

Perpetuating Social Movements amid Declining Opportunity: The Survival Strategies of Two Argentine Piquetero Groups

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Abstract: This article examines the recent behaviour in Argentina of two national protest groups of so-called “piqueteros” or picketers (impoverished unemployed individuals who used the blockage of strategic roads and bridges to force government concessions) that emerged politically in the build-up to the crisis of 2001-2002. Using theoretical concepts developed by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly in understanding social movements, the author analyses what he calls the “survival strategy” adopted by their leaders as the political opportunities that produced their initial growth gave way to a more hostile environment with the normalization of Argentine politics under the Kirchner administration. While the two piquetero groups studied differ considerably in terms of their politics and ideology, both ended up depending on the same traditional tactic of utilizing important government contacts to obtain the resources necessary for organizational maintenance, despite their nominal identity as radical protesters against the present political system. *Keywords:* piqueteros, social movements, clientelism, survival strategy, political opportunity structures.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, successful efforts were made to mobilize parts of the growing body of the impoverished unemployed in Argentina in non-traditional protests against various government bodies there. The actions to block strategic roads and bridges by such ‘piqueteros’ or picketers organized in what became an important socio-political movement reflected worsening economic conditions linked to the neoliberal policies adopted during the lengthy Menem administration of 1989-1999. Such mass protests, in turn, were intended to create sufficient disruption of the shaky economy (and resultant bad publicity for the now increasingly vulnerable national governments that followed in 2001-2002) to induce political officials to provide places in a variety of official emergency aid programmes for those taking to the streets and their needy families (Epstein, 2003). Although they began in the country’s interior, as time went on, such mass street protests by groups like the piqueteros would increasingly concentrate in various areas of Buenos Aires Province just outside the city of Buenos Aires and in the Capital itself.¹

That part of social movement theory associated with Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (see McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1997; Tarrow 1998) has particularly stressed that the type of contentious politics associated with social movements is likely to be found when conditions are destabilized sufficiently so as to create appropriate ‘political opportunity structures’. Such a sense of opportunity might be perceived by movement leaders who could calculate the likely possibilities versus the risks involved in protest activities, given what was happening with ‘changes in institutional rules, political alignments or alliance[s]’ (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1997, 153). Such a perception of opportunity burgeoned in post-Menem Argentina with the collapse of the De la Rúa government and of the Alliance coalition on which it rested in December

2001 and during the unpopular Duhalde administration appointed by Congress to serve out the remaining two years of De la Rúa's term.

Only with the inauguration of Néstor Kirchner as President in May 2003 and subsequently – as the sense of political crisis gradually dissipated – did the political situation begin to normalize.² By the first half of Kirchner's presidency, the specific opportunities that earlier had facilitated the piquetero movement with its numerous rival splinter groups began to fade. The initial public sympathy that had been expressed by many Argentines of different social classes in support of the movement as it grew in the face of seriously escalating unemployment and hunger now turned against such continuing protests; with economic recovery, these disruptive events were increasingly seen by many ordinary citizens more in terms of the inconveniences experienced by individuals trying to get to their job on time in the blocked streets of the Capital than as a necessary strategy used by desperate fellow citizens (*La Nación Line*, 3 December 2003; *Clarín Internet*, 9 December 2003). As public opinion about the piqueteros changed, the national government felt itself freer to try to contain what it complained of as the unduly politicized worker street protests.

This essay will discuss various approaches pursued by different piquetero leaders in helping to maintain their organizations intact as political conditions became less favourable to them. While Argentina has experienced a considerable number of piquetero groups of differing ideological tendencies and socio-political programmes,³ the focus here will be on two specific groups, in terms of what could be labelled their 'survival strategies' when facing noticeably diminished opportunity conditions: the tactically more moderate and far larger *Federación de Tierra, Vivienda, y Hábitat* or FTV (the Federation for Land, Housing, and Habitat) and the more radical, smaller *Movimiento Territorial de Liberación* or MTL (the Territorial Liberation Movement). Although neither of these two groups ought to be seen as fully representative of all the others sharing similar tactics in their dealing with the external political world, they have been chosen to illustrate certain particularly creative possibilities that skillful leaders might adopt under the now less opportune conditions they encountered. Such an account is thereby meant to contribute to social movement theory by moving from accounts of group origins to a case study examination of movement continuation under less favourable circumstances as the moment of special opportunity passes.

The focus here will be on these two piquetero groups as national organizations dominated by their top leaders. While these groups probably constitute a somewhat heterogeneous membership found in particular parts of Argentina, key leaders to be discussed here such as Luis D'Elía of the FTV and Carlos 'Chile' Huerta of the MTL are seen to possess considerable autonomy in making decisions for the entire membership throughout the country. If the rhetoric of these groups has emphasized the active participation of the members in local mass assemblies, these leaders seem aware that they have considerable freedom in making critical decisions as long as they at least go through the motions of collective decision-making. They realize that they can, if necessary, ignore dissenting views found in the membership, given the inherently hierarchical decision-making structure of the FTV and the MTL nation-wide.⁴

