Changing Articulations of Class and Ethnicity: A Villa Miseria *in Buenos Aires*

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May 2009

BWPI Working Paper 94

Creating and sharing knowledge to help end poverty

Abstract[1]

This essay explores in a socioeconomic crisis context whether the forms of articulating and disarticulating class and ethnicity in popular neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires have changed. During the 90s, amidst increasing unemployment and social exclusion, and coupled with very few possibilities for organising or political mobilisation, social processes tended to lead to the fracturing of groups and their demands. In lower class neighbourhoods, with a strong presence of immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay, the scarcity of resources and the daily struggles for access to them was increasingly tied to xenophobic attitudes and actions. The flipside of these processes of ethnic segregation was the sustained growth of border-immigrant organisations, their festivals, their presence on low frequency radio stations, their football leagues, and other similar activities and networks. As the context changed, it was also necessary to ask whether dynamics of differentiation, which involved the culturalisation of the popular sectors' demands, had been accentuated, or whether a new situation had developed. The research presented aims find out whether the main identifying categories, and the signifiers to which people refer when they form groups to participate in the political arena, have changed.

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[1]Because of ethical and political reasons that will soon become clear, the first version of this text was not published in Spanish until 2008. This study is based on field data that was collected in 2002 and 2003, and the first draft was written in early 2004. At that time, the tensions between organisations for the unemployed were at the centre of political processes, and it was unclear whether new forms of official xenophobia would resurface. This led me to believe that some of the data might be taken out of context and used against the people I had studied. Hoping this is no longer the case, and safeguarding the identities of the people and places involved, I now present the following text.

Introduction

In mid-2002 I was involved in two parallel research studies. One of them was about what we call processes of ethnisation. I was particularly interested in analysing the organisations of border-country immigrants in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The other study focused on the political life of poor communities in the same area, from organisations for the unemployed, to community kitchens. In July of that year, I was able to obtain the phone number of the president of the Federation of Bolivian Civil Associations. I wrote it down on a piece of paper and put it in my pocket. The next day I obtained the phone number of the ex-president of the Neighbourhood Committee of a *villa miseria* (informal settlement), whom I had wanted to interview for quite some time. Faithful to my precarious system of saving pieces of paper, I placed this one in my other trouser pocket. The next day I prepared to call them to set up appointments, only to find, to my surprise, that they were the same person.

This is how I learned that the representative of the Bolivian organisations in Argentina was the same person as the ex-representative of the residents of an informal settlement. A few days later, I was finally able to have a long conversation with Victor.[2] He explained to me that from his point of view, these two roles were not related to each other in any way. Victor had been involved in activities with the Neighbourhood Committee that made him rise to the position of vice-president. Later, a major corruption scandal against the president had emerged, forcing him to resign, and pushing Victor into the role of president. His main responsibility as president, and as member of the Neighbourhood Committee, was to legalise the property deeds of the local houses and, therefore, to eliminate the risks to the community of being expelled from that area. The majority of the activities had to do with what he called 'being neighbours': paving roads, lighting and urbanisation in general. At the same time, his role as leader of an organisation for Bolivians was to negotiate state policies to obtain proper documentation for his fellow countrymen, and to promote Bolivian culture. Simply put, while the Neighbourhood Association managed claims concerning land property and urbanisation, the Bolivian organisation was in charge of matters concerning legalisation, and the social prestige of Bolivian immigrants.

Victor believed it was obvious that these roles had nothing to do with each other. No neighbourhood association, he explained, could ever include the demands of immigrants, nor vice versa. I will demonstrate that in Victor's neighbourhood, each organisation's identification with a specific realm of demands was reproduced in relation to a particular problem that became increasingly urgent in 2000: unemployment.

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[2] The names of places and people have been changed.

The relationship between the types of demands of the organisations, and identity as a defining factor in the formation of these groups, was directly part of the enquiries of my research. Most anthropologists generally agree that during the 1990s there were many processes of ethnisation among immigrant groups, indigenous populations and Afro-Argentineans in Argentina, as well as processes of intense discrimination based on the nationality of people and groups (see Grimson, 2007a).

By the end of 2001, an acute economic and political crisis began in Argentina. Based on a system that pegged the value of the Argentine peso to the American dollar, the main components of the neoliberal economic model collapsed, igniting social mobilisations that resonated throughout the lower class neighbourhoods. Beginning in the late 1990s and rapidly evolving after 2002, new social organisations arose that united the neighbours in an effort to advance their demands regarding unemployment, as well as basic survival issues, such as food and social welfare plans (see Cerruti and Grimson, 2005).

