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Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina

Close to three hundred stores and supermarkets were looted during week-long food riots in Argentina in December 2001. Thirty-four people were reported dead, and hundreds were injured. Among the looting crowds, activists from the Peronist Party (the main political party in the country) were quite prominent. During the lootings, police officers were conspicuously absent – particularly when small stores were sacked. Through a combination of archival research, statistical analysis, and multisited fieldwork and drawing on the perspective of contentious politics, this book provides the first available analytic description of the origins, course, meanings, and outcomes of the December 2001 wave of lootings in Argentina. It scrutinizes the gray zone where the actions and networks of both party activists and law enforcement officials meet and mesh. The book also makes a case for the study of the gray zone in less spectacular, but equally relevant, forms of political activity. Clandestine connections between established political actors, this book argues, count in the making of collective violence and in routine political life.

Javier Auyero is an associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 2001 and a Harry Frank Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005. He is the author of *Poor People's Politics* and *Contentious Lives* and has published articles in *Theory and Society*, *Ethnography*, *Mobilization*, *Latin American Research Review*, and *Journal of Latin American Studies*, among others.

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THE GRAY ZONE OF STATE POWER

JAVIER AUYERO

State University of New York, Stony Brook

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For Esteban, reader of all books, source of all important ideas.
And for Tuki, who knows what really matters.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

> One might legitimately ask how, from my considerable distance in place and time from the events I am describing, I can know all that I claim to be a part of my brother's story. . . . And the answer, of course, is that I do not, in the conventional sense, know many of these things. I am not making them up, however. I am imagining them. Memory, intuition, interrogation and reflection have given me a vision, and it is this vision that I am telling here.
>
> Russell Banks, *Affliction*, p. 47

> There is not one simple, "animal," response to hunger. . . . "Riot" . . . is not a "natural" or "obvious" response to hunger but a sophisticated pattern of collective behaviour, a collective alternative to individualistic and familial strategies of survival. Of course hunger rioters were hungry, but hunger does not dictate that they must riot nor does it determine riot's forms.
>
> E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 266

In 1989, when the first food riots in modern Argentine history occurred, I was living in Buenos Aires – close, in fact, to one of the epicenters of the violence. Years later, in December 2001, when the episodes this book describes and seeks to understand took place, I was not in Argentina. I watched brief images of the sacking of food markets and other stores on TV and read about them on-line in the Argentine newspapers. At the time, I thought we were witnessing pretty much the same thing as in 1989: people were hungry, they couldn't take "it" anymore, and they exploded – in 1989, "it" was soaring prices in the midst of a hyperinflationary peak; in 2001, "it" was a combination of an inept government and a dramatic economic crisis. Collective suffering, I thought then,

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couldn't go on much longer without manifesting itself in some dramatic way. Chaotic and desperate lootings were the result of many – too many and too fast – being pushed against the ropes. While watching the 2001 episodes on TV and reading about them in the newspaper, I also recalled the human toll of the 1989 lootings and began wondering what would happen this time, when events were apparently more massive: How long would it take for the government and its repressive apparatus to control the mayhem? How many would be dead and injured (and soon forgotten)? How terrible would the human and material devastation be when things calmed down? At the time, the lootings received some media attention, but the events in the main plaza and the streets of Buenos Aires captured the spotlight: The *cacerolazos* (as the banging of the pots and pans in protest against government policies came to be known), the brutal repression that left thirty-five dead (and no one punished), and the political crisis that ended the De La Rua government and put the Peronist Party back in office became the main story.

The 2001 lootings lasted about a week; things eventually calmed down and, while the study of popular protest in Argentina became a sort of mini-industry among scholars and activists interested in Latin American politics, the food riots quickly retreated into oblivion – explained away as a collective but disorganized response to hunger, pretty much along the lines of my own thinking at the time. This book recovers the lootings from that oblivion and seeks to reconstruct what happened during those episodes by focusing on their dynamics and meanings.

