When everyday life, routine politics, and protest meet

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Abstract. Based on archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines the continuities between everyday life, routine politics, and contentious action. Focusing on a case study, the 6-day road blockade in the Argentine Patagonia in June 1996, the article dissects these connections through a thick description of (a) the intersection of this episode of popular protest with the biography of one of its key participants, and (b) the modes in which routine politics and local history have an impact on the origins and shape of the protest and on the activated identities of the actors who collectively voice their discontent during the protest.

Contentious snapshot

June 26, 1996. Governor Sapag and picketer Laura Padilla sign a public agreement in the city of Cutral-co, province of Neuquén, Argentina. The whole country watches the event on TV, reads about it in newspapers, or hears about the details on the radio. That agreement puts an end to a protest by thousands of residents of Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul who blocked all the access roads to the area, effectively halting the movement of people and goods for 7 days and 6 nights. It all begins on June 20 with the news of the cancellation of a deal between the provincial government and Agrium, a Canadian company, to build a fertilizer plant in the region, a plant that would provide, at best, 50 full-time jobs. A few hours after local radio stations spread the bad news, five main barricades and dozens of smaller pickets, with varying numbers of women, men, and children in each, isolated this oil and gas region from the rest of the province and the country. During days and nights, one slogan unites the hundreds of protesters: "Nobody comes in, nobody gets out. We want Governor Sapag to come here. We want jobs" (see Figure 1).

It is below 30°C on the morning of June 25th, when a federal judge in command of 200 soldiers of the *Gendarmería Nacional* comes to Plaza Huincul with the intention of clearing National Road 22 of

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Figure 1. Piquetero on the barricade.

demonstrators. With the help of tear gas and rubber bullets the gendarmes clear out the first barricade less than a mile from the main blockade at *Torre Uno* (the oil derrick that memorializes the discovery of petroleum in the region) but as they attempt to move forward, they notice that approximately 20,000 people (close to half of the total population of both towns) are awaiting them. From the roof of a van, her arm held by a masked picketer, the judge addresses the crowd with a megaphone, recuses herself from the case, and tells protesters that she and the gendarmes at her command are leaving town. The crowd cheers her, sings the national anthem, and shouts: “The people won, the people won!”

On the morning of the protest’s seventh day, Governor Sapag meets with the “Committee of Pickets’ Representatives” (a recently formed organization of which Laura Padilla is now the main spokesperson) in Cutral-co. The hand-written agreement signed by the governor and the picketer states that the protest was a “clear demonstration of the hunger suffered by the population” of both cities, and promises public works that will provide locals with jobs, delivery of food, and the reconnection of gas and electricity to approximately 2,500 families whose service was cut off due to lack of payment. The agreement also states that the governor will declare both communities in “occupational and social emergency,” specify some of the projects that the provincial

government will begin or support to create jobs, promises that the provincial bank will assist local businesses with new credit lines, issues assurances that no punitive measures will be taken against those who took active part in the protest and, finally, guarantees that new investors will be sought to build the fertilizer plant.

Five years later, I am sitting in the living room of Laura's modest house in General Roca (in the neighboring province of Rio Negro) when she hands me the notebook she carried during the 7 days of the protest that came to be nationally known as *la pueblada*: "You can have it, take it with you.. . . Part of what we, the picketers, did is in this notebook." In one of our last conversations, Laura, a 44-year-old mother of three, currently unemployed, tells me that when she signed the agreement with the governor, "I was signing against all the injustices, the humiliations, that I suffered throughout my life."

In one simple statement, Laura alerted me about a key dimension of popular contention, a dimension that (I realized when back from the field) figures prominently in Charles Tilly's notion of repertoire of collective action, i.e. the intimate relationship that everyday life has with protest.[1] This key, though understudied, aspect of contentious politics constitutes the object of this article. Based on archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this article draws upon the theatrical metaphor of "repertoire" to examine the continuities between everyday life, routine politics, and contentious joint action at both individual and collective levels. Focusing on a case study, the 6-day road blockade in the Argentine Patagonia known as "*la pueblada*," the article scrutinizes these connections through a thick description of (a) the intersection of this episode of popular protest with the life history of one of its key participants, paying particular attention to the ways in which Laura's biography (i.e. her social trajectory not merely as a picketer but as a woman, a wife, a mother, and a worker) shapes her actions, thoughts, and feelings during the uprising, (b) the modes in which routine politics have an impact on the origins and shape of the protest, and (c) the ways in which local history informs the shared understandings of protesters.

The first part of the article concisely reviews the main tenets of Tilly's notion of repertoire of contention. The second part reconstructs the day before this specific contentious episode, paying particular attention to the immediate origins of the protest. Here I focus on Laura's everyday life during the weeks before the protest and on the crucial role

played by a prominent local radio station and by some local politicians in encouraging and facilitating the mobilization. In the language of Tilly's classic *From Mobilization to Revolution* we witness a veritable mobilization of resources that, linked to elite factionalism, provides aggrieved actors the opportunity to voice their discontent. The third section looks at the larger background in which *la pueblada* occurred, i.e. its political–economic context. Here, I focus on the ruinous effects that the privatization of the government oil company had on both towns. Particular attention is given to the rise of joblessness and poverty. After summarizing Laura's life history, the fourth section describes her involvement in the protest and the way in which she makes sense of it. The last section of the article reconstructs the experiences and self-understandings of protesters focusing on the ways in which they are rooted in the towns' history, politics, and current plight.

Repertoire

Understood as the set of routines by which people get together to act on their shared interests, Tilly's notion of repertoire invites us to examine patterns of collective claim-making, regularities in the ways in which people band together to make their demands heard, across time and space. The notion:

- Brings together different levels of analysis ranging from large-scale changes such as the development of capitalism (with the subsequent proletarianization of work) and the process of state-making (with the parallel growth of the state's bulk, complexity, and penetration of its coercive and extractive power) to patterns of citizen–state interaction. This model exhorts social analysts to hold macro-structures and micro-processes together conceptually, looking closely at the ways big changes indirectly shape collective action by affecting the interests, opportunities, organizations, and identities of ordinary people. Furthermore, this framework makes clear the need for a simultaneous analysis of diachrony and synchrony with its emphasis on both the forms of protest and at their trans*form*ation.
- Is cultural at its core in that it focuses on people's habits of contention, and on the form that collective action takes as a result of shared expectations and learned improvisations. The repertoire, then, is not merely a set of means for making claims but also an array of meanings that arise relationally, in struggle; meanings that, as Geertz puts it, are "hammered out in the flow of events."[2] Learning through struggle is thus at the core of the theatrical metaphor of repertoire.