Empirical questions concerning class

In this new context, it was necessary to ask whether the forms of articulating and disarticulating class and ethnicity remained the same, or if they had changed. During the 90s, amidst increasing unemployment and social exclusion, and coupled with very few possibilities for organising or political mobilisation, social processes tended to lead to the fracturing of groups and their demands. In lower class neighbourhoods, with a strong presence of immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay, the scarcity of resources and the daily struggles for access to them was increasingly tied to xenophobic attitudes and actions. The flipside of these processes of ethnic segregation was the sustained growth of border-immigrant organisations, their festivals, their presence on low frequency radio stations, their football leagues, and other similar activities and networks.

As the context changed, it was also necessary to ask whether dynamics of differentiation, which involved the culturalisation of the popular sectors' demands, had been accentuated, or whether a new situation had developed. I wanted to find out whether the main identifying categories, and the signifiers to which people refer when they form groups to participate in the political arena, had changed – in other words, whether a dynamic for a new system of equivalents had opened up in the moments preceding and immediately after 2001 (Laclau, 1996). This meant exploring and analysing the relationships between class and ethnicity in the poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires.

In the last few years, the concept of social class has practically disappeared from sociological and anthropological studies. The motives behind this seem to vary among the different disciplines. For example, Portes and Hoffman (2003: 356) claim that when studying matters concerning inequality and poverty, CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe) and the ILO (International Labour Organisation) do not include the concept of class in their official publications, 'because of its Marxist origin and consequent evocation of notions of conflict, privilege, and exploitation'. However, 'its omission – they continue – obscures significant aspects of contemporary social dynamics'. To reintroduce this notion, they redefine it as 'discrete and durable categories of the population characterized by differential access to power-conferring resources and related life chances' (ibid).

Something analogous to what Portes and Hoffman describe for sociological studies has occurred in anthropology, and in socio-cultural studies in general. A small group of studies continues to employ the notion of class within a traditional conceptual framework that tends to reduce all conflicts to 'class struggle'. However, most studies have tended to omit the concept of class, in both its analytical (structural), and descriptive dimensions, particularly when referring to political action. At the very least, class is employed as another possible option when referring to identity, but in contexts where it never seems to operate in an effective manner.

Claudia Fonseca has described:

> a silence, or at least, an ill articulated murmur in the field of current anthropological analysis, where, in harsh contrast to other thematic areas, the research efforts developed from the point of view of class have been pulverized. (...) Anthropologists who employ a class framework to centre their analysis are rare. Those who do, tend to couch their work in concepts and analytical approaches developed in less ethnographic disciplines (...). As a result, the anthropological study of class as a thematic area has practically disappeared from the map (2005: 117-118).

At the same time, Fenton and Bradley (2002) have proposed the need for a 'middle ground' to rethink the relationship between ethnicity, economy, and class.

In the field of cultural analysis and the study of identity processes, both in anthropology and in other disciplines, the last two decades have revealed a strong influence by some US perspectives that, openly or not, tend to conceptually reproduce political processes specific to that national society. In other words, the United States' political identifications tend to emphasise racial and ethnic constructs, and to dilute class identifications. As a

result, American anthropologists' contribution to the analysis of class is scant, and there are very few empirical studies in this area.[3]

Currently, finding an appropriate place for the concept of class as a cultural and political process has become theoretically challenging. On the one hand, 'class' continues to refer to structural divisions like those discussed by Portes and Hoffman. On the other, 'class' is applied as a form of identification, as in Ortner's work (1998). This is important because there is a significant connection between preferred modes of political interpellation that are characteristic of the neoliberal phase. Specifically, these are culturalist interpellations and the theoretical prevalence of ethnic, generational and gender categories, both of which have been much more detrimental than constructive to the notion of class.

I call them culturalist because they deal with a kind of hegemonic interpellation that emphasises a recognition, which is supposed to operate symbolically without affecting material dimensions, such as issues of indigenous territories, radical social and civic inclusion of adolescents, or full citizenship for immigrants. In fact, these issues cannot be separated from the role of international financial agencies and the incentives they offer to certain types of research. In any case, a political map has been created that allows us to talk specifically about neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale, 2005).

The point is that this tendency to concentrate exclusively on identity politics can lead to a new form of ethnocentrism, which prevents any register or analysis of situations and cases that effectively appear during field research – and in which class identifications clearly emerge. In this same way, ethnographic data is often ignored when it reveals a certain 'class culture' which may be a suitable third space for this concept (in addition to its structural meaning and reference to identity). By mentioning class culture, I am not referring to homogeneous universes, but rather to certain codes within which common emotions and disputes are developed; 'shared practices and experiences, on a daily basis, in the sphere of a specific pattern or way of life' (Fonseca, 2005). In this exploration of the ways in which the concept of class operates within social and political life, I will attempt to consider not only the identifications, but also the shared experiences and practices within a *villa miseria* of Buenos Aires.