While the two case studies discussed here present tactical alternatives that are

quite different from each other in most other respects, both are based upon a certain common understanding of how the political process works in Argentina and elsewhere in most of Latin America, one that recognizes the centrality of socio-political networking (Chalmers, Martin, and Piester 1997). Pursuing their at times quite divergent strategies, both groups were similarly to take advantage of the personal contacts developed and maintained by their top leaders with different accommodating government officials at the centre of Argentine politics in Buenos Aires, both in the national government and in that of the municipality. The special access to power and material resources provided by whom one knows in high places remains critical in getting collective goals fulfilled, even for supposedly anti-system activists like piqueteros. If Argentine politics changed in certain important ways as a consequence of the profound crisis of 2001-2002 (Epstein and Pion-Berlin, eds. 2006), the centrality of such networking in achieving successful political outcomes has remained a significant constant factor. It was something of which piquetero leaders in the FTV and the MTL were all very much aware.

The organizational structure of what follows is fairly simple. Following this introduction is a brief discussion of the contrasting approaches adopted by the Duhalde and Kirchner administrations toward the piqueteros, especially in reference to the provision of government aid to the unemployed needy. This comparison is meant to provide an account of the basic opportunity conditions the piquetero groups encountered when contemplating their individual responses. The major part of the essay sketches how these two piquetero groups responded to the policies of each government, beginning first with the FTV and then proceeding to the MTL. In the case of the FTV, early efforts to provide critical political education on current Argentina for group activists would later be deemphasized, as more conventional clientelist activities grew in importance with shifting conditions. The MTL, in turn, has emphasized establishing what some outsiders might see as well publicized special projects that would directly provide employment and related benefits for a limited number of deserving group members. The essay itself concludes with commentary derived from the two case studies about what they suggest for social movement theory in terms of longer-term group survival once overall conditions begin to return to what might constitute an approximate of political normalcy.

Changing government piquetero policy with political normalization

Coming into office in mid-2003 after the April elections, Kirchner inherited a variety of national government relief efforts affecting poor Argentines from the Duhalde administration. These had been created at a time of heightened political instability as a way of assuaging potentially violent social discontent, as well as reducing the popular misery that become so evident to the powers-that-be in the national government. If his immediate predecessor had thought it politically necessary to provide expanded social programmes as a way of reducing social tensions found in mobilized groups of unemployed piqueteros, Kirchner was to adopt a less conciliatory attitude as economic conditions improved and with that, popular confidence in the new president.

Of these extant social programmes, the most important in terms of the number of beneficiaries was the Programme for Unemployed Heads of Families (Plan Jefas

y Jefes de Familia Desocupados, hereafter the Plan Jefas/Jefes), introduced in 2002 by the Duhalde government to try to deal with the then huge expansion in the number of the desperately needy, including many piquetero families. By May 2003, the time of the transition from Duhalde to Kirchner, the number of beneficiaries in that programme receiving the very modest sum of 150 pesos (equivalent to some 50-plus U.S. dollars) per month per family⁵ reached its highest point in membership in excess of two million families, possibly some three-quarters of all those eligible among the unemployed in what was supposed to be a universal programme for unemployed heads of household with children under 18 years old (*La Nación Line*, 9 February 2004; Golbert 2004, 36). There were also a number of relief programmes administered directly by particular provinces like the Life Support Programme (Plan Vida) of basic food distribution created in Buenos Aires (Delamata 2004, 17).

The Plan Jefas/Jefes nominally was administered by some 1,900 municipal-level Consultative Councils, themselves theoretically under the supervision of a National Council for Administration, Implementation, and Control. One source estimated that different piquetero groups controlled about 10 per cent of these local councils, with political party machines running at least an equivalent figure, if not more (Golbert 2004; 21, 29). The same author noted the lack of effective national control over how such a programme really functioned and how individuals gained places on the list of beneficiaries; similarly, the requirement that recipients of aid, in turn, perform an obligatory labor service of some 20 hours weekly was irregularly enforced (Golbert 2004, 35).

As 2002 went on, more conservative elements of the Argentine press printed repeated criticism of this lax and highly politicized operation of the Plan Jefas/Jefes, emphasizing what was seen as the likelihood of frequent clientelist abuse (see *La Nación Line*, 13 May; 1 July; 15 July; 22 November; 2 December; *Clarín Internet*, 9 October).⁶ Certainly, most piquetero groups would have had a difficult time existing without the pooling of the small sums contributed by members derived from their place in a so-called 'plan', money that went to finance local piquetero bakeries, nurseries and, in some cases, small-scale work-shops producing simple commodities for the members, as well as for sale to the general public. Such collectively produced material resources needed to sustain organization survival would eventually shrink as unemployment eventually declined and where poor families were encouraged to join other national social programmes more effectively controlled by the national government. The extent to which members in a Jefas/Jefes plan were obliged to turn over a set percentage of the money they received from the government as a condition for being kept on the official plan membership list (as opposed to voluntarily contributing such sums) is largely unknown, but could be seen to have been exaggerated as a social problem by that mass media. What such criticism tended to ignore or down play here were the new bonds of group loyalty and reconfigured identity achieved not only through occasional joint protests in the streets captured in television reporting but, probably more importantly, what was achieved less visibly through regular participation in local piquetero assemblies and other shared community activities by individuals whom society had written off as simply part of the hard-core long-term unemployed but who now felt more valued (Auyero 2000, 204-07). If the piqueteros

certainly engaged in clientelism, it was of a decidedly non-traditional kind, reinforcing new group solidarity among many who previously found themselves among the outcasts of Argentine society (Epstein 2003, 24).