As Tilly comments, "Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle."[3] What do protesters learn? Tilly answers, "People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, and organize special-interest associations. At any particular point in history, however, they learn only a rather small number of alternative ways to act together."[4] How does this learning process affect subsequent ways of acting? "The existing repertoire constrains collective action; far from the image we sometimes hold of mindless crowds, people tend to act within known limits, to innovate at the margins of existing forms, and to miss many opportunities available to them in principle. That constraint results in part from the advantages of familiarity, partly from the investment of second and third parties in the established forms of collective action."[5] Thus, the concept allows us to combine two interests that too often have been divorced, namely the impact of structural change on collective action and the transformation of the culture of popular protest.[6]

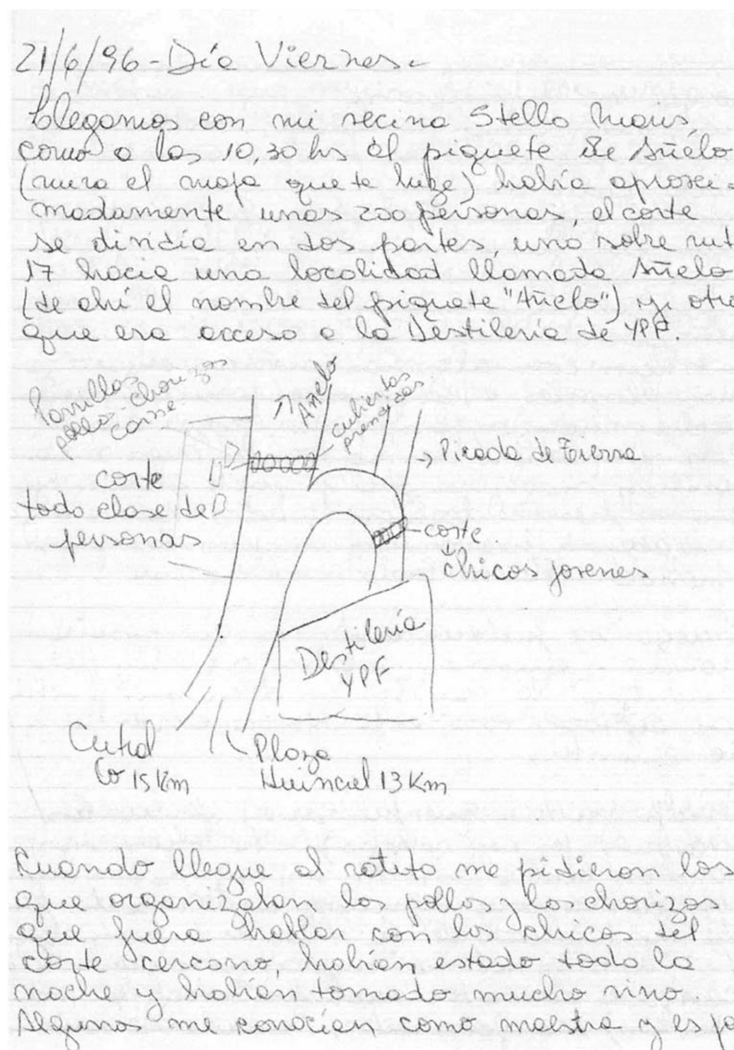
- Is eminently political in that this set of contentious routines (a) emerges from continuous struggles against the state, (b) has an intimate relationship with everyday life and routine politics, and (c) is constrained by patterns of state repression. In this way, Tilly warns against the flawed tendency to assume that the explanation for an increase in protest can be located in the identification of existing grievances. Grievances are not sufficient to trigger collective action; they operate within a matrix of political relationships, prior collective struggles, and state responses to those struggles. Hence, contention tends everywhere to, "flow out of a population's central political processes, instead of expressing diffuse strains and discontents within the population."[7] Rather than attempting to explain the event in full, in what follows I reconstruct an episode of contention using mainly (though not exclusively) this last dimension of the notion of repertoire to focus attention on the existing continuities between everyday life, routine politics, and protest.

Everyday life at the crossroads

At the time of the protest, Laura is working as a private tutor teaching language and social studies in a house she rents with her friend Jorge, who teaches math. The few students she has barely help her to make ends meet. What follows is an excerpt from Laura's diary covering

the first day of the protest (the original version mixes past and present tenses) (Figure 2):

Thursday, June 20, 1996. I woke up early. My same duties were awaiting me. No work was forthcoming, but I had to go and wait for it. Everything was as usual. I had to go to Court to check the paperwork for the child allowance I was claiming from my husband; that was tedious, tiring, humiliating . . . [At noon my neighbor told me to tune Radio Victoria] I listened to the radio but I didn't understand what was going on: "they


21/6/96 - Día Viernes.
Llegamos con mi vecina Stella Maris
como a las 10,30 hs al piquete de Añelo
(mira el mapa que te hice) había aproxi-
madamente unas 200 personas, el corte
se dividía en dos partes, uno sobre ruta
17 hacia una localidad llamada Añelo
(de ahí el nombre del piquete "Añelo") y otro
que era acceso a la Destilería de YPF.