Identities in the *villa*

Nobody knows whether one-fourth, or half of the inhabitants of the *villa*, which we will henceforth call *Villa Panorama,* are Paraguayan and Bolivian. The census data from 1991 indicates that 23 percent of the inhabitants of all emergency *villas* in Buenos Aires

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[3] Sherry Ortner (1998) has discussed American anthropologists' traditional rejection of the notion of class.

had been born in countries bordering Argentina (INDEC, 1991). At that time, *Villa Panorama* had approximately half of the population that it does today. However, there is an even more important point: 'Bolivian' here does not always refer to a person who was born in Bolivia, but rather it is a racialised category. Those people who are legally Argentinean, but who are the offspring of parents born in Bolivia, and who have phenotypical traits generally associated with the Aymara or Quechua peoples, are considered Bolivian in the *villa.* In comparison, the Paraguayans are usually identified by their speech, either because they speak Guaraní, or because of their accent.

It is clear that one's 'mother tongue' is less inherited than phenotypical traits, especially in a marriage market that is so closed for young Bolivians that it basically pushes them to be endogamous. Furthermore, 'Paraguayan' and 'Bolivian' are social categories with very different connotations in the *villa.* In most cases, 'Paraguayan-ness' functions more as an identity than as a reference to a different nationality, almost as if it referred to just another province, as if it were a stigma equivalent to 'Santiagueño', 'Correntino', or any other. They are 'outsiders' like the others, but in clear contrast to Bolivians (and Peruvians) who are so clearly *foreigners.* However, this relative similarity in the stereotypes of 'Paraguayans' and immigrants from the provinces does not work in all situations, the most obvious being the difficulties Paraguayans face in obtaining proper documentation.

The complex panorama of identity in the *villa* is combined with a specific political and social situation. Being the poorest neighbourhoods of the richest city in the country, the *villas miserias* historically receive a wide array of resources from the city government of Buenos Aires. Basically we are talking about construction materials, employment plans, food distributed through 'community kitchens', medicine, scholarships, 'box lunches', etc. The inhabitants attempt to access these resources through personal relationships with a variety of middlemen.

By law, every resident of the *villa* registered in the census has a right to some of these resources, such as construction materials or 'box lunches', despite their legal status. In contrast, only residents with proper papers have access to 'Jefas and Jefes de Hogar' ('heads of household')[4] plans, even if they are foreign nationals.

It was this that led Victor to explain that 'plans have neither race nor creed', but they do have documents. This expression should be understood as a response to an everyday situation of discrimination that, although not legally recognised, is key in the life of the *villa.* The cohabitation of the different groups is not harmonious. For example, among the

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[4] The 'Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados' was instituted during the worst period of the Argentinean crisis, when the unemployment rate was 24 percent. It consists of a monthly payment of U$S50 to any head of household who is unemployed and has children who are enrolled in school.

residents of the *villa*, Bolivians are more likely to be victims of a robbery. They are ideal targets because of their relative capacity for saving, and because they are unlikely to confront those who demand money from them. In contrast, the Paraguayans have developed networks of self-protection that allow them to spread information, and to protect each other in case of an attempted robbery.

Like most of their neighbours, Bolivians sought public aid in the midst of the economic and social crisis. As a result, resentments emerged in some cases, when Bolivians attended the 'community kitchens', or when they obtained bricks and cement to improve the construction of their homes. An Argentine neighbour of the *villa*, who was angry that Bolivians had received construction materials before his own family, said to me, 'There are no construction materials from the government to improve the passageways and public spaces, but for the *bolitas* there are'.[5] Another neighbour, whose family had already received provisions, was complaining that his road still did not have enough supplies to be repaired, while the Bolivians were raising walls with the materials delivered by the State.

It is these kinds of neighbours who, in different situations, insult Bolivian women, using phrases such as: 'Bolivian, go back to your country'. The Bolivian women, themselves, are surprised by the frontal nature of these attacks. At the same time, the Argentines are baffled by the fact that the Bolivians shut themselves in their own homes, with the curtains down. This is in contrast to the Paraguayans, and the immigrants from the local provinces, who drink *mate* on the patios and roads, in plain view. This Bolivian lockdown is interpreted through references to a mysterious Andean essence, and never to the systematic nature of direct discrimination. Still, a short distance from where all this takes place, in a Bolivian neighbourhood close to San Lorenzo Stadium, the 'Andean essence' seems to differ, and Bolivians use the open spaces and roads as part of their daily routine.

Ethnicity in *barrio* politics

These elements, which deserve to be expanded and nuanced, are a necessary framework to comprehend the workings of neighbourhood politics. It is a politics that cannot be fully understood without analysing its relation to ethnicity.

The *villa* has a neighbourhood institution, the 'Junta Vecinal', where all adult neighbours registered in the census can elect their authorities. Until a few years ago, not only could

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[5] 'Bolita' is the name that Argentineans use to describe Bolivians, and which carries contempt in its enunciation.

they vote, but they could also be elected. Nowadays, they have to have all their documents in order to run for office.