By the second half of 2003, the Kirchner government had decided that its political interests dictated a reduction in the size of the decentralized Plan Jefas/Jefes over which it had only limited control. Between July 2003 and January 2004, the number of beneficiaries had been reduced by some 250,000 families (*La Nación Line*, 9 February 2004).⁷ By June 2004, the fall in beneficiaries totaled 400,000 families (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004, 48). By 2008, some million and a half recipients or three-quarters of those once enrolled had left the programme, some voluntarily and others not so (*La Nación.com*, 22 September 2008). While the improving job scene might have justified some programme downsizing, the government's motivations were more likely to have been those of reducing social protest in the streets by undercutting the more radical piquetero groups participating in that social programme. Complaints by activists ousted from the programme on grounds that they no longer met its requirements were generally ignored.

Tensions between the government and the hard-line piqueteros worsened further over time. Incidents like the seizure of the Buenos Aires municipal legislature in July 2004 by individuals including piqueteros protesting pending legislation restricting the use of public space and the violent protest against the visit of IMF head Rodrigo de Rato by piqueteros at the end of August that year (*Página/12 Web*, 17 July 2004; 1 September 2004) were utilized to justify an official policy regulating frequently used sites for public protest like the Plaza de Mayo in front of the presidential offices in the Casa Rosada or the bridge connecting the Capital with Avellaneda. Peaceful public protest was to be allowed but with restrictions set by a Kirchner administration now determined to assert its political control (*La Nación Line*, 22 February 2005; 8 September 2005).

The piquetero movement was divided in its approach to Kirchner. If there were many groups harshly critical of the government like those in the radical Bloque Piquetero, there were others that sought an accommodation with the power that the presidency now represented, groups with more pragmatic less ideological leaders. The administration, in turn, believed it might contain most of the threat social protest represented by seeking to co-opt those piqueteros seen as politically more flexible while criticizing as extremists those more militant (*La Nación Line*, 11 December 2003). After previous negotiations, the government in June 2004 announced the formation of a piquetero political alliance of such more pragmatic groups meant to defend the president against his major rival for control of the Peronist Party, his immediate predecessor, former president Duhalde (*La Nación Line*, 9 June 2004).⁸ By then, such groups had on their own decided to largely abandon the tactic of using road blockages to attract the attention of government officials to their claims for economic benefits for their members. Such a switch in tactics was seen as an effort to maintain sympathy for the piqueteros from parts of the public annoyed with repeated road blockages. As a payoff for their cooperation, a number of key leaders including several from the FTV such as Luis D'Elía among these new allies would be named to positions in the government from which they would have some input into official policy-making (see *La Nación Line*, 29 July 2007).

If the Duhalde presidency had been relatively weak with low popular support

and quite susceptible to the negative effects mass social protest had on public opinion, its Kirchner successor rapidly regained control over much of the political scene. This change in overall national power presented a different environment in which piquetero leaders had to act, one far less favourable from their point of view (despite less open government repression) than that which had existed at the height of the economic crisis given a less vulnerable, more popular national government and reduced resources stemming from an eventually much smaller Plan Jefas/Jefes. The window of political opportunity for such social movements was now closing.

Selected piquetero responses to diminished opportunity

The theoretical approach toward social movements of Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam stresses not only political opportunity, but also organizational factors contributing to social mobilization and cultural elements framing individual perceptions on participation in such mobilization. What follows here focuses on how the leadership of two piquetero groups, the FTV and the MTL, responded in terms of policy options to the greater normalization of control found in the Kirchner government and its reduced vulnerability to piquetero pressure like road blockades and street demonstrations.

a) *The Federación de Tierra, Vivienda, y Hábitat (FTV)*: Since its formation in 1998, the FTV has been principally led by Luis D'Elía, an ideologically moderate individual first involved in politics as a reformist Christian Democrat as a result of a land invasion in 1986 and later with a part of the centre-left FREPASO party. Although a national level organization, the FTV's most important base of operations is found in parts of the La Matanza area of Buenos Aires Province, located to the west of the national capital. It is officially part of the non-traditional national trade union confederation, the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos or CTA, but has widespread operational independence from the CTA (Contartese 2007, 5).

Under D'Elía's leadership, the FTV has seen the utility of ties with other social organizations and with the centre of national politics. In the words of two well informed observers (Svampa and Pereyra 2003, 59),

For D'Elía, politics appears as a tool and a necessary and changing channel of communications with the State [... used] in a process of constructing territorial power. This strategy [...] provides an account as much of the ambiguity as to the limits of political action, as it indicates a constant inflection where dependence on the State and political pragmatism tend to be superimposed and confused with each other.