Cuando llegue al ratito me pidieron los
que organizaban los pollos y los chorizos
que fuera hablar con los chicos del
corte cercano, habían estado toda la
noche y habían tomado mucho vino.
Algunos me conocían como maestra y es po

Figure 2. Laura's diary.

will blockade the roads, stores will close for the day." There were phone calls to the radio station in which people expressed all their anger. [When I got back to work, Jorge] told me the history of Agrium, the fertilizer plant, the different factions within the governing party (Movimiento Popular Neuquino, hereafter MPN) and all the things I had to know [. . .] I went back home and I tuned on the radio again and I listened to all the angry comments that the people were making: "Another political promise was vanishing." Unemployment, "father YPF" was gone, hunger, nothing to do [. . .] I went to bed with the radio on my side, by then I had begun to identify with that poverty [the radio was talking about]. And I cried for the three years of solitude [since she got divorced in 1993], the three years of efforts, of struggles for my three kids . . . three years of fights against a humiliating court system [. . .] That night I cried a lot . . . And I cried and I felt identified with the comments that people were making on the radio [. . .] I am poor, with no possibilities, with no hope, thirty-six years old, alone [. . .] I don't receive child support [. . .] The morning of the twenty-first every store was closed . . . I never participated in something like this . . . What shall I do? I talked to my neighbor and we decided to go to the road, the radio was announcing big barbecues, and they were saying that the cabs were free if you wanted to go. In other words, it was like a day in the country, and with that mentality, I went to the road, [I went] to have a barbecue with my neighbors [. . .] The reality: unemployment and poverty, injustice. My reality: unemployment, poverty, injustice. That was my life.

Laura is certainly not the sole recipient of those radio messages. Early on June 20, Radio Victoria airs the cancellation of the deal between the provincial government and Agrium, and "opens its microphones to listen to the people's reaction . . . A neighbor called saying that the people should show its discontent . . . [another one] said that we should get together in the road," Mario Fernández, director and owner of the radio station, recalls. All my interviewees mention those radio messages as central in their recollections, not only in terms of the ways in which the radio calls on people but also in terms of the way in which the local radio *frames* the cancellation of the fertilizer plant project.[8] On Radio Victoria, the former mayor Grittini and his political ally the radio station owner and director Fernandez, depict the cancellation of the deal with Agrium as a "final blow to both communities," as the "last hope gone," as an "utterly arbitrary decision of the provincial government." Daniel remembers that: "there was a lot of anger . . . the radio said that we should go out and demonstrate. They

were saying that it was the time to be courageous." "I learned about the blockade on the radio . . . they were talking about the social situation," Zulma says. Laura, Daniel, Zulma and the rest point towards both the same framing articulator and its similar functions: The radio both makes sense of the "social situation" and persuades people to go to the road.

As the radio broadcasts "the ire that we felt" – as Daniel explains to me – and calls people to the *Torre Uno* on Route 22, cabs bring people there free of charge. Is this a sudden eruption of indignation? Are radio reporters and taxi drivers merely the first to spontaneously react? Hardly so. The factionalism within the governing party, the MPN, and particularly, the actions of the former Mayor Grittini who is waging his own personal fight against Mayor Martinasso and Governor Sapag,[9] are at the root of both the "injustice framing"[10] and the veritable mobilization of resources.[11] In an interview that he prefers not to tape – "because the truth cannot be told to a tape recorder" – Daniel Martinasso tells me: "Grittini backed the protest during the first couple of days. How? Well, in the first place buying a couple of local radio stations so that they call people to the route." "Is it that easy to buy a radio station?" I innocently ask him. "I myself paid Radio Victoria so that they broadcast nice things about my administration. The radio's reception area was built with the money I paid to the owner . . . that's how politics work in Cutral-co." Grittini's and his associates' efforts (Radio Victoria's owner Fernandez being a key figure at this stage) don't stop there. Although there is not firm evidence, many sources (journalists, politicians, and picketers) indicate that he also sends the trucks that bring hundreds of tires to the different pickets and some of the bulldozers to block the traffic. He is also behind the free distribution of food, gasoline, firewood, and cigarettes in the barricades. Some even say that Grittini pays US$ 50 per night to hundreds of young picketers and that his associates provide them with wine and drugs.

Thus, while the radio airs its angry messages (telling people that "something has to be done" and calling them to go to the *Torre Uno*), cabs drive people there and to the other barricades for free, tires are brought to the pickets, food, cigarettes, and other essentials are distributed free of charge ("We even get diapers for the babies!" Laura and other women recall). This *mobilization of resources* and this *framing process* do not, however, operate in a vacuum but under background conditions that are ripe for a large-scale protest.

State dismantling

Both Plaza Huincul and Cutral-co were born of and developed through oil activity. Since their inception in 1918 and 1933, respectively, both towns grew with the rhythm of (and became highly dependent on) the benefits provided by oil production and by the activities of the state oil company, YPF (the first government company founded in 1922). With the discovery of petroleum in the area came its territorial occupation and settlement carried out under the aegis of state action. The rapid population growth of both towns reflects the expansion of YPF's activities. From 1947 to 1990, the total population increased from 6,452 to 44,711, an impressive demographic growth by all accounts.[12] The cradle-to-grave enterprise welfare of YPF benefited its workers with higher than average salaries, modern housing serviced by the very same company personnel ("anything that was broken in the house was fixed by YPF," I was repeatedly told by former YPF workers), access to a very good hospital and health plan, and paid vacations ("once a year, we had free plane tickets and two weeks in a hotel in Buenos Aires or anywhere in the country"). YPF's welfare extended well beyond the confines of the company: It was the whole social and economic life of the region that was boosted by its presence. YPF built entire neighborhoods, provided others with sewers and lighting, erected a local high-quality hospital, a movie theater, a sports center, and provided school buses for most of the population.

In less than 2 years an economic system and a form of life that had lasted more than four decades was literally shattered. The privatization of YPF was passed as law by the National Congress on September 24, 1992, and soon enough the devastating effects were felt in the region. YPF not only cut back its personnel from 4,200 employees to 600 in less than 1 year, but also ceased to be the welfare enterprise around which the life of both towns evolved (the company even moved its headquarters out of Plaza Huincul), and became an enclave industry functioning under strict capitalist guidelines.[13]

Headlines of the major regional newspaper captured the general mood as the first effects of the privatization began to be felt in Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul: "Uncertain future awaits Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul," "Alarming unemployment in the oil region," "The struggle against becoming a ghost town." As massive layoffs were taking place, the articles described a "general feeling of uncertainty" about the beginnings of the process that is now in its mature form: hyper-unemployment. In Cutral-

co, 30% of the economically active population (25,340 residents) was unemployed (1997). More than half of the population of both towns lives below the official poverty line.