In the 2002-03 elections for the Junta Vecinal of *Villa Panorama*, there were seven different electoral tickets. Two of these were linked to the Partido Justicialista (PJ), one to the Union Civica Radical (UCR), and one to the ARI (Afirmación para una República Igualitaria). Of the remaining three tickets, one represented a large sector of the 'Paraguayan community', and the other two represented similar factions from the Bolivian community. Beyond the specifics, what is important here is that the criteria used to organise these tickets were sometimes related to party politics, and sometimes to ethnic politics. Of course, there was some overlap between both sets of criteria, but what is clear is that a candidate's political capacity was based on one or the other.

When Victor lost his re-election bid for the presidency, the new president told me he had won by forming an alliance 'against the collective' (the Bolivians). As we drank *mate* at the Junta Vecinal, Ardigay, the new president, explained that: 'The collective is terrible, dangerous, and if you don't take care of yourself, if you let them, they'll eat you whole, leave you with nothing, they work like ants, you don't see them, but when you finally realize it, they have taken everything away'.

This manner of talking about the 'collective' (which in the *villa* requires no further adjectives, for it obviously refers to the Bolivians), reminds me of previous methods of adjudicating silent powers and a devilish conspiratory nature to certain groups. The alliance that Ardigay built to oust Victor and the Bolivians included a sector of the Paraguayan community. The victorious vice-presidential candidate is Paraguayan, and is closely linked to the networks of his fellow countrymen. In other words, when they 'brought down' the Bolivian president, an influential sector of the PJ, which is represented by an old and powerful family from the *villa,* united with the Paraguayan community. It is important to clarify that homogeneous politics does not exist among the Paraguayans. Critical of the PJ and of the local Paraguayan leaders, a minority did not support the new administration. However, they did feel obligated to explain that they were critical, 'even though the vice-president is my fellow countryman.'

When Ardigay won the elections, the displaced Bolivian leaders decided to establish the *Sociedad de Fomento* – Promotion Society – *'18 de Agosto',* to negotiate the deeds to some of the houses in the *villa.* In other words, they decided to continue working towards their main objective on their own: to secure the deeds to their lots. However, because the law only acknowledges 'Juntas Vecinales' as representatives of the *villas,* the city government did not recognise them as official mediators and the new group was never able to gain strength.

Around that time, the Bolivians also created the 'Bolivian House', with the objective of promoting the culture of their country, and obtaining legal documents for the 'collective' (even in *villas* with a very high percentage of foreigners). Thus, they formed the 'House', where they organised parties for their patron saints, as well as many other cultural activities in the *villa.* Soon after, they joined the Federación de Asociaciones Civiles Bolivianas en Argentina (FACBOL).

At the time, the FACBOL represented over 20 Bolivian organisations before the Argentinean government. It was created in 1995 by several organisations from within the capital and Greater Buenos Aires. As the president explained in 2003, the FACBOL came about through a proposal by the President of Argentina at the time, Carlos Saúl Menem, who had said that if they expected their claims to be heard, they could not all arrive at once every time they needed something. They should have representatives. According to others, it was Menem´s Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach, who made this suggestion to the Bolivian leaders.

Victor claims that the main problem for Bolivians is their legal status, because without documents they do not have access to social programmes, and they have serious difficulties obtaining jobs. Thus, the main objective of the Bolivian organisations is the attainment of documents, and the 'promotion of culture' as a political vindication of a stigmatised identity.

In contrast, unemployment is not a topic that seems to occupy much of their time. During the week of the presidency of Rodríguez Saa in December 2001, the government announced that they had been granted 1,000 employment plans for six months. Some unions then complained that plans were being offered to foreigners. After the six months expired, the plans were not renewed, and the Bolivians did not protest. The plans had not been their initiative, and they made no effort to keep them. Even if there are 'many of our countrymen that have plans, the government tells them where they have to go to work,' a Bolivian leader explained to me. In other words, the Bolivian organisations do not manage their employment plans. Probably, together with the rest of the border-country immigrant groups, they may be the only popular organisations that have not developed their own social plans since 2002. This is an important point, since to obtain these benefits it is necessary to be accredited as either an unemployed workers or neighbourhood organisation, even if each group happens to be made up of the same people.

Bolivian and Paraguayan *piqueteros*

In the *villa,* the social organisations seem extremely rigid in terms of the demands for which they were created. For example, after the year 2000, Victor's organisation, which

had always worked on matters concerning documentation and culture, did not include any demands concerning employment. This could be explained by their condition as foreigners. However, the Junta Vecinal, which had not included any demands about legal documentation for immigrants, even though the political and demographic weight of immigrants in the *villa* was considerable, also did not embrace any employment demands afterwards. At the beginning of the 2001-02 crisis, the scarcity of food was another situation that had not been brought up by the Junta, and this translated into the spontaneous emergence of *ollas populares* and the strengthening of the 14 community kitchens. Likewise, starting in 2001, the demand for employment and employment plans resulted in the emergence of new organisations specifically created for and by the unemployed.