D'Elía consistently sought to strike deals with the State that would allow his organization to maintain some degree of relative autonomy in pursuit of its own political goals (Merklen 2002, 98), even if his relations with particular presidential administrations have varied in their cordiality. While he was highly critical of Duhalde's government, he managed to arrange that the FTV would be one of the two piquetero groups represented on the National Council supposedly administering the Plan Jefas/Jefes set up by that government (*La Nación Line*, 22 April 2002).⁹ Not too surprisingly, the FTV managed to secure more places for its members in that

government unemployment relief programme than any other piquetero organization in its early months (*La Nación Line*, 23 November 2002).

As part of its strategy of maintaining its membership morale during the Duhalde government, the FTV created a pilot programme for orienting some of its middle-level leaders about the evolution of recent Argentine politics. In a course organized by sociologist Alcira Argumedo and FTV National Secretary for Education and Training Juan José Cantiello that took place from April to November 2002, some 120 delegates from various neighbourhoods in the La Matanza area participated. Among the specific goals of such a course was that of promoting the recovery of a sense of personal dignity among those participating, despite their situation of being unemployed, as well as creating group solidarity (Argumedo 2005). Invited speakers spoke on topics such as twentieth century Argentine history, contemporary world politics dominated by the U.S., the role of technology in globalization, neo-liberalism and the mass media, new forms of popular representation, the power of the Argentine state, and the place of the Argentine military in Argentine democracy (FTV 2002). More informal question and answer sessions followed such lectures. The ideological thrust of such lectures was highly critical of neo-liberalism and of earlier Argentine governments that accepted its assumptions. What was encouraged were alternatives that might allow ordinary citizens in Argentina and elsewhere more freedom to find collective solutions to the common problems encountered in their daily lives. The course was repeated in a more compact form in 2004, incorporating new material on the political scene under the new Kirchner government (Cantiello 2005). In addition, the FTV has organized various short, one-day training sessions such as what took place in July 2005 under the slogan of 'Through a common destiny in a fatherland for all' (Contartese 2007, 5). In the words of senior FTV official Cantiello (2006), such 'programs of ideological orientation [exist] to provide the compañeros with a common floor [of understanding], a common vocabulary'.

What we do not know much about is the degree of effectiveness of the various educational efforts by the FTV to influence the cultural frame of its middle-level leaders and reinforce their personal commitment to its organizational structure both in their particular neighbourhoods and nation-wide. One well known academic, who in 2003 met with FTV activists from various parts of La Matanza as part of a day-long encounter that its leaders had organized on democracy, reported being favourably impressed by the level of political sophistication of some individual delegates participating in the overall discussion (Nun 2003). Obviously, one does not want to make too much of such an interaction where we know virtually nothing about the background of such participants; we cannot generalize about how much they might have absorbed from any earlier courses attended.

Fairly early during the Kirchner government, the FTV seemed to shift the direction of its strategy from such educational efforts toward a greater emphasis on maximizing its ties with the new president. During the already alluded to unveiling of the piquetero alliance on behalf of the President, Luis D'Elía announced that his group would support Kirchner 'in places of influence, the mass media, and in the streets' (*La Nación Line*, 22 June 2004). Although D'Elía and other FTV leaders denied this, the piquetero group became a force that typically could be counted on to mobilize its members in causes supported by the administration. One of the best

known incidents of this type was D'Elía's street demonstration outside the offices of Royal Dutch Shell in Buenos Aires and his endorsement of the President's call for a national boycott against Shell's Argentine operations, when the multinational company raised the prices for its petroleum at a time of rising domestic inflation in Argentina (Reel 2005, A13). There would be other mobilizations in 2006 and 2008 against groups critical of the Kirchner presidency and, more recently, that of his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

In February 2006, the Kirchner government appointed D'Elía to the newly created position of Secretary of Lands for a Social Habitat within the Ministry of Planning, with the stated function of regularizing the situation of lands in the public domain throughout the country for the construction of housing for the poor, long a formal goal of the FTV. Government sources suggested that the new office might expropriate abandoned privately owned lands as well. At the time of the appointment, Planning Minister Julio De Vido stated that D'Elía 'had always been part of the team' of the ministry, but that only now was he assuming a public position there. He would continue with his responsibilities in the poor neighbourhoods of Greater Buenos Aires, 'with the only difference [being] that now he would have an office in this building'. Each of the three organizational subdivisions of the secretariat was headed by an individual with FTV ties. Of special importance to this discussion of organizational survival, the expectation expressed by the new Secretary was that he would be given access to large sums of money for use in his duties (*La Nación Line*, 22 February 2006; *La Prensa Digital*, 23 February 2006). Given the traditions of Argentine politics, many observers probably suspected that the appointment of the piquetero leader could result in his new government office becoming a conduit for the transfer of ample public funds to the FTV and its members, thus building up its organizational material resources.

