

## I

## Introduction

It is a cold May afternoon, and a several-hours-long meeting of activists in the district of La Matanza has just ended. It is time to leave, but I have never been to this particular neighborhood before and I have no idea where to go. Someone explains to me how to get to the bus stop, but I must look confused, for she rapidly tells me to join Antonella,<sup>1</sup> who is just heading for the exact same place.

Antonella is a woman in her late sixties, with a small frame and the wrinkled face of those who have worked hard all their life. As soon as we start walking, I realize she is an enthusiastic talker, with a cheerful attitude despite a frequently tragic personal story. Born in a poor rural community in the northern province of Santiago del Estero, her mother died during her birth. Abandoned by her father soon afterwards, she was raised by an aunt and a grandmother, who, despite extreme poverty and hunger, insisted that she study. By age fourteen, however, she had to drop out of school and help her family by doing odd jobs as a domestic worker and farmhand. At twenty, she moved to the national capital of Buenos Aires seeking a better life. A relative found her a job as a live-in maid, and for five years, she cleaned, cooked, and took care of several children for a wealthy family. When she was twenty-five, she married a construction worker who had also migrated from Santiago to Buenos Aires. The couple bought a small plot in what then was a sparsely inhabited area of Greater Buenos Aires and slowly began to build their house. She quit her

<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of respondents, all names of people and their organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms.

live-in job but kept working as a housecleaner until her first child was born. Afterwards, she stayed at home and raised two daughters and a son.

This quaint domestic lifestyle ended with one of the regular crises that have affected Argentina's economy over the last forty years. Antonella's husband lost his job, and the family had to rely on soup kitchens for food. To make ends meet, she left her children in the care of her twelve-year-old daughter and took a cleaning job in a fur coat factory. This would become the beginning of a new occupation: Other workers gradually taught her the trade, and she used lunch breaks to practice with the machinery. Over time, she started to moonlight for the company. Every day, she went home with pieces of coats, which she sewed together at night. For more than a decade, she dedicated herself to this occupation, first as a side job and later full-time. Eventually, she stopped: Her husband by that time had a better income as an independent contractor, the children were growing up, and she felt the need to be around to make sure they behaved and studied.

However, the family's situation took a turn for the worse again in the late 1990s with the first effects of the recession that would culminate in the 2001–2002 economic collapse of the country. Unemployment soared, and people in poor communities had increasing difficulties earning a living. Antonella's daughter told her about a grassroots organization that was recruiting people to demand jobs and subsidies for the unemployed and mentioned a small-scale textile production project that the group was creating with funds from the government. Antonella told her daughter she would gladly help her with sewing but would never attend meetings or demonstrations. Her husband had always liked to participate in these kinds of events, but she never shared his interests and was deeply skeptical of politics. As the crisis deepened, the family began to rely more and more on the organization: At different points, all her children and her husband took part in workfare programs managed by the group.

With time, however, Antonella became increasingly involved. She does not recall exactly when it happened, but as time passed, she began to enjoy attending meetings and working with other activists. By her first anniversary in the movement, she was already a neighborhood coordinator, a position she has never abandoned. Other members of her family dropped out when their economic situation improved: Her daughter graduated from vocational school and found a job as a teacher, and her husband received a pension that did not depend on the organization. However, Antonella followed another trajectory. Even though she is also retired, she continues to work in a soup kitchen, represents her

neighborhood in meetings, and takes part in most demonstrations. Since she receives government-funded retiree benefits, she cannot enroll in a workfare plan. Consequently, she only obtains limited resources from the organization through informal means. Still, she devotes more hours to the group than many other participants.