As a result, in 2002, in a *villa* of over 15,000 inhabitants, not one unified organisation for the unemployed, but rather four different ones, emerged in different areas of the *barrio*, each supported by different social networks. For example, half of the members of one group were Bolivian women who worked in sewing groups; a trade they acquired in the Korean and Bolivian workshops during their peak in the 1990s. In contrast, in another organisation, there were practically no Bolivian members; instead it was composed of a large number of Paraguayans and 'Formoseños' who worked in construction.

The fragmentation of the social networks within the *villa* was not the only reason for the divisions among the organisations for the unemployed. These organisations established a link between the urgent needs of the residents and social or political activists who did not live in the *villa*. In general, these highly committed and well-intentioned activists were able to articulate concrete answers, such as community kitchens, *merenderos* (afternoon snack programmes)*, roperitos* (groups that fix and distribute used clothing), and other similar initiatives. Furthermore, it was much easier for them than for the residents of the *villa* to access, negotiate and manage social plans.

Thus, a group of social and political activists might modify their previous work in the *barrio*, or arrive proposing specific demands for plans, or have the plans with them ready for distribution. As a result, they would unwittingly promote group alliances with one of the many existing social networks in the *villa.*

The relationships between the activists and the inhabitants of the *villa* were extremely diverse, and it is impossible to further analyse them in this paper. However, there is one episode that proved particularly significant for my research.

A group of activists, who were involved in community work in the *villa,* decided to call their organisation the '19th of December Front'*.* The neighbours were surprised, and

asked them why they had chosen that name. 'Because it was the day of the *pueblada'* (popular uprising), responded the activists. 'What *pueblada*?' insisted the residents, since on their dirt roads and narrow walkways they had not banged a single pot. Nor had any of their neighbours attended the rallies at the Plaza de Mayo that day. 'The one on the 19th of December', replied the activists, taking the conversation back to where it had started.

The neighbours were baffled. For them, the 19th of December was not a normal day, but they certainly did not remember any *pueblada*. In the *villa* it had been a special day, when everybody had fervently joined together from dusk till dawn. Everybody came together; Bolivians, Paraguayans, Argentines, old men, petty thieves, dangerous gangs, and mothers in charge of community kitchens. They had united because the police had warned them that at any moment, 'they would come from Fort Apache' to demolish the *villa.* They knew quite well about the lootings in the supermarkets, and even though there was a large one a few hundred metres away, nothing happened. They had simply braced themselves for an attack from another *villa*, or from a neighbouring *barrio.*

A Paraguayan woman, who is a block delegate for the *Junta Vecinal*, and a representative for a group of women with social plans, explained it this way:

> We were all armed. Together we stayed up all night. We had nearly seven bonfires going, everywhere. The nice thing about that day was that the *chorros* (petty thieves) got together with the people; we were all brothers and sisters. They said: 'If they come, let us know, and you can back us up.' And I said: there had to be an emergency for the people to come together like that, like a brotherhood. We had to take turns guarding the entrance. In the end, it was just something the police said so that nobody would try looting. When they said they were coming from Fort Apache, nobody moved. It was a trick.

The residents of *Villa Panorama* know that many people went out on that day to protest. However, they could only see themselves as potentially taking part in the looting, and not in the protests. Thus, they believed that the 'trick' was aimed at stopping them from robbing and, considering that they already think of themselves as a *pueblo*, the term *'pueblada'* did not make much sense to them as a description for that night of 'conversations' and 'brotherhood.'

From then on, in 2002, the different organisations for the unemployed from the *villa* began to obtain new employment plans, through the use of blockades on routes and avenues. At the same time that they were acquiring new resources, they were attracting new unemployed neighbours, who needed access to public assistance. Seeing this, immigrants without proper documentation also began to approach these groups.

In response to my enquiries, a social representative pointed out a group of women who got together at the 'Escuelita', and described them as *'piqueteras'*. From the start I was told that they were Bolivian, although there was also a Paraguayan among them, and that among the 27 women there were representatives 'from all of the Departments of Bolivia'; an expression made at the end of 2002, when the unity of the country was not subject to debate. Talking to them, it surprised me to discover how, in the context of a public institution and using social plans, they were continuing the sewing activities that the Bolivians had developed as micro-businesses in previous years, and which had been severely affected by the crisis. Recycling the waste material from the nearby textile factories, they managed to also renew their productive knowhow.