Nevertheless, what took place proved disappointing to D'Elía, who had been an advocate of an agenda that favoured the redistribution of Argentine income and resources in more equitable terms. The Kirchner government refused to support his August 2006 campaign against U.S. environmentalist and millionaire landowner Douglas Tompkins in reference to land the latter owned in Corrientes Province. More critically, D'Elía was to complain that De Vido never provided him with much of a budget for land expropriations or personnel. In mid-October that year, the piquetero leader went so far as to offer his resignation from his governmental post, but was persuaded to remain (*La Nación Line*, 1 November 2006). What led to his renewed, forced resignation from the Kirchner administration was his involvement with the Iranian embassy in its protest against Argentina's support for an Interpol warrant against ex-Iranian officials accused of having orchestrated the 1994 AMIA Jewish Community Centre bombing in Buenos Aires (*Clarín Internet*, 15 November 2006; *La Nación Line*, 14 November 2006). D'Elía was then and remains an ally of the Chávez government in Venezuela, itself a friend of the current Iranian regime.¹⁰ Although no longer enjoying public office, D'Elía went out of his way to avoid any open criticism of President Kirchner. The Kirchner government could continue to count on the FTV to take to the streets of the Capital opposing demonstrations hostile to the government like that organized by Juan Carlos Blumberg in 2006 and one by agricultural interests in 2008 during his wife's presidency. The extent to which he and the FTV benefitted from continuing

ties with the Kirchner administration is unknown.

The survival strategies employed by the FTV given overall diminished political opportunity then embodied both a cultural and organizational emphasis, but where the latter became the more important over time. How are we to evaluate their degree of success? One answer, if rather crude in terms of measuring the causal connections, would look at the plausible effects of the different emphases upon the size of FTV membership. Given the lack of any more neutral sources, we are forced to utilize estimates coming from those in authority in the organization itself or those related by individuals who have spoken with them. Figures offered for 2005 varied from 125,000 by April (Reel) to 100,000 at mid-year (Contartese). The number provided in a November 2006 interview with the author over a year later by then FTV President Cantiello – who had replaced D’Elia while he was on leave serving in the Argentine government – was 90,000.¹¹ While such numbers are approximate at best, on their face, they suggest a likely modest decline in membership at a time that employment was growing in Argentina and when some individuals formerly active in the FTV might have found less reason to maintain such a commitment. Whatever the case, that piquetero organization still maintained a presence, if a likely somewhat diminished one, toward the end of 2006.

If such was the situation given the strategy adopted by the FTV, what happened with the other piquetero organization to be discussed here, the MTL?

b) *The Movimiento Territorial de Liberación (MTL)*: After being part of the FTV from 1998 to 2000, what would become the MTL broke off and in June 2001 set itself up as a separate piquetero organization. Its then leader, Alberto ‘Beto’ Ibarra, described its decision to break with the FTV as due to ‘political and methodological differences’, probably a reference to the greater radicalism by then of the new group which would be part of the far-left National Piquetero Bloc until 2006 (Ibarra 2005; Centro de Medios Independientes 2006). There was a leadership struggle in 2004 over the group’s relationship with the Kirchner government, with Ibarra being replaced by Carlos ‘Chile’ Huerta as the new dominant figure (Partido Comunista de Argentina 2004). While having close ties with the Argentine Communist Party and with various leaders including Huerta, the MTL insisted that it was essentially autonomous in its decision-making (Alcañiz and Scheier 2007, 165-66).¹² The MTL remains part of the CTA, the non-traditional labour organization (Huerta 2006), like its rival the FTV, but clearly has a less visible presence there; the CTA connection is not likely to be a restraint on MTL decisions. According to its principal leader, by 2006, the MTL had become part of what he described as the ‘moderate opposition’ to Kirchner (*La Nación Line*, 27 April 2006). This turn toward moderation probably reflects the group’s success in utilizing personal ties to obtain material benefits for its members.

Although the Kirchner government was to take a harder line toward piqueteros, others in both politics and society may still be sympathetic to groups made up of the unemployed. This theme will be touched on in terms of what the MTL has done concerning social mobilization other than the level of opportunity found nationally, especially gaining access to material means critical for organizational maintenance, or to cultural factors important for framing participation.

In regard to the cultural element, the MTL has done little to promote any sys-

tematic ideological orientation among its members. As part of a general discussion, Huerta described the piquetero group as ‘a movement not a political party [...] where] there is diversity of opinion’ (Huerta 2005). One activist in the group saw its lack of educational programmes concerning politics as ‘our great deficit’ (Anonymous 2006).¹³ Huerta, added to this commentary by saying while ‘the MTL sent some twenty people in the last year to the University de las Madres¹⁴ for courses on cooperativism [...] he] would like it if the MTL had its own courses’ (Huerta 2006). His mention of cooperatives reflects the piquetero group’s focus on utilizing certain benefits that current law allows such organizations. In investigating what was discussed in such classes on cooperatives taught at the University de las Madres, this author was told that while the courses were more of a technical nature, all those taking them were expected to also take an explicitly political class as well, the ‘Cátedra del Che’ named after the Argentine revolutionary ‘Che’ Guevara. While such courses on cooperatives originally had a majority of students that were anti-government, recently there have been more people from pro-government groups (Raffineli 2006). One would think that the modest number of people from the MTL in such a divergent learning environment would receive a fairly general orientation, mixing legal information with some likely leftist politics. There probably was little picked up there that would directly reinforce their commitment to the MTL or to the policies of its leaders.