Antonella is one of the millions of people affected by Argentina's remarkable transition from being one of the most egalitarian societies in Latin America to one marked by high inequality and exclusion. Despite political and economic instability, for most of the twentieth century workers in the country enjoyed low unemployment, relatively high salaries, and generous welfare policies associated with strong union membership and modest levels of informality. However, the 1970s saw the beginning of a process of deindustrialization, associated with pro-market economic policies implemented first by the 1976–1983 military dictatorship and in a much more intense form by the 1990s administration of Carlos Menem. The consequence was a substantial deterioration in the job market, which became particularly acute in 2001–2002, when a combination of external shocks and an overvalued currency led to the deepest economic crisis in the nation's history.<sup>2</sup> Joblessness grew from less than 3 percent in 1980 to more than 20 percent in 2002. In addition, the share of manufacturing jobs fell by half and informal labor doubled. Despite periods of economic expansion since then, these indicators remain relatively weak. Even though the unemployment rate has fallen to about 10 percent,<sup>3</sup> only one in eight jobs are in the manufacturing sector, and informality continues to affect one third of all workers.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, there is a new normal in the Argentinean economy, which has become more service-oriented. The labor market is more segmented, and well-paying positions are fewer and require extensive credentials and skills. These transformations have had an enormous impact on the daily life of working-class families. Entire communities have been excluded from the formal labor market, with devastating consequences. Young people without access to the quality education required by the jobs available, as well as middle-aged individuals who are deemed too old to be

<sup>2</sup> For more on the economic collapse of 2001–2002 and its consequences, see Lozano (2002) and Gerchunoff and Llach (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The unemployment rate fell to 10 percent in 2006 and averaged 8 percent between 2007 and 2019. The source for these data is the World Bank Open Data database, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/> (last accessed June 17, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the persistence of these indicators, see MTEYSS (2013) and CEPAL (2015).

retrained, have great difficulties finding stable occupation. The result has been an undermining of the well-being, stability, and safety of countless households.

Not surprisingly, Argentines reacted to these challenges in different ways. Antonella is among the thousands who did so by joining one of the most prominent forms of collective action in the nation's recent history. Faced with drastic increases in structural unemployment and informality, community leaders in the 1990s began to establish groups of laid-off workers in different cities, demanding access to jobs and relief programs. Despite their diverse origins, these groups rapidly developed similar repertoires that helped them recruit members and gain influence, giving birth to what came to be known as the Unemployed Workers' Movement, or *piqueteros*. Most of these organizations structured as networks of local groups that stage roadblocks (*piquetes* in Spanish) to demand the distribution of social assistance. If successful, they distribute part of these resources among participants and use the rest to develop an extensive array of social services in areas where the welfare arm of the state has retreated.

Antonella's less-than-straightforward trajectory toward involvement in her organization is quite common. In fact, the experiences of rank-and-file activists in the movement pose an intriguing puzzle. Most recruits joined, in the words of many an informant, "due to necessity": They were in dire need of resources, and an acquaintance told them about a group that was "signing people up" for a social program. The vast majority initially held negative views of the *piqueteros* and had limited experience in politics. Once recruited, they started attending demonstrations and other activities, receiving foodstuffs regularly, until they obtained a state-funded workfare plan. Since organizations usually administer these positions directly, respondents are expected to sustain their involvement in order to continue receiving benefits. Given these circumstances, we would expect most of them to participate for as long as they acquire resources and to withdraw when more effective sources of income become available. However, the subsequent behavior of many of them challenges these expectations, as they begin to make efforts to remain involved, prioritizing activism over family time, leisure activities, and even financial self-interest.

The puzzle is more intriguing in that several of these participants remain indifferent or even antagonistic to central aspects of the movement's agenda. In all of the organizations I worked with, people openly (and frequently) expressed views that contradicted the ideology of their

group. While leaders highlight that the coexistence of varied viewpoints is a key strength of the movement, partisan and media opposition has treated this diversity as evidence of the political immaturity of participants and the manipulation of people's needs for illegitimate organizational goals.<sup>5</sup> However, evidence from existing surveys and ethnographic studies does not support such criticism.<sup>6</sup> The people I met in the piquetero movement did not seem less informed or engaged than other Argentines. Indeed, the fact that many of them regularly voice disagreement with their organizations yet continue to make sacrifices for them suggests that the characterization of these groups as composed of a mass of malleable and apathetic members is very inaccurate.

