionism, however, as occurred in the 1940s and ‘50s, but through the State sector, almost a half century later at the height of neo-liberalism as a reward for his loyal support of Balestrini. This was a situation which aided very few people at a time when unemployment appears to have been the rule. Rubén thus rose within a certain hierarchy in relationship to his neighbors, to whom he distributed resources and whom he convoked to appear at Peronist demonstrations. Even so, Rubén did not lose his status as a member of the Santa Rita community: he continued to be “Rubén” or “Don Rubén”, except now he was “involved in politics”.

At the same time, we must call attention to the fact that, in spite of the transformations which occurred in the politics of employment, Peronism continued to be a movement which the popular classes understood as speaking for them. Now, however, the Peronists did not compete with other political parties but with organizations of the unemployed who had the same task of distributing resources and convoking residents for political demonstrations in the pickets. New categories must thus be thought out in order to interpret a movement that is so complex that it began as the voice of the newly arrived workers from the interior and, 50 years later, can still mobilize the masses, albeit now the unemployed masses.

As we have seen, extrapolations of the concepts “patronage” and “clientelism” do not help us to understand a universe of neighbors united against unemployment, crime and poverty, which involve themselves in circuits of resource exchange and which link themselves to a given political party or social movement. The case of Santa Rita offers up elements for comprehending these circuits as a universe of equals, but also to recognize new the configurations which the concept of “work” acquires in a context which is defined, a priori, as “idleness”. This, in turn, becomes the

birthing place of a new leader: by following the routes of political activism and electoral politics and, through these, “political life”, Rubén manages to maintain a balance in his already established relationships with his neighbors.

Notes

* This article describes some points of my doctoral thesis, defended at PPGAS/Museu Nacional/UFRJ on March 9th, 2009, under the orientation of Professor Lygia Sigaud (*in memoriam*), my main interlocutor during the analysis and argumentation of the evidence that I present here. I would also like to thank Federico Neiburg, João Pacheco de Oliveira, Rosana Guber, Patrícia Vargas, Fortunato Mallimaci and the anonymous evaluator of *Revista Mana*, whose comments and criticisms permitted me to give new directions to my research.

1 In order to preserve their anonymity, I have altered the names of the people and places related here. I have maintained the names of public personages and the city where I undertook my research.

2 *Villa* is a pejorative term that is used in Argentina to designate squatter settlements containing populations that live precariously without Access to services such as water and electricity which, when it is available, is generally obtained through clandestine connections.

3 The literature on Peronism is exhaustive. A few of the most important authors are: Germani (1973); Murmis & Portantiero (1984); James (1990); Neiburg (1995, 1998); Plotkin (1995, 2007).

4 In an earlier work, the same author analyzed the family-based labor organization of Northeastern Brazil’s small-scale agricultural producers. See Heredia 1979.

5 The city of La Matanza has 320 km² and more than a million and a half inhabitants. 30% of its population does not have Access to basic necessities: it is the largest and poorest district of the Buenos Aires metropolitan region. Since Argentina’s redemocratization in 1983 up to today, it has been governed by the Peronist party. In the early 1990s, the highways in and around La Matanza became the scene of large mobilizations and “piquetes” (Pickets) organized by the territorial leaders of the *villas* and settlements, demanding the government take control of plans and food supplies. In this fashion, the *piqueteiro* movements became another way for the neighbors to obtain resources from the State, in frank conflict with the ways promoted by municipal agents.

6 In the mid-1980s, land occupations sprung up in several cities in the greater Buenos Aires metropolitan region. Groups of families took over both public and private lands in order to build houses on them and with the intent of creating neighborhoods with common spaces such as medical posts and soccer fields, for example. This was a voluntarist phenomenon and people referred to it by saying they were going to “go or enter by taking”. Lot limits were rigorously respected and this often resulted in conflicts which were, in some cases, mediated through gunfire. At the same time, the exigencies of squatting meant that these “bairros” were different from the *villas*, where houses were built one on top the other and urbanization was a remote possibility. For a detailed analysis of the occupations La Matanza, see Merklen 1991.

7 The Heads of Household Plan was a subsidy to the unemployed of 150 pesos each month, launched by Eduardo Duhalde’s interim government after an intense wave of protests were set off by the sacking of a chain of supermarkets in December 2001. The Plan insisted that the people who received the aid were to turn over their minor children to the government. They were then to undertake community services in exchange.

8 *Manzaneras* were the women who distributed the Milk and other articles released by the Plano Vida. The name was derived from the division of the city’s urban space, the *manzana* being where the supplies for the Plan were located. In this way, the *manzanera* distributed food to the children who lived near her house. For an ethnography of this plan and a description of these women, see Masson 2004.

9 The size of the benefits was calculated according to the number of household members. The first received 100 pesos and each additional member received 25 pesos, up to a total of five people. The people who received the benefits were not forced to undertake any community or other services in

exchange, but needed to prove that their children were going to school and were also duly vaccinated according to the national plan.

¹⁰ Quirós' ethnography (2006), by focusing on the people Who participated in the piquereiro movements instead of upon the movements themselves, demonstrated how such people defined their participation in different forms. Some called themselves "piqueteiros" while others referred to their participation with a phrase that marked its transitory nature: "I'm with the piqueteiros".

*¹ [T.N.] *Puntero* is a term commonly used to refer to local militants Who work for a candidate or a party, mobilizing bases and recruiting voters (in the U.S., the equivalent would be a Ward Boss). For more information, see Quirós 2009.

*² [T.N.] The material used to build houses in the so-called *villas*, or shantytowns.

*³ [T.N.] Temporary jobs.

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