The MTL’s interest in cooperativism was directly linked to its promotion of several projects run by cooperatives organized by the piquetero group that have trained, provided employment for various members, and both resulted in material benefits for such activists and favourable publicity for the group as a whole.¹⁵ Of these, the project that has received the most attention has been that for the construction of 326 housing units plus associated shops, two community centres, and a children’s daycare in the largely working class Parque Patricios neighbourhood of the Capital, implemented by the Emetele [MTL in English] Cooperative. Those who actually built the project were all MTL activists, many of whom received their first experience in construction here. The piquetero group were able to take advantage of financing made available to it as a cooperative by the Buenos Aires Institute for Housing of the City or IVC under Law 341 aimed at low income groups in the form of a multi-million peso loan repayable over 30 years coming from the Banco de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. While such a loan in theory might have been available to any group meeting the specific legal requirements, evidence from this case suggests a more complex, more political process.

The Parque Patricios housing project seems in great part the result of personal contacts reinforced by certain leftist sympathies of key officials in the Buenos Aires Housing Institute and in the prestigious architectural firm of Pfeifer-Zurdo that designed the plans gratis. Interviews with then IVC head Ernesto Selzer and with MTL leader Carlos Huerta, respectively, emphasized the fairness of the bureaucratic process of the government agency – by the former – and the political pressure generated from piquetero demonstrations – by the latter. More revealing was information concerning the likely leftist past from the 1970s of Juan Pfeifer of Pfeifer-Zurdo, mentioned by Selzer, and that of Selzer and his close associate Luis Ostraj, General Manager of the IVC, in the same time period, mentioned by Huerta (Selzer 2005; Huerta 2005). What can be presumed is that ideological sympathies

facilitated the MTL being granted the loan, not in spite of but because of their Communist Party connections. Others have mentioned the important role of the local Institute for the Mobilization of Cooperative Funds with its ties to the Argentine Communist Party in helping with the bureaucratic procedures needed in the loan application procedure (Alcañiz and Scheier 2007, 158, 166-67). At least by the time the housing was in full swing in 2005, Huerta and Selzer had themselves developed a fairly warm personal working relation.¹⁶ The Parque Patricios project was inaugurated in March 2007.¹⁷

The workers originally recruited and trained by the MTL from among its members were to see their cooperative successfully gain other construction work in the Buenos Aires area, this time not building for themselves or their piquetero compañeros but for the commercial market. In this new work, they were to receive salaries considerably higher than the miserly sum for which they previously might have been eligible as part of a government aid programme like the Plan Jefas/Jefes (Centro de Medios Independientes 2006). Their entrance into the commercial market in 2006 seems to have paralleled the growing political moderation of the MTL alluded to above.

As was done earlier with the FTV, we need to evaluate the survival strategy utilized by the MTL. The combination of what could be seen as demonstration projects like the construction of multiple housing units in Parque Patricios (that provided reasonably paid jobs to a limited number of movement activists recruited as workers there) and the diminution of active opposition to the Kirchner government has helped maintain the organization under difficult circumstances and provide it with favourable publicity. The use of membership numbers as a means of evaluation of the group's standing over time runs into similar problems to those encountered with the FTV: such numbers are only estimates of unknown reliability. The number most commonly cited in the press is 20,000 members (see, for example, *La Nación Line*, 27 April 2006). Two U.S. academics that interviewed MTL leaders in 2004 mention 30,000 at that time (Alcañiz and Scheier 2007, 166, 168). In speaking with group activists in September 2006, this author received as an answer from one well-placed person, 'more than 12,000' (Anonymous 2006), only to have that answer challenged by MTL leader Carlos Huerta as one that was 'far too low' (Huerta 2006). Examination of these figures suggests a likely decline in MTL membership over the last several years from 30,000 down to at least 20,000, if not lower still. As was indicated in reference to the FTV, the less favourable conditions for organized social protest following the beginning of the Kirchner government with the return of more stable political conditions appear to have had a decided impact in reducing piquetero group size.¹⁸

Conclusions about the survival strategies of piquetero groups

The theoretical account of social movements provided by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly cited here divided explanations for the emergence of such protest groups into three broad categories: (1) the special opportunities provided when the existing political power configuration is destabilized, (2) organizational resources that facilitate collective mobilization, and (3) cultural framing processes that provide interpretative meaning salient to group participants. In this essay, the research ques-

tion has been altered from a discussion of the successful mobilization of such movements to one focusing on group survival once the initial opportunities diminish. Tarrow (1998, chapter 9) specifically saw the existence of social protest movements as a cycle that eventually comes to an end. What has been done here in discussing survival efforts in recent years dominated by the national leaders of two Argentine piquetero protest groups has been to utilize the three explanatory categories that McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly provide, devoting special attention to the last two, given declining opportunity with greater government control and the change in official social programmes with the Kirchners.