In her diary, Laura speaks in very general terms about the widespread joblessness and misery. It would not be possible to understand the meanings that *la pueblada* has for residents and picketers without a grasp on the bigger historical picture, i.e. on the structural adjustment process and its local translation, the privatization of YPF. Relevant as the background structural conditions are to understanding the lived protest, they are not the sole source of the meanings that Laura ascribes to this massive mobilization. The emergence of the protest finds Laura at a very difficult moment in her life. Her diary describes her own deprivations since the time of her divorce and the humiliations suffered at the hands of a callous court system. It would be equally difficult to grasp her participation in the protest without delving into some aspects of her biography.

Herstory

The reconstruction of Laura's life-story took me more than 20 hours of taped interviews, and innumerable conversations and letters. Let me here mention four main themes that I deem crucial to understand both her life and her contentious experience: Laura was born and raised in a family where politics was considered a bad word and politicians seen as "dirty and corrupt fellows" ("my father never became a member of the then governing party and for that we suffered a lot . . . he never got a secure job in the oil company, they kept transferring him from one place to the next . . . politics screwed us up"). She married quite young and sooner than later she became the victim of her husband's violence. She describes her marriage as "a jail" in which she was repeatedly beaten, abused, and (once) raped. She went through a tortuous divorce (that included having to "look for a punch" from her husband so that she could file a domestic violence complaint and not lose the custody of her children; and "tedious, tiring, and humiliating" paperwork at the courts claiming child support from her ex-husband), and last, through a painful, and at the beginning hesitant, participation in therapy groups for domestic violence victims. "In all of the separation process," she told me "going to the domestic violence groups, I learned about the cycle of violence. I learned about the honeymoon period which is when the beater repents and the woman has hope again, believes again that the story will change, that everything is going to be different. I learned how

the beater goes along accumulating tension that end with an explosion . . . I also realized what happened in one of the reconciliations, the time he put the gun on the nightstand (and asked her to have sex), that was rape. I took a long time to overcome it; it gave me a shock, it was like taking on being a single mother, with all the violence that signifies, abused woman, with all the humiliations, and on top of all that a rape. It took me a long time to process that; I cooked and would cry, I went to take a bath and would cry, or I went to go to sleep and would cry. I had to go to psychologists all over again, because it was something that, after being in groups for a long time, I asked again: What happened to me in my life? How did I fall so far? How did I fail to defend myself? I wouldn't forgive myself for it. Until, little by little, through conversations in the groups . . . I discovered that there were others who had been through the same."

By June, 1996, Laura was barely making ends meet teaching private lessons, as she describes in her diary. She was suing her husband to obtain child support, but without a private lawyer, the lawsuit was making little, if any, progress. These were her worries on the morning of June 21, when she listened to Radio Victoria broadcasting the angry comments of the residents of Cutral-co; they were speaking in terms painfully familiar to her: poverty, unemployment, hopelessness, injustice.

A barbecue on the barricade

It came to me as a surprise that Laura (the symbol of *la pueblada*, the nationally known picketer) did not attend the road blockade in order to complain. Early in the morning of the 21, she tunes to Radio Victoria to follow the news. "On local radio, they were saying that the pickets needed grill broilers. They did not have enough of them to cook the incredible amount of meat they had. And so there I was, at home, and I told my neighbor: 'What a boring day! What if we go to the road to have a barbecue? With the grill I have, we will be able to get into one of the groups'. . . Life was so tedious in Cutral-co," Laura remembers, "going to the road blockade was like an excursion. Through the radio, I found out that in Añelo (northern barricade) picketers were in need of grill broilers. That was 19 km away from home. I went there in a free cab to have a barbecue, to spend a day in the countryside with my children." By now, Laura is aware of the political character of the protest. Yesterday, her friend Jorge told her that the factionalism within the MPN was behind the demonstration. "I had

needs; that's true. But that was my story. My story would never become associated with anything political.[14] Politicians were in the road blockade at *Torre Uno*. I would never go there. I went to a less important barricade, with fewer people, and lots of food." Laura's distrust of politicians is deeply informed by her biography: Her father was "screwed up by politics; they kept sending him all over the province, to different places, because he was not a party or union member;" and she was raised in a family where everything political was considered corrupt: "I grew up in a family where politics was a prohibited topic. The politician, in my house, was (considered) a dirty fellow. I don't like politicians." More recently, in her job as a private teacher she learned more about the dark side of local political life: "Most of my students were the sons of local politicians and officials. Their families were breaking apart; parents didn't pay any attention to their kids; they were on drugs. Their parents would buy them expensive stuff but not listen to them . . . ."

> "We arrive at Añelo around 10:30 am with my neighbor. There are close to two hundred people," Laura explains to me. In the picket, Laura relates to me, "the motto is: 'nobody comes in, nobody goes out." No vehicle or person is allowed to go through Añelo (and, from the available evidence, through none of the other barricades). Around noon, the radio informs the people in Añelo and in the rest of the pickets that there will be a meeting at *Torre Uno*, and delegates from each picket should attend. Since Laura is "the teacher," the one who, for the rest of the picketers, "knows how to speak," they choose her and Raúl (a 40-year-old man who has been in the picket since the night before) to be their delegates. Raúl, however, refuses to go: "He says he doesn't know how to speak in public," Laura remembers (Figure 3).

The meeting at the *Torre Uno* is an impressive gathering with more than 5,000 people. Laura is amazed by the number of people and astonished with the lack of attention paid to the pickets' delegates. This is how she describes what happens in the meeting:

> "When we get there, surprise! Those holding the microphone are reading their speeches, they are not improvising, they are using foul language, they are asking for the resignation of the governor. The people in my picket are not like that, they are there because they are hungry ... They don't want the governor to resign. Those holding the microphone never call upon us, the representatives of the pickets. They don't even say that we are there, they ignore us."