Why scrutinize the lootings? Who cares about them many years afterward? As the reader will soon realize, in and of themselves, the lootings are interesting, multifaceted episodes. And, as we will see, people (participants, bystanders, victims, public officials, and grassroots leaders) care deeply about them. Truth be told, I was extremely surprised when top public officials made room in their busy schedules on short notice to talk about events that happened years ago. I was even more surprised at the vehemence that officials and grassroots leaders put into their accounts ("I am so angry about what happened. Anything you need, please do not hesitate to contact me again," a prominent activist told me; "anything you need . . . I also want to know what happened," a top official confessed). Shopkeepers and residents also took time to talk to us and to

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dwell on the many details of those days as if they were reliving them right then and there. But the main reason for attempting the reconstruction of the lootings is twofold: The food riots are a unique window into contemporary Argentine popular politics and a wonderful opportunity to extend our knowledge of the political dynamics of collective violence. If we know which questions to ask them, then the story the lootings tell exceeds the actual events and speaks of issues, I will argue, to which students of politics around the world should be paying closer attention.

Carried out from a "considerable distance in place and time," this reconstruction is based on old-fashioned fieldwork and archival research, and it is informed by an ethnographic sensibility that keeps vigilance over a scholastic view all too common among those who study the relationship between collective suffering and popular contention. Fieldwork in different communities and in the archives gave me a vision of what happened from December 14 to 22, 2001, of how politics tends to work in modern Argentina, and of the dynamics and meanings of collective violence. This book tells of this vision.

Many, many people helped me in the creation of this vision. First and foremost, I want to thank the residents and shopkeepers in La Matanza and Moreno for trusting me with their stories about events that, mainly in the case of the victims of violence, shook their lives. I am also extremely grateful to Vanesa da Silva and Graciela Rodriguez, my two hard-working research assistants on this project. They helped me locate the fieldwork sites, conducted many interviews, and shared with me their own views of the events. Rodrigo Hobert, fellow sociologist and unwavering entertainer, helped me in the creation of the catalog of the events.

This book draws on my own fieldwork and that of others. For sharing their field notes with me and for enriching dialogues, I'm thankful to Marina Sitrin, Karina Mallamacci, and Magdalena Tosoni. In Buenos Aires, Horacio Verbitsky proved to be not only an intelligent interlocutor with whom I discussed the main thrust of this book but also a source of crucial contacts that, literally, changed the course of my inquiry. Eduardo Cura facilitated my access to the archives of Channel Eleven, where Osvaldo Petrozzino kindly showed me images of the lootings – some of them never broadcast before. Thanks to all.

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Mia Bloom, Elizabeth Borland, Mona El-Ghobashy, Daniel Fridman, Leslie Gates, Michael Hanagan, James Jasper, Jackie Klopp, John Krinsky, Roy Licklider, Francesca Polletta, Sherrill Stroschein, and Sidney Tarrow provided comments on two earlier drafts of the Introduction and Chapter 4 during two lively sessions at the Columbia Contentious Politics Seminar. I also presented a draft of the same chapter at the Economic Sociology Workshop at Princeton University; many thanks to Patricia Fernandez-Kelly and Viviana Zelizer for a constructive session. When I thought the book was "almost done," I took it on a tour to California to test how it fared. Nina Eliasoph, Paul Lichterman, and Pierrette Hongdaneu-Sotelo at the University of Southern California and Beatriz Sarlo, then visiting at UC-Berkeley, may not know it but I found enough encouragement in their comments to push me deeper into this project. I then realized that the book was not "almost" but only "half" done and that I needed to further conceptually dissect and empirically explore the notion of gray zone. I then took another tour with the book "half cooked," this time to the South, to Argentina, where I shared many of the ideas and empirical findings with researchers and colleagues at a meeting organized by Valeria Brusco from Centro de Estudios en Política y Sociedad (CEPYS)–Córdoba. Part of a series called *In Vino Veritas*, the discussion that followed my rather disorganized presentation helped me to refine some of my arguments. Thanks to Valeria and her colleagues for their interest, comments, and, of course, the wine. I'm also grateful to my colleagues at the Centro de Estudios en Cultura y Política (CECYP), with whom, surprisingly after all these years, we keep editing the journal *Apuntes*, particularly Marina Farinetti and (again) Daniel Fridman (whose comments I heeded carefully), and my dear friend Lucas Rubinich (again, Lucas, *gracias*). An early version of the Introduction and of Chapter 4 was presented at the *Seminario Internacional: Ciudadanía, sociedad civil y participación política* organized at the University of Buenos Aires on September 1–2, 2005, and then published in the *Journal of Latin American Studies*. Thanks to the many participants who heard and provided encouragement and criticism; to Isidoro Cheresky, who organized a wonderful two-day seminar; and to the editor of *JLAS*, James Dunkerley, for his encouragement. I also want to thank Gastón Beltrán, John Markoff, and my colleagues at Stony Brook,