It was not easy for a 'gringo', such as myself, to earn the trust of these women. They first explained to me that because they have Argentinean children, their documents are in order and therefore they have access to social plans. However, little by little, they started confiding in me about the different ways in which they were discriminated against for being foreigners, both in their daily lives in the *villa*, and in the marches. Never in our conversations did the word *'piqueteras'* emerge spontaneously, as the social leader from the *villa* had described them. Finally, I decided to ask them: 'Are you *piqueteras*?' A silence ensued as they looked at each other. One of them answered, 'Well yes, sometimes we are, we block the avenue to protest against the car cemetery, or to demand more social plans, and we go to other protests.'

Only after reading Ferraudi Curto's paper (2007) did I understand that statement. For them, *Piquetero* is not something one is or is not, like being 'Bolivian'. *Piquetero* is something one can become at certain times, or as they told Ferraudi Curto, 'we go as *piqueteros*'. *Piquetero* is something one does, and as such does not determine the basic identity of these people. It is something you can 'be sometimes', 'go as', 'become for a moment', but it is does not constitute one's identity.

A *piquetera* assembly about ethnicity

The presence of immigrants in the organisations for the unemployed created a variety of tense situations that are useful for studying the relationship between ethnicity and class in *Villa Panorama*. I will analyse some of the events that occurred within one of the groups, to which I will conventionally refer as 'the Association of the Unemployed'.

In one of the weekly assemblies of this Association, the members were informed that: 'those who need a plan, and who do not have a *DNI (*Identity Documents), either

because they are immigrants, or for whatever the reason, need to find an acquaintance that has that document.' In other words, everyone seemed to know that there were people without documents who, through this strategy, would be able to collect employment plans.

In this context, there was an assembly on December 2002, which I want to describe in detail. The assembly began with a discussion about compensation – in other words, the obligations that all beneficiaries of a plan must fulfil to the organisation; to the construction group, the community bakery, or the community kitchen. Usually there are problems with members who do not cover their four-hour shifts, and the organisations for the unemployed spend a lot of time discussing this difficulty. Those who do not comply are constantly warned that they risk losing their plan, even though it is only in extraordinary circumstances that such a measure is ever taken. This threat is only used to pressure the members, because no representative wants to deal with the responsibility of saying out loud: 'If so-and-so does not comply, he or she should stop collecting the plan and leave.' While the approximately 60 members present at the assembly continued to discuss these same issues once again, Yolanda, an active participant, interrupted the agenda and announced in an energetic voice:

> Listen. On channel 26 there is a programme where people can complain and say things. Somebody called in and said that they belong to an Association for the Unemployed that has Bolivians and Paraguayans without documents using the names of others to collect plans.

Everyone in the shed, which the members of the association had built with their own hands by obtaining bricks and materials from the local government, gazed attentively at the speaker. Under the blazing midday heat, Yolanda continued raising the tone of her voice. She took in a breath of air, and said: 'That person is here, in this assembly, and should leave now.'

An absolute silence ensued. Yolanda is Paraguayan and has been living in Argentina for the past 20 years. She is married to Roque, a Paraguayan who has been involved in the Association from its onset, and one of the few representatives from the *villa* who is also part of the Association. They have two children, both of whom are Argentinean. Neither Yolanda nor Roque has problems with their documents.

Silence dominated the assembly. The only things moving in the shed were the eyes of those present. Several gazes rested on Norma, who was the next one to speak: 'It was not me, it was not me,' she said. 'I am Paraguayan and I do not deny it.'

Nobody really knew what to do. A young attendee said something like: 'If foreigners can not legalise their situation, we have to integrate them, not discriminate against them.'

Yolanda was enraged: 'I agree,' she said, 'but what I am denouncing is something else. I am saying that they are trying to turn everything into shit. They want to screw us. On TV they gave the exact address of this Association.'

'They want to turn everything into shit', she said, because someone had publicly denounced that there was an agreement to create illegal access (give an un-documented person a plan, using the name of someone else), in order to include those without papers into the Association. There was a lot of commotion. People started asking questions. It was clear that on television, the voice of someone had been heard saying those things on the phone, and that Yolanda, and two other residents of the *villa* present at the assembly, had heard it by coincidence. A young man, who sometimes volunteered, even though he was not a resident of the *villa*, said: 'What was done is serious, because the government could take away the plans assigned to the Association; it can be used to attack the Association.'

The accusation expressed two very different matters. On the one hand, if it was true that whoever called the TV station was present, this constituted an act of disloyalty and treason. On the other hand, this betrayal was aimed at exposing the fact that some of those who constantly protested to demand their rights, in reality had none, since they were foreigners without documents, and that the Association misused what was given to them by distributing benefits to foreigners without documents. The problem had nothing to do with origin. Their argument was entirely about legality.