Those "holding the microphone" are, in Laura's mind, the local politicians. "I just can't stand this. It's too much, it's all politics. I ask myself: what the hell am I doing in this meeting? I better go back to Añelo."

Figure 3. Meeting at Torre Uno. Courtesy Alejandra Faiazzo.

Her suspicions are shared by other picketers. Less than a month after *la pueblada*, Rubén recalls: “When I went to the *Torre*, I realized that it was like a political rally, there were as always three or four politicians making promises . . . .”

As Laura arrives at her picket, “people from *Torre Uno* are telling the other picketers that the trucks carrying oil and gasoline have to go

through our barricade, that we shouldn't be blocking the oil traffic.[15] And the people from my picket are mad, indignant, our motto is 'nobody comes in, nobody goes out', not even the trucks carrying gasoline. People go ballistic!" Here is where the trouble begins.

Disrespect

After hours of conversation with Laura I accidentally come across one incident that, as minor and unrelated to the structural roots of the uprising as it is, appears to be crucial to understand her involvement in the protest. The following is Laura's reconstruction of the dialogue that took place in the middle of the chaos when picketers are angrily telling the envoys from *Torre Uno* that nobody, "not even the oil trucks" will pass through Añelo:

> Raúl (talking to Laura): Didn't you go to the meeting at *Torre Uno* and tell them that nobody will pass through the picket?
>
> Laura: Listen to me. They didn't pay us any attention. That meeting was a farce. They didn't call us, they didn't care for our opinions . . . they didn't even want to know what's going on in the pickets.
>
> Raúl (talking to the people around): *See, this shit happened because we sent a woman . . .*
>
> Laura (angry): Stop there, hang on there ... You were supposed to come with me. And you convinced me to go. And now you say that a woman is good for nothing. You are the one who's useless because you didn't want to come with me . . .
>
> Raúl (dismissive): *See, she is like all women, she loudly bitches inside her home but outside . . .*
>
> Laura (now very angry, on the verge of tears): Look . . . we are now going to the radio. I will get all the pickets' delegates together and I will show you that I am telling the truth. After that, I hope I don't see you in my fucking life again!

Laura is now joined by Omar, another picketer who was present at the meeting at *Torre Uno*, who tries to persuade Raúl: "Laura is telling the truth," Omar says but Raúl keeps saying that Laura is useless. And so Laura asks Omar to take her to Radio Victoria. The microphones of the radio are opened to each and every resident to express his or her point of view on the current situation. But Laura uses that outlet to call for a meeting of the picketers, in the *Aeropuerto*, "at the other end of the city, at the extreme opposite of *Torre Uno*, without politicians. On the radio, Laura says: 'This meeting is for the representatives of the pickets. No politicians should come."'

Laura has no history of prior activism, and a deep distrust of anything political. When did she decide to stay in the road, with all the risks and suffering implied (it is the middle of the winter in the Patagonia and it is very cold and windy, and rumors about the imminent arrival of the gendarmes had run rampant since the very beginning) and no benefits for herself in sight? After days of talking with her, of driving her around the main pickets and listening to her stories, of watching videos and reading newspapers, I realized that the question is misleading. *Pace* rational action, contrary to what theory would expect, there is no moment in which Laura made a plain, make-or-break choice to stay on the road, no occasion in which she ran the costs and benefits of possible action plans through a psychic adding machine to maximize her investment of energy, both physical and emotional. She was actually *sucked into* the role of picketer by the interactions she had on the road; interactions deeply shaped by elements of her own biography. To be blunt, she stayed on the road because she felt disrespected first by the politicians at *Torre Uno* and second, and most important at this stage, by a man. True, her last 3 years were those of poverty and immiseration, years that would give her or anybody else enough reasons to protest. But she wasn't there for that, "that was my story, never to be associated with anything political." Those 3 years, "three years of efforts, of struggles" as she writes in her diary, were also years of "breathing airs of liberty" – as she puts it when referring to the absence of her husband. With the help of others in the groups against domestic violence, they were years of learning about the respect that women deserve from men – something that, given her history of domestic abuse and violence, was not at all clear in her mind. They were, in other words, *years of material decay but also of moral empowerment*. That day on the road Raúl touched a nerve, giving Laura the looked-for chance to obtain the esteem and recognition she had learned about during those 3 years: "I was mad with Raúl . . . it really bothered me; he treated me badly, as if I was stupid because I was a woman. I was offended, as if we women are useless. No way." And thus she became a picketer, in part, out of gender trouble.

And so began Laura's 6-day career as a picketer. Although the way in which she became involved in the protest is highly singular, the way in which she began to understand the collectivity of those protesting, the way in which she defined who she and her fellow picketers are, is hardly unique: it is a shared understanding that began to take shape at that meeting in the barricade of *Aeropuerto*, where the first picketers' organization is born. We will come back to this collective dimension

shortly after examining one more way in which the picketer's biography informs her actions on the road.

"If I have to define what I did I'd say this: my aim was to protect people," Laura tells me when I first meet her. And she comes back to this issue of protection and of the non-violent character of the protest oftentimes. Her remarks reflect, to some extent, part of the picketers' discussions at that time. But they also reflect her personal anxiety about safety. She tells me, "We wanted to protect people. I said that on radio: we, the picketers, are here to protect people." Her caring and protective actions were directed towards one main group in the pickets: young people ("*los pibes*"). Laura sheds tears every time she describes the moment when she convinced the more than 50 youngsters in her picket, who were getting violent after hours of heavy drinking, to throw the cartons of cheap wine into the burning tires. Laura comes back to this issue of wine, violence, and protection repeatedly, obsessively I would say, during the time we spend together. And there is a reason for that; a reason that has to do with how deeply her protective and caring actions are linked with the story of her own life, and particularly, with "the three years of suffering" that preceded the contentious episode:

> "We had to protect the people; we had to protect ourselves. How so? We had to take care of the violent people. How did we calm them down? *In the groups* (against domestic violence), *I learned* that you have to approach the violent person smoothly, put your arm around him, and touch him. When someone is irritated, you have to approach him tenderly; the first thing you have to tell him is that you understand him. People told me that in the groups. *Those were the techniques that we learned to placate the violent husband*. . . *That's what we did in the pickets* [. . .] *The things I learned in the groups against domestic violence were very useful those days*. In order to calm down the violent kids, you have to be kind to them, touch them. . . *pretty much in the same way I did with my husband when he got mad*" (my emphasis).