What processes, then, lead to this level of attachment? Why do people who join reluctantly, face substantial personal obstacles to activism, and do not always agree with their organizations develop such a commitment to the movement? Based on ethnographic fieldwork spanning three and a half years, as well as in-depth interviews with 133 current and former members of nine piquetero groups, this book suggests an answer. I argue that a key appeal of participation is the opportunity to engage in practices associated with a respectable blue-collar lifestyle threatened by deindustrialization and joblessness. Through their daily involvement in the movement, older participants reconstruct the routines they associate with a golden past in which factory jobs were plentiful, younger activists develop the kind of habits they were raised to see as valuable, and all members protect communal activities undermined by the expansion of poverty and violence. For Antonella as for countless others, daily activities in a piquetero organization allow the actualization of dispositions developed in fields of life that either no longer exist or are in danger of vanishing. The movement becomes a surrogate for manual labor in a factory or domestic work at home, offering consistency and respectability in a context of marked socioeconomic decline.

The argument I propose in this book reflects a critical engagement with the literature on collective action. Views of the piqueteros as inauthentic forms of protest not only reveal long-standing prejudices in Argentinean society against popular politics but may also express a narrow scholarly

<sup>5</sup> For the evolution of media coverage of the piquetero movement, see Svampa (2005, 2008) and Gómez (2009).

<sup>6</sup> See *Latinobarómetro* (2018) for survey data showing that political apathy and skepticism are widespread among Argentines, and Quirós (2006, 2011) and Manzano (2013) for evidence of the complex motivations of participants.

understanding of activism. Despite substantial progress in the field of social movement studies, many aspects of people's participation in contentious politics remain unclear. Even though there is a large body of literature on the factors that contribute to a person's engagement in collective action, most studies tend to focus primarily on the recruitment phase and neglect what happens afterwards. Thus, we know a great deal about the factors that make initial participation more likely, but we are less knowledgeable about the mechanisms by which people develop long-term attachment (or not) to the groups they have joined. In particular, while researchers have analyzed how ideological processes sustain activism, the role that everyday practices play in the same outcome has received far less attention. Based on the experiences of individuals in the piquetero movement, I argue that activists can be hesitant about their organization's ideology yet still develop a strong attachment to their routines within it. What people think about the movements they join certainly matters, but so does what they do while mobilized.

In addition, this book provides new insight into the wave of progressive mobilization that swept through Latin America in the past decade and a half, of which the piqueteros were an essential part. The combination since the 1980s of unprecedented democratization with drastic neoliberal reforms promoted the emergence of various experiences of collective action that successfully pushed for the recognition of new rights. Even though an extensive literature<sup>7</sup> has explored these instances, much of it tends to portray their struggles in terms of a novel transformation of society, downplaying their more orthodox aspects. While not denying the innovative elements of anti-neoliberal movements like the piqueteros, an exploration of the life stories of activists suggests that traditional notions of labor, family, and community play a large role in their conception of social justice.

Finally, by providing a case study of how workers affected by job loss recreate their traditional forms of life through progressive grassroots mobilization, the following pages offer insight for understanding current events in other parts of the world. In recent years, the expansion of right-wing politics throughout the globe has intensified concerns over the effects of neoliberal globalization for democratic governance. Faced with economic uncertainty and reduced prospects for social mobility, working-class voters

<sup>7</sup> For studies of this wave of mobilization, see Johnston and Almeida (2006), Almeida (2007), Stakler-Sholk, Varden, and Kuecker (2008), Roberts (2008), Delamata (2009a), Silva (2009, 2013), and Prevost, Oliva Campos, and Varden (2012).