Allow me to reflect on the situation. When this happened, for me – and I believe for others – Yolanda's intervention seemed completely 'off the point' from what was being discussed, and seemed to create a major shift in the agenda. It appeared to have been an outburst. However, when I reread my notes I realised that what was being discussed was who had the right to remain in the Association, who had the right to collect their plan, and who should be expelled from the Association for non-compliance with their obligations. Reading the situation in this context, it can be argued that Yolanda, who fulfils her duties daily and responsibly, was actually claiming that rights are the result of the completion of obligations, and not of the possession of proper documents.

When Norma insisted that it had not been her, she argued that she was Paraguayan, and did not deny her origin. In other words, she believed a Paraguayan would never make an accusation like that. Her argument was not that she was loyal to the Association, nor to her friends. Her argument was that she was Paraguayan. However, Yolanda did not see things in the same way and she said so directly, raising her voice and looking straight into her eyes: 'Norma: it was you. The person, who said that on television, over the phone, was you. I recognised your voice, and the others recognised it too.'

Two other participants in the assembly nodded, confirming Yolanda's claims.

'It was not me', Norma insisted.

'This puts everyone's work at risk,' Yolanda said, while everyone began to talk.

A collective murmur arose. One of the neighbours intervened: 'There were people in the *barrio*, today, investigating what was being done in the Association and the community dining hall.'

One of the young, middle-class men that help out in the Association asked everyone to calm down, and to organise a discussion where everyone could express their opinion. Basically, there was a faction that preferred not to talk, did not know what to say, did not want to confront Yolanda or Norma, or simply did not feel they were involved in the conflict. Another faction, a majority, expressed that something had to be done to protect the Association. After a series of collective discussions and hesitations, a majority put it to a vote, and Norma was expelled from the Association.

A month later

A month later there was a plenary meeting of the Association. A proposal was made for a collective reflection about the objectives of the movement, the methods of action, and the best ways to work in the *barrio*. We were split into groups to discuss the topics. I got the opportunity to participate in the same group as Roque and Yolanda.

Yolanda spoke: 'I don't want anybody to say that they can't give their opinion because they are Bolivian or Paraguayan.'

Roque, in his intervention, showed two very different sides of his position as a Paraguayan in the organisation for the unemployed. Expressing one side, during the plenary, he said:

> I, as a member of the movement, feel discriminated against for being a foreigner. Because some say: 'Why does this guy come and talk if he is Paraguayan, and knows nothing about Argentina?' They say nothing to my fellow countrymen who do not speak up, only to me because I talk.

Showing a different side, in the group meeting he asserted:

Ever since I came to the Association I can walk around the *barrio* in a different way, I feel safer. We, the Paraguayans, believed we could not ask for anything, that we could not protest because we were foreigners. Until we realised that it is also our right. That it is important. For example, Sonia, she is scared to tell a kid in the community-dining hall to behave. She is afraid that he will answer back: 'What are you saying, you shitty Bolivian?' And this is also their fault because they don't know how to defend themselves. For me, being here has given me security, confidence. And even more so to the Bolivians, for they are even more silent than the Paraguayans.

Roque came to Argentina in 1987 looking for 'a better future for myself'. He was able to find regular employment as a construction painter. That is why he says:

Before, I used to watch the *piqueteros* blockading roads and I used to say, 'They should get a job, those people don't want to work'; and that was because there was work where I was. Now: 'I am in the Association, but not really thinking about my own future, but that of my sons who are Argentinean'.

I want to highlight this part of Roque's narrative. He claimed that all his efforts working in the Association, blockading roads, and organising neighbours, 'is not really for me,' but for 'my sons the Argentineans'. In other words, his own situation as an unemployed worker is not a sufficient justification, but rather it is the nationality of his children that legitimises his actions.

Obviously, if he feels the need to justify his actions, it is because he believes his right to demand is being questioned. Both Bolivian and Paraguayan women have told me how, the moment they come down from the vehicle that transports them to a street protest, that is, at the very moment that they begin to behave as (if they were) citizens, they are sometimes confronted by middle-class Argentineans asking them where they are from, or directly accusing them of being foreigners: 'You are foreigners: go back to your own country!' In other words, according to their stories and perceptions, at the moment when they block a road, when they demonstrate publicly, or when they demand their rights from the state, immigrants are usually challenged.

These narrations always surprised me – on the one hand, because even though I had heard various criticisms and accusations against the *piqueteros*, I never realised that anyone saw them as foreigners; on the other, because, even though I was present at dozens of street blockades, I never witnessed such a confrontation. If these altercations were as common as these women said they were, they would represent an additional example of what I have described as the process of 'foreignisation' of the popular sectors in Argentina (Grimson, 2007a).

However, my surprise at not having witnessed this situation (which obviously does not diminish the validity of their story) pushes me to suggest that there may be yet another possible interpretation. The Paraguayans and Bolivians who participate in organisations for the unemployed have always been particularly ambivalent about becoming part of protests in public roads. As victims of stigmas and discriminations, and even of open police prosecution, they never visualised themselves politically in that manner. In any case, those who did participate in protests during the 1960s did so as an expression of a fashionable *latinoamericanismo*, at a time when nationality had a very different meaning.