Shared self-understandings

"*Che*, this is no joke. There are very well-dressed people in the crowd," an old gendarme comments as the approximately 200 soldiers from the *Gendarmería Nacional* approach the 20,000 residents standing at *Torre Uno* (Figure 4). Without knowing so, the gendarme is making a very important sociological observation about the composition of the crowd. The 20,000 protesters include "well-dressed people," i.e. middle-class residents, *together with*, the poor and unemployed. The available evidence proves the gendarme right. More than half of both towns' populations are awaiting the soldiers on the morning of June

Figure 4. Barricading Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul.

25, among them poor people from the infamous *500 Viviendas* and well-to-do residents from the city center. Laura recalls that "in the pickets you had a poor mother with her kids, workers who had been laid off from YPF, the unemployed, the sub-employed, but you could also find teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, accountants, salespersons, housewives. In each picket, it was all mixed." Cecilia, who spent days and nights in the main picket, agrees with Laura's description, "The whole town was at the *Torre Uno* . . . people with jobs, shop owners, workers . . . " This heterogeneous crowd awaits the gendarmes passionately singing the national anthem ("I never sang the anthem with so much emotion and pride," Cecilia remembers), and chanting "The people united will never be defeated." During the 7 days in the road, protesters tell reporters: "We want jobs. We provide the gasoline, the oil, the electricity, and . . . is this the pay we get? We want the governor to come here. The whole *pueblo* is here. There are no politicians here!" As the troops of the Gendarmería move closer, the federal judge who is in command tells a couple of picketers, who are in the first barricade, that she wants to talk to some representatives: "There are no representatives here," they reply; "The people are here . . . come and talk to the people."

This crowd defines itself as united ("The *whole pueblo* is here"), numerous ("We are thirty thousand, not five thousand"), committed to

one goal ("We want jobs. We want Sapag to come here and give us a solution"), worthy ("We provide the gasoline, the oil, the electricity, and . . . is this the pay we get?"), and lacking leaders ("There are no politicians here").[16] Both in their ways of referring to themselves and in the crowd's social composition, that is, in its discourse and in its social relations, the protesters put forward a participatory identity that revolves around the notion of "pueblo."[17]

This insurgent identity does not just happen; it is a collective and contentious construction. During those 6 nights and 7 days in the road, protesters make incessant efforts to define themselves, voicing who they are, and as important, who they are *not*. Exploring how this collective self-understanding comes about is crucial to understanding the protest as lived experience, and to get closer to protesters' experiences of *being-in-the-road*.

Four years after the episode Jote, a picketer, was seen on TV shouting "The people won, the people won" as the gendarmes turn around and leave town following the orders of the judge, he tells me: "The first day, they, the politicians, secretly organized the whole thing, because of the internal struggle in the MPN. But on the second day, talking among ourselves in the picket, we realized the protest was a political maneuver. And so we began to organize, saying that politicians should stay outside, and stressing that we only wanted to talk to one politician: the governor himself." In the meeting at the airport barricade, far (both physically and symbolically) from the *Torre Uno*, the picketers agree that politicians are trying to use the protest for their own purposes (the general suspicion is that Grittini is using the excuse of the fertilizer plant to wage his own personal fight against his former ally, Mayor Martinasso and, by extension, against his former competitor in the internal elections of the MPN, Governor Sapag, with the intention of demanding their resignations). As the first picketers' organization takes shape, Laura's, Jote's, and others' private disgust for local politicians became the basis for a protest within the protest, and a shared identity.

Much of what goes on since the second day of the protest revolves around the very self-understanding of protesters, i.e. the demarcation of boundaries between "us," the picketers and the people, and "them," authorities and politicians; so much so that, in the collective experience of *la pueblada*, the definition of who the picketers are and what the protest is about takes precedence over their actual claims. The first communiqué that Laura reads on TV the morning after the meeting

at the *Aeropuerto* puts forward a first collective characterization, that of "self-convened neighbors." In the course of the next few days, this self-definition will change its terms ("the people," "citizens") but not its main meaning: those protesting in the roads and staying day and night in the pickets *are not* politicians: "We are the people. No politicians are among us," protesters tell reporters. Ruben recollects that in the pickets "we didn't want any politicians. If they came, we kicked them out. We wanted to resist, to force Sapag to come here." Every chance they get to speak to a local radio or TV channel, residents of Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul voice the same determination: "Sapag should come here and listen to us . . . We'll then see if we cease the protest."

In an interview broadcast on the local TV channel during the protest's fourth day, Governor Sapag refuses to go to Cutral-co until protesters "clear the road and go back home" and puts forward his own definition of what is going on and who are the main actors. Picketers were, according to the governor, committing a federal crime (i.e. blockading traffic in a national road), and were being manipulated by a group of "politicians with no reputation" (in reference to Grittini and his followers): "I cannot talk to people who are committing a crime [. . .] Some of the leaders of this mobilization have political motives . . . ."

In a letter to a friend Laura writes: "On Sunday the 23, Sapag treats us as if we are criminals . . . it's terrible. Picketers are furious: *hunger is not a crime*! The picketers harden their position." Years later, she tells me: "He is ill-advised. He thinks that his political adversaries are still leading the protest, and that is no longer the case. At the beginning, politicians are in charge. Now, it's the people . . . when we see Sapag on TV, we think 'this old man is an idiot, he still thinks this is all politics." Laura is certainly not the only one enraged by the governor's remarks. His speech fosters a veritable "war of words" between picketers and authorities.[18] The local TV station records residents' reactions to the governor's accusations. More than about concrete demands, this war of words revolves around *who actually is in the road*. For the governor, they are people manipulated by local politicians. For residents and picketers, it is *todo el pueblo*. A resident from Cutral-co says to the cameras of Channel 2: "The governor keeps saying that this (protest) is manipulated by politicians, that this is the product of party factionalism. That's not the case. It is the people who took to the streets . . . " One of Laura's fellow picketers, Omar, tells a local TV reporter: "We want the governor to stop criticizing us, in reference to what he said last night . . . We want to dialogue. We do not want a political confrontation. We

are not politicians, we are nothing, we are the people." The cameras also register an old resident, referring to the governor's speech, saying: "Why, Mr. Governor, are you disrespecting the people from Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul? Why? Why do you make fun of them?" I am watching this video with Laura who asks me: "See how the people react to the governor's words? He treats us like criminals."