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in many countries have embraced authoritarian and xenophobic agendas.<sup>8</sup> However, this is only part of the story. As experiences like the piqueteros show, vulnerable populations around the world have responded to deindustrialization in various ways. The connection between growing inequality, social anxiety, and reactionary extremism is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

#### I.1 PERSONAL BACKGROUNDS, MOBILIZATION EXPERIENCES, AND ACTIVIST DISPOSITIONS

The processes through which a person develops attachment to a social activity are complex. While, at the aggregate level, certain features may be more common among participants in a practice, the relation between these characteristics and actual behavior at the individual level is usually weak. Consequently, to understand the appeal of a social action, we need to first explore its intrinsic rewards: What do people obtain from doing something? To use Jack Katz's terms, it is essential to analyze not only the "background" of action (the personal attributes that make a person more likely to do something) but also its "foreground" (the qualities of the act that make it attractive). In his study of different forms of crime, Katz argues for focusing on the experience of deviance itself, rather than on the characteristics of offenders. Otherwise, any attempt to explain lawbreaking based on the background conditions associated with criminality will run into three problems:

(1) whatever the validity of the hereditary, psychological and social-ecological conditions of crime, many of those in the supposedly causal categories do not commit the crime at issue, (2) many who do commit the crime do not fit the causal categories, and (3) what is most provocative, many who do fit the background categories and later commit the predicted crime go for long stretches without committing the crimes to which theory directs them. (Katz 1988: 3–4)

Nevertheless, the fact that involvement in a particular social action does not follow directly from background factors does not mean that these factors are irrelevant. Quite the contrary, the process by which an action

<sup>8</sup> There is a large literature discussing the reasons behind the expansion in recent years of right-wing politics in different countries of the world. For the case of the United States, see Frank (2004), Skocpol and Williamson (2012), and Hochschild (2016). For the United Kingdom, see Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy, and Manley (2018), and Dorling and Tomlinson (2019). In the case of Italy, see Romei (2018) and D'Alimonte (2019). For India, see Tillin (2015) and Vaishnav (2019). For Brazil, see Gethin and Morgan (2018) and Hunter and Power (2019).

generates its own incentive varies according to the characteristics of each individual. Biographies matter because they affect the ways in which people develop an attachment to certain practices (Desmond 2007; Shapira 2013). Throughout the life course, people are exposed to various forms of relations, institutions, and norms, leading to beliefs and expectations that are particular to each person. These socialization processes influence how some people are predisposed to enjoy certain activities or see them as “natural” to them. Consequently, understanding a person’s attachment to a habit entails unraveling how the practices associated with it interact with other aspects of his or her life to generate specific dispositions (Bourdieu 1977).

That being said, the positive resonance between a person’s life and a particular social activity is neither automatic nor permanent. Rather, it depends on constant affirmation and ratification through interaction with other participants (Benzecry 2011; Tavory 2016). In other words, the development of a sense of enjoyment with regard to a social practice is a learning process, through which individuals gradually attach new meanings to their routines and come to appreciate what was originally either unpleasant or unremarkable to them (Becker 1963; Wacquant 2004). As Howard Becker argued in his study of marijuana users, in order to enjoy an activity, beginners need to first learn from others particular techniques and perceptions, that is, specific ways of doing and appreciating the practice:

An individual will be able to use marijuana for pleasure only when he goes through a process of learning to conceive of it as an object which can be used in this way. No one becomes a user without (1) learning to smoke the drug in a way which will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use (learning, in other words, to get high); and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations he perceives. In the course of this process he develops a disposition or motivation to use marijuana which was not and could not have been present when he began use, for it involves and depends on conceptions of the drug which could only grow out of the kind of actual experience detailed above. (Becker 1963: 76)

Two aspects of this sense of enjoyment are particularly salient for the purposes of this book. The first is the opportunity to embrace behaviors seen as virtuous. As sociologists studying culture and religion have long argued, participation in certain routines helps individuals construct a self-image of goodness by personifying desirable social roles. That is, actions not only reflect a person’s sense of morality but also constitute it (see Winchester 2008; Benzecry 2011; Fridman 2016). Regular engagement in specific practices allows people to claim membership in a valued category



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and set moral boundaries with groups deemed as less worthy (Lamont 2000). As a result, when individuals use their involvement to embody the kind of person they want to be, they are likely to appreciate such involvement as an end in itself.