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Michael Schwartz, Naomi Rosenthal, Andrea Tyree, and Ian Roxborough, who made trenchant criticisms and suggestions on earlier drafts. Timothy Moran, colleague and skilled statistician, helped me to create a statistical model of the looting dynamics out of data I collected from newspaper sources. A snapshot of our joint work is reproduced here in the Appendix (an extended version was published in the journal *Social Forces*). I am also indebted to my graduate students, past and present members of the Ethnography Workshop at Stony Brook. The new generation of Stony Brook ethnographers had to put up with me while I was writing this book. Unbeknownst to them, I tested some of the ideas during the ethnography seminar I taught in the spring of 2005. Thanks then to Diana Baldermann, Larissa Buchholz, Lauren Joseph, Carol Lindquist, Matthew Mahler, Etsuoko Marouka-Ng, Tyson Smith, and Amy Traver for being patient with me while I was thinking out loud and for being wonderful sources of ideas, energy, and fun. Carol, editor extraordinaire, carefully cleaned this manuscript from weird, incorrect, or all-but-*Spanglish* expressions while challenging me to go further into my understanding of the relationships between the gray zone and democracy. Thanks to Jessica Giovachino whose architectural skills were put to good use in the making of Figure 5.

I am very grateful to the staff at the Laboratorio de Sistemas de Información Geográfica from the Instituto del Conurbano at the Universidad de General Sarmiento who were diligent in making the maps presented here. Without the generous funding provided by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and without a sabbatical leave made available by my home institution, Stony Brook University, I would not have found the time to conduct the research – much less to transcribe, analyze, and write up the results.

I've done this twice already, and I need to do it a third time. This whole business of writing books began when, I still don't know whether intentionally or not, my former advisor Chuck Tilly referred to my then-dissertation as a book. Since then, I've been thinking in terms of books – both reading them and writing them. Chuck was the first to read the research project that started all this, and he made critical comments along the way. He then read the final version and provided his by-now legendary insights – both substantive and stylistic. As the reader will

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see, much of the argument of this book is a critical dialogue with Tilly's work. *Muchas gracias*, Chuck. I am also very grateful to my editor at Cambridge, Lew Bateman; to the Contentious Politics Series editor, Jack Goldstone; and to two anonymous reviewers. It is not exaggeration to say that their careful reading and astute criticisms and suggestions made a crucial difference in the final product.

Summers in the United States are a good time to do fieldwork in Argentina. I had, and still have after so many years, the same ambiguous feelings about that time. On one hand, I spend time doing what I like most about this craft, talking with people, listening to them, engaging with them. I also spend time with my friends down in Argentina. During the course of this project, Esteban and Shila, Tuki and Valeria, were there to . . . well, they know. When I was too tired after long days in the field, they took me on a two-day trip to Mendoza that merits a book all on its own. On the other hand, summers are time away from *mi tribu*, the loved ones up here. Gabriela, *compañera*, Camilo and Luis, *amigos mios*, I promise I will make up for the time lost.

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