Nowhere is the making of the picketer's self-understanding more patently reflected than in Laura's notebook. The notebook hints at the organizational tasks ("place labels on vehicles," "call for a meeting with the lawyers association," "machines to block roads," "retirees are in charge of food," etc.) to which the picketers devote most of their time in the road. Laura sounds very much like that jack-of-all-trades, the underestimated housewife, when she describes her picket: "We were very organized. Women were the coordinators, they took care of kids, they got and distributed the food ..." On one of the pages, the notebook has the phone numbers of TV and radio stations, and one phrase: "Utilize the media." "Use the media," Laura explains to me, "so that someone pays attention to us." Her annotations and comments show the profound awareness that protesters have about the key role the media can play in making the protest visible beyond the confines of the two towns, and even beyond the limits of the province. In her statement, however, this concern with visibility is not merely a strategic need. It is also an expression of the dialogical basis of the identity picketers are by now defending: If they, with the help of the media, are taken into account, their collective image will change in the eyes of the main object of their demands, Governor Sapag. As Laura recalls: "What we were going through was completely unknown . . . to the rest of the country. That's why we wanted to get in touch with the national radio stations and TV channels. We were thinking: 'if somebody pays us some attention, the governor will realize that we are not criminals. He will realize that the whole people are here."

The media at the time, along with my interviews years later, record this need to be listened to. At a time when both Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul are perceived, by locals and outsiders alike, as rapidly becoming ghost towns, the crowd's emphasis on "being seen," "being noticed" by the "governor in person" can be read as a cry against in-visibilization, against the threat of disappearance. As Marcelo, a picketer, recalls: "We obstructed traffic because it was the only way in which we could be listened to . . . " Rubén recalls: "The people wanted the governor to see and feel that we were not five subversives, that we were not

criminals as he said, that there was no political maneuvering behind us. The people, some of whom even voted for him, wanted the governor to see that we were tired of lies and of many other things . . . " Or as Mary, her eyes on the verge of tears, clearly puts it: "My son asked me why we were in the road. And I told him: 'Look son, this *pueblo* needs to be heard. The people in this town need to be aware of the things we are losing, of the things that the government is taking away from us.' I understood it that way; I lived it that way." Listening to Rubén, Mary, Mónica ("We won't move from the road because we are here, in Cutral-co, to stay . . . Why do I have to leave if I love this place . . . I grew up here"), and to many others, I would even venture that the social world created around being-in-the-road offered residents and picketers alike, for 7 days, that which they most totally lacked as inhabitants of a place-in-danger: a justification for existing. Being-in-the-road has the power of rescuing them from official oblivion, and offers them the chance to emerge from indifference.

Who is this "we" that wants to be seen, acknowledged, and recognized? Brief as the phrases that Laura scatters in her notebook are, they synthesize the (relational and dialogical) claims and self-understanding of the picketers:

> "Fifty thousand residents. No, coup d'etat [. . .] Before privatization, they didn't get the people ready. The richest soil, the poorest people. An unarmed people, 20,000 people. Picketers-Citizens. Unemployment [. . .] 4,100 unemployed [. . .] Joy-People United. Expelled from the economic system [. . .] The representatives of the pickets inform the people: we are having meetings, we are more determined than ever. The governor has (in front of him) a people demonstrating that it is united, that it will not give up, and that it wants to have a dialogue."

That is the "we" that is in search of visibility: a numerous, united, and determined collectivity of citizens, without the arms and the revolutionary intentions that provincial (and even national) authorities are talking about. As Jote recalls: "We didn't want to overthrow anybody. We said so, we do not want a coup." And Laura, on a national TV program after the protest, repeats: "We are very respectful of the authorities. We want them to listen to the people ... to the whole *pueblo*."

What does "the whole *pueblo*" mean? On the one hand, *el pueblo* refers to location, to the fact that entire towns are present in the road. And both towns are present in the road so that the governor and "the whole country" (as Laura records in her notebook) become aware of their rapid decline after the privatization of YPF. In residents' minds, this

is a very special *pueblo* because it provides energy (natural gas and petroleum) to the rest of the country. Among Cutralquenses and Huinculenses, there is a widespread belief (itself rooted in the entrenched nationalist rhetoric that portrays residents as the "owners" of the oil in the region) that YPF's mineral resources belong to them. As a young picketer remarks, just a couple of feet away from the gendarmes (and it was repeated several times during those days in the road), "We provide the gasoline, the oil, the electricity, and . . . is this the pay we get?" In other words, the collective self-understanding that was relationally and dialogically forged during those days has its roots (its material bases, I would say) not only in the current plight of Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul as towns at risk but also in the memories of the "golden times" of YPF and in the deeply held conviction concerning the ownership of natural resources. In this way, residents' collective memories of the workings of the semi-welfare state during the times of YPF provided them with powerful solidarity impetus to fight for what they saw as their cities' interests.[19] This collective "we" has two major concerns: the lack of jobs and opportunities and the risks thereby implied to the towns' very survival. As Mónica puts it: "I love this place, this landscape. Why do I have to leave? It was a huge effort to get a house here, why shall I go away? The *pueblada* was about this." And as Zulma graphically summarizes: "We wanted jobs . . . we wanted an answer from the government, we wanted to have something so that our children could study. We wanted the government to know that the situation was a one-way ticket to hell (*que esto se iba al carajo sin retorno*). Those were our claims."