Examination of current Argentine political news makes it clear that organized social protest there has not ceased but with considerable economic recovery has been increasingly channeled into more normal forms like election campaigns in what is now a functioning democracy.¹⁹ Successful policy initiatives introduced by the Kirchner government enabled it to regain the public support denied its largely unsuccessful immediate predecessors, Duhalde and De la Rúa. Once established in office, Kirchner sought to strengthen the presidency against opposition groups including the piqueteros. One of the consequences of the changing political scene and the diminished opportunities it provided for street protest was that piquetero actions like road blockages (*cortes de ruta*) would notably decrease over time.²⁰ The sharp fall in popularity shown in 2008 by Cristina Kirchner with new economic and political problems would raise new questions of overall government stability, with increasing attention being given to how well the Kirchners and their allies would do in the upcoming 2009 legislative elections.

Timing has been important concerning what the two piquetero groups under study here have done. Under Duhalde, the strategies employed differed somewhat, with the FTV, itself particularly estranged from that government, placing more emphasis on political, educational/ideological training than the MTL. With the Kirchner administration and improved access to policy-making, this cultural focus became less important for the FTV. One likely reason for this shift probably reflects the FTV's changing needs as that large group began to decline in size. Attracting few new members given the improved job possibilities now provided by the economy, the FTV decided it should concentrate on existing activists, hopefully being able to offer them access to material benefits that the piquetero organization sought to provide from the friendly ties it was to establish with Kirchner, facilitated by the strategic flexibility and ideological moderation of top national leaders. The more politically radical MTL with its links to the Communist Party argued that there was little difference between Duhalde and Kirchner in terms of the essentially pro-capitalist economic policies both supported. MTL members could lose few government-provided positions in programmes like the Plan Jefas/Jefes since they had never had many; the FTV, however, had much more at stake in this regard since its members were much better represented in that and similar programmes and, hence, had much more potentially to lose. While more critical of Kirchner than the FTV, the MTL moderated its political opposition to the government by 2006 as its government-facilitated housing project got underway.

Both piquetero groups were to rely on personal contacts they could utilize with government officials for gaining access to material resources. The FTV was connected with Kirchner where Luis D'Elía became the president's most important

piquetero supporter; the MTL was linked with officials in the Buenos Aires Institute of Housing for the City, with Carlos Huerta taking advantage of common left-party sympathies past and present in the municipality prior to the 2007 election as Head of Government of conservative peronist Mauricio Macri. D'Elía would eventually be named to run the Kirchner government's newly created Secretariat of Lands for a Social Habitat for much of 2006, with the economic and political resources that such an office commanded. Huerta's group was provided with a multi-million peso bank loan with which it could offer jobs for the construction of the well-publicized Parque Patricios housing project and the possibility of other future jobs in building. As both piquetero leaders no doubt already knew, contacts matter greatly in Argentine politics.

Such material resources obtained – so vital for organizational continuity – have played an important role in helping these two piquetero organizations to survive²¹ where the conditions that had initially given rise to them had now begun to change unfavourably, including the switch of public opinion from an initial sympathy to growing hostility to the piquetero movement. The view expressed here is that the ability of piquetero leaders like Luis D'Elía and Carlos Huerta to utilize key political contacts has been of critical importance in these groups adapting with reasonable success to the new circumstances. While the FTV and the MTL certainly are surviving at present, both nevertheless appear to be shrinking somewhat in size and, and quite obviously, in importance. In the judgment offered here, the longer term role politically of these piquetero groups seems to be a marginal one. Part of the normalization of politics under Néstor Kirchner where elections and political institutions have resumed being the key to how political power is exercised has been the absorption of the two piquetero movements studied here as part of a new status quo that has been continued under the current presidency of his wife, Cristina. Whatever political and economic problems the Kirchners presently experience do not seem likely to produce any significant revival of the piquetero movement as a national political force.

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Notes

1. The author's calculation is based on statistics provided by Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría (2004). The data reported there derive from various Argentine Federal Police reports, supplemented by newspaper accounts.
2. The number of street blockages by protest groups like the piqueteros nationally rose steadily as economic conditions deteriorated: 252 in 1999, 514 in 2000, 1383 in 2001, and 2336 in 2002 at the height of the crisis. Thereafter as eventual recovery slowly reached poorer neighbourhoods, such protests declined somewhat, falling to 1278 in 2003 and 1181 in 2004 (Centro de Estudios Nueva

Mayoría 2005). In 2005, the number of traffic stoppages recorded by the same source actually edged up slightly to 1199 (Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría, 2006), but declined once more to 817 in 2006. In recent years, the relative role in such protests of piquetero groups declined as this tactic was adopted by trade unions and other social groups (Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría 2007). Although there are no reliable figures for the actual number of participants in such protest activity, press accounts suggest a significant decline in the number of such protestors as time went by.