Second, a central appeal of routines lies in their intrinsic predictability, which provides a sense of order in people's daily experiences – what Anthony Giddens terms “ontological security” (Giddens 1979; also see Laing 1961). The very regularity of a habit contributes to the feeling of being in control over one's life, especially in times of crisis or in the context of socioeconomic decline (Auyero and Kilanski 2015). By engaging in the same practices repeatedly, people faced with uncertainty know what to expect of each day.

In sum, commitment to a social activity emerges out of its resonance with the cultural understandings and expectations a person has been socialized into. In particular, when routines allow the embodiment of positive models of conduct and bolster an individual's sense of command over his or her situation, they are likely to become very appealing. Respectability and consistency are particularly salient for my argument because they are among the most important things individuals lose when they become unemployed. The lack of steady occupation implies more than simply a threat to sustenance: It entails the loss of a whole set of principles that organize daily life and endow people's experiences with purpose (Bird 1966; Jahoda, Lazarfeld, and Zeisel 1977; Wilson 1996). As Pierre Bourdieu explains in *Pascalian Meditations*:

In losing their work, the unemployed have also lost the countless tokens of a socially known and recognized *function*, in other words the whole set of goals posited in advance, independently of any conscious project, in the form of demands and commitments – “important” meetings, cheques to post, invoices to draw up – and the whole forth-coming already given in the immediate present, in the form of deadlines, dates and timetables to be observed – buses to take, rates to maintain, targets to meet . . . Deprived of this objective universe of incitements and indications which orientate and stimulate action and, through it, social life, they can only experience the free time that is left to them as dead time, purposeless and meaningless [emphasis in the original]. (1997: 222)

As the coming chapters will argue, long-term involvement in the piquetero movement is motivated not only by the access to material support or the appeal of organizational ideologies. The movement also offers many people an opportunity to engage in routines providing this lost sense of personal value. For countless Argentineans excluded from the labor market, piquetero organizations grant the space and resources necessary to be

the kind of person they were raised to be. You can still be a worker, even if having a well-paying, stable job is a long-gone dream. Thus, from the perspective of many of my respondents, making efforts to remain involved in a group that you joined reluctantly, with whose ideology you do not necessarily agree, and which barely provides for the sustenance of your family, makes perfect sense.

## 1.2 THE UNEMPLOYED WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Since the 1980s, Latin America has experienced a remarkable period of democratization. Most countries in the region managed to sustain fair elections, high levels of individual freedoms, and institutional mechanisms for the transfer of power that held even in times of civil unrest. Nevertheless, this period has also coincided with extensive neoliberal reforms that caused a retrenchment of the welfare state and an increase in structural unemployment and inequality. Hence, the last three decades combine an expansion of political liberties with the persistence of widespread economic disparities. This scenario has contributed to the development of new experiences of collective action. Faced with growing chances for dissent on the one hand, and the undermining of their means of livelihood on the other, millions of Latin Americans have organized to demand access to a decent standard of living (for an overview, see Roberts 2008; Silva 2009).

Piquetero organizations have been one of the main exponents of this wave. The first expressions of the movement took place between 1996 and 1997 during a series of uprisings in company towns in the provinces of Salta and Neuquén, where residents used roadblocks to protest the sudden leap in unemployment caused by the privatization of the national oil company. The success of these events in forcing concessions from the authorities, coupled with the government's increasing use of relief programs as a way to defuse social unrest, encouraged grassroots organizers in other parts of the country to emulate these methods of protest. Consequently, organizations of unemployed workers emerged throughout the nation, developing a flexible internal structure and an efficient repertoire of contention that allowed them to rapidly gain followers. Most of these organizations consist of networks of local groups that engage in roadblocks to demand social assistance, usually in the form of workfare programs, foodstuffs, and funding for small cooperative projects. These resources are then allocated among participants following criteria based on need and merit: Whoever has more dependents and contributes more