There is, however, another crucial connotation of the term "pueblo" implicit in the roar of the crowd. Protesters and picketers constructed their identity and their demands in democratic terms against what they saw as politicians' obscure dealings and constant attempts to "use the people." From the picketers' point of view, who the protesters were and what they were shouting about had as much to do with the devastation provoked by state-retrenchment expressed in the privatization of the state-run oil company as it did with the ruin brought about by politicians' self-promoting actions. A perspective sensitive to the words and actions of the crowd, to protesters' claims as much as to their self-understandings, should alert us about the actor against which picketers constructed their identity: the political class, or in Laura's terms, "those who are in charge, those who say 'I will do this and that if you vote for me."' It is, without the usual representatives (or, better, in spite of them), that residents are able to voice their discontent about the towns'

rapid decay to the whole country. "For once," Laura and many picketers told me, "politicians couldn't use us."

Concluding remarks

The embeddedness of contention in local context gives protest its power and meaning. Existing scholarship insists on the rootedness of collective action in "normal" social relations, on the multifarious ways in which joint struggle takes place embedded, and often hidden, in the mundane structures of everyday life and usual politics.[20] Contentious gatherings, writes Tilly, "obviously bear a coherent relationship to the social organization and routine politics of their settings. But what relationship? That is the problem."[21] In this article, I examined this relationship by dissecting the ways in which one protester's actions, thoughts, and feelings during the uprising were deeply informed by the history of her life, and the modes in which the protest's origins and form are linked to the towns' history, current condition, and prevailing political routines.

Laura first gets involved with the picketers' actions out of a "gender offense" ("I wanted to show that macho that we women are not useless") that would be incomprehensible without a grasp on her history of domestic abuse and violence. The disdain for politicians that fuels much of her actions during those days is rooted in her family history. During days and nights in the road, Laura's concern with protection and non-violence, and her ways of calming people down, are also sunk in a complex layer of biographical themes – her plight during her cruel marriage and tortuous divorce, and the lessons she learned in the groups against domestic violence. She is in the road not only in search of a respect she lost a long time ago, but also to do what gives her a sense of worthiness: to protect people. Her life (and now the protest) is all about that: finding and providing protection. In this way, her history illuminates the continuity between biography and contention. Or in her simple words: "In each barricade, we express the things that were going on in our daily lives."

The way in which Laura lived this popular revolt was not only informed by her singular history but by the interactions she had with other fellow protesters and with authorities, and by the shared understandings forged jointly on the cold roads of Cutral-co and Plaza Huincul. This was a collective identity that finds deep roots in the history and current

predicament of both towns and that is constructed in opposition to local politicians and officials – some of whom, to end with a paradox, we can find at the origins of this contentious episode where everyday life, routine politics and protest meet and mesh.

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Notes

1. See, Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain," in Mark Traugott, editor, *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
2. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
3. Charles Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain," 26.
4. Ibid.
5. Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French*, 390–391.
6. Sidney Tarrow, "The People's Two Rhythms: Charles Tilly and the Study of Contentious Politics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (1996): 586–600.
7. Charles Tilly, *Roads From Past to Future* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 27.
8. On framing (and its critics) as a central element in the emergence and course of mobilization, see Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–639; David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sidney Tarrow, editors, *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 197–217; Francesca Polletta, "Contending Stories: Narrative in Social Movements," *Qualitative Sociology* 21/4 (1998): 419–446; Mark Steinberg, *Fighting Words. Working-Class Formation, Collective Action, and Discourse in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
9. Months before, in the party primaries (internas) current Governor Sosbich allied with Cutral-co former Mayor Grittini against then time Governor Sapag. Sapag won the primaries and Mayor Martinasso, who initially sided with Sosbisch-Grittini, switched factions and join Sapag's group.
10. An "injustice frame" is a mode of interpretation – prefatory to protest – produced and adopted by those who classify the actions of an authority as unjust. See William Gamson, "The Social Psychology of Collective Action," in Aldon Morris

and Carol McClurg Mueller, editors, *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

11. For classic statement on resource mobilization theory, see John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1977): 1212–1241; Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 213.
12. Orietta Favaro and Mario Bucciarelli, "Efectos de la privatización De YPF: La desagregación territorial del espacio Neuquino?" *Realidad Económica* 127 (1994): 88–99.
13. Orietta Favaro, Mario Bucciarelli and Graciela Luomo, "La conflictividad social en Neuquén. El movimiento cutralquense y los nuevos sujetos socials," *Realidad Económica* 148 (1997): 13–27.
14. Laura's personal troubles are indeed political in the sense that feminism, broadly understood, speaks of the term "political" but not in the sense that Laura herself gives to the term. When speaking of "politics" and "political" I am referring to indigenous categories, that is, to the definitions that actors themselves adopt: Politics, in this sense, mean "party politics."
15. Apparently (and this has been confirmed by many local sources), some of the organizers of the protest do not want protesters to interrupt the distribution of gasoline and oil to nearby areas (former mayor Grittini, for one, is the owner of many gas stations in the area).
16. In this sense, this crowd was a textbook example of WUNC, the term coined by Tilly to refer to the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment displayed by participants in collective action around the world. See, Charles Tilly, "WUNC," draft chapter for Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, editors, *Crowds* (Stanford University Press, 2005).
17. Here, I am closely following Gould's approach to protesters' self-understandings. According to him, a participatory identity is "the social identification with respect to which an individual responds in a given instance of social protest to specific normative and instrumental appeals." Roger Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris From 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13.
18. A similar process, attesting to the relevance of symbolic struggle during episodes of contention (this time between Chinese students and authorities during the Tiananmen protest), is described in Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors. Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (California: California University Press, 1995).
19. Lee makes a similar argument with respect to the memories of Maoist socialism at the basis of Chinese workers' collective actions. Ching Kwan Lee, "The 'Revenge of History'. Collective Memories and Labor Protests in North-Eastern China," *Ethnography* 1/2 (2000): 217–237.
20. See, among others, James Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); and Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1994).
21. Charles Tilly, "How to Detect, Describe, and Explain Repertoires of Contention," Center for the Study of Social Change, New School for Social Research, The Working Paper Series 150 (1992): 6.