3. Here, see the sectoral characteristics of the three-fold division of the piquetero movement found in Figure 1 of Epstein (2003, 29).
4. In one FTV assembly of group activists witnessed by the author chaired by Luis D'Elía on 9 July 2002 (combined with representatives from the then allied piquetero group, the *Corriente Clasista Combativa* dominated nationally by Juan Carlos Alderete), the issue was raised by several speakers whether the rank-and-file in La Matanza should cooperate with the more radical rival National Piquetero Bloc – a position clearly rejected by the FTV and CCC top leadership. Instead, a motion from D'Elía to participate in a march sponsored by the rather moderate CTA trade union association across La Matanza onward to La Plata, the capital of Buenos Aires Province, was unanimously adopted by a public show of hands, and no one seemed surprised that no opportunity was given for negative votes or abstentions. Such leader-led group activity is seen here as an example of the top-down decision-making structure of the FTV. In contrast, certain other piquetero groups like the MTD Solano not included in this study appear to give greater importance to a more horizontal, less vertical structure of decision-making than is normally found in most piquetero organizations (see specific comments by two professional observers of the overall piquetero movement, Montes Cató and Cross, 2002).
5. One government survey of beneficiaries in October 2002, suggested that this small sum of 150 pesos per month raised total family income of those receiving it 56 per cent, an indication of the extreme poverty of such recipients (SIEMPRO 2003, 33).
6. See similar criticism from *Cáritas*, the organization of the Argentine Catholic Church which provides aid to the poor, and from the IMF in Washington (*Clarín Internet*, 9 October, 2002; *La Nación Line*, 24 September 2002).
7. Women heads of family were encouraged to transfer to the new Family Programme for Social Inclusion (Plan Familias por la Inclusión Social or Plan Familias), run by the President's sister, the national Minister for Social Development.
8. The major pro-Kirchner piquetero groups consisted of the FTV of Luis D'Elía, *Barrios de Pie* led by Jorge Ceballos, the MTD *Eva Perón* headed by Emilio Pérsico, and the *Frente Transversal Nacional y Popular* of Edgardo Depetri (*La Nación Line*, 22 June 2004).
9. The other piquetero group represented there was the *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* or CCC led by Juan Carlos Alderete, a group sharing the La Matanza base that coordinated its activities with the FTV from late 2001 to late 2003.
10. Rumours have circulated of recent Chávez financial support for D'Elía and the FTV (Oppenheimer 2007).
11. D'Elía had claimed a FTV national membership figure of 70,000 in mid-2002 (D'Elía 2002).
12. Alberto 'Beto' Ibarra, however, denounced the Communist Party for its supposed role in his ouster as principal MTL leader, violating the group's autonomy (*La Nación Line*, 29 April 2004).
13. MTL leader José 'Chapu' Urelli noted that his group had no written materials for use in the ideological orientation of its members (Urelli 2005).
14. The *Universidad de las Madres* is run by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. It presents classes with an overall leftist orientation that are open to the general public.
15. One additional MTL showcase project has been the reopening of a mine and ore processing plant in the north-western province of Jujuy (see MTL 2005; Alcañiz and Scheier 2007, 166-67).
16. While this author was interviewing Selzer, he asked when the *Parque Patricios* project was expected to be finished. Consequently, Selzer had his secretary phone Huerta who could be overheard moments later on the office intercom to reply in a most friendly tone (Selzer 2005).
17. Several months later, conservative peronist Mauricio Macri would be elected Head of Government of the Buenos Aires municipality, replacing the more left-leaning governments of Jorge Telerman and Anibal Ibarra where the later had among its appointees as head of the government's Housing Institute, Ernest Selzer, the individual who authorized the loan for the MTL cooperative.

18. One knowledgeable academic on the phenomenon of the piqueteros, Maristella Svampa (2006), has suggested that various individuals who were to join a piquetero group had previously had ties to local peronist party branches, but had disaffiliated during the economic crisis when their politically-obtained resources disappeared. With the economic recovery in recent years and a renewed peronist control of the national government, it is possible that some of those abandoning their piquetero activism may have rejoined a revived local peronist branch. Such a conclusion would suggest the relative weakness of piquetero identity and the importance of material benefits like a place in a Plan Jefas/Jefes programme controlled by a piquetero group linked to their personal activism.
19. One case of such continued large-scale street demonstrations was those organized by Juan Carlos Blumberg to demand greater public security after the kidnapping and murder of his son (see Muserli 2006); other more recent mass actions include those protesting the building of paper plants near the Uruguayan border (Palermo and Reboratti, eds, 2007) and the current growers protests against government financial retentions on heightened agricultural export earnings (*Financial Times*, 24-25 May 2008; *La Nación*, 9 June 2008; *Página/12*, 10 June 2008)
20. If both of the two piquetero groups observed in this study have moderated their initial anti-government actions, other parts of this now fragmented movement have maintained their hostility. The actions taken by piquetero leaders reflect their calculation of the likely possibilities for success given the nature of their particular group, including its collective identity and its ties with strategic parts of the external political world.
21. Both of the piquetero groups studied here ultimately downplayed the role of political socialization utilizing appeals to culturally significant symbols relevant to the interpretation of the overall political environment. Observations of a small third piquetero group located in Buenos Aires Province to the south of the Capital, the MTD [Movimiento de Trabajadores Desempleados] Solano, that placed far greater emphasis on such cultural framing (see for example MTD Solano 2001) while strictly maintaining group autonomy from external political forces suggest that this combination of factors was an unsuccessful one for survival. Observation of MTD Solano assemblies in 2003 and then three years later shows a sharp fall in the number of those attending, with the few members still active by 2006 almost entirely made up of the aged and infirm (personal observations, 22 July 2003; 7 November 2006).

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