Thus, the alternative or complementary interpretation would indicate that in the blockades, *they* are the ones worried about their nationality. Immigrants participate in the protests, self-conscious about their nationality and, in many cases, also about their illegal status. The result is that every accusation, every time someone yells at them to 'leave', every complaint about them being a bother, every challenge to their right to protest (common allegations, for example, from Justice and Police forces, aimed at all *piquetero* blockades), is interpreted by Bolivians and Paraguayans as if it were, at least in part, a questioning of their rights based on their nationality. Another speculation is that immigrants, afraid of participating in protests due to their status, can ascribe an accusatory nature to any contest or dispute that may be produced by their actions, in a particular situation. When they are questioned about their actions, they interpret it as a confrontation due to their origin.

This conjecture is based on the sharp contrast between these perceptions, the absence of these confrontations from my own observational records, and the explanations from other participants in the protests. Adding to an already nuanced situation is Roque's own description of events, in which he claims that journalists, covering the blockades, usually ask him: 'Are you from here?' He answers:

   No, but I have been here for over 15 years and my children are Argentinean. I then ask them whether they think that because I am Paraguayan I am not allowed to do this. I am going to continue to live here.

Beyond the speculations, what is clear is that immigrants have internalised such confrontations. It is even possible to suggest that this is a reason why they do not feel the need to engage in some form of civic participation, or at the very least, that it is a factor that frames their modes of participation. Roque believed that he could not protest because he was Paraguayan, and that he did not have any rights because he was an immigrant. Although, nowadays, the belief that immigrants are not subject to rights seems almost natural, in reality it is the result of a historical situation generated by a specific notion of citizenship, linked to nationality and origin. If we compare them to the European immigrants who arrived in Argentina towards the end of the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century, it is apparent that most of them believed that they had

certain rights, due to the mere fact that they were workers, beyond their nationality. On the contrary, if we observe the public protests of Argentineans in Spain, we discover that they believe they have the right to collectively remain there because they are the descendants of Spaniards and Europeans. In this latter case, rights seem to be the product of origin.

The story about Sonia, the Bolivian who did not dare discipline the children in the dining hall for fear that they would challenge her, demonstrates that this apprehension is not limited to situations of protest or public demonstrations. There is fear in an adult who worries about his or her authority being questioned by an Argentinean child, and fear of being assaulted or harassed for the simple fact of being Bolivian. These are two extreme situations: in one, they are challenged with violence; in the other, they freeze into inaction when faced by a child whom they are serving, inside an organisation to which they themselves belong.

Nationality and nationalism in *piquetero* groups

For the unemployed workers organisations, nationality and ethnicity play yet another role in the construction of class actions and identity. During blockades and *piquetero* protests there is a varying, yet constant, use of national symbols: the Argentinean flag, the national colours, and the anthem. The meaning behind the use of these symbols is often about making claims, since the pride felt for them also highlights the workers' exclusion. This exclusion is lived as a form of humiliation, and is challenged by emphasising a dignity that comes out of the workers' demands for state recognition. In other words, the act of demanding that the state acknowledge them implies a sense of dignity.

Rights, citizenship and nationality are so intertwined, that the workers' use of national symbols refers directly to what is being threatened: those who are excluded (conceptualised as 'the people' or 'unemployed workers'), as well as the project for inclusion (conceptualised as 'the nation').

I have demonstrated how the 'Nation' can be used as an important resource to legitimise workers' demands of the state (Grimson, 2003a and 2007b). Those who have been excluded from this national context do not have any rights (slaves in the past, illegal aliens in the present), like in the case of 19th century definitions of 'Brazilian', or what tends to happen today, with definitions of citizenship and legality (see Grimson, 2003a and b).

Thus, the participants interpret the presence of these national symbols during protests as an argument for their right to be included. This is particularly evident in protests where the dilemma is not one that constitutes an 'up/down' relationship (as it is in a labour

dispute for better wages), but rather 'inside/outside'. Yet, this is not the way all of the members understand it. *Piqueteros,* who were born in Paraguay or Bolivia, have explained to me that they feel excluded by the anthem and the flag. For them, Argentinean symbols confirm that not only do the laws marginalise them for not having documents, but that a shared sense of identity also stigmatises them, even when they do have documents, especially the Bolivians. For immigrants, the act of protesting *as Argentineans,* reintroduces the question of whether they really do have a right to make demands. The presence of these symbols reminds them that, within a more formalised common understanding, their rights are not absolute, but rather situational in a double sense: first, because they are in the country (and eventually they might have Argentinean children), and second because the *piquetero* groups do not impose limits to join the protests, which are still always carried out with Argentinean flags.

Although those who have Argentinean children can formally obtain the rights of every citizen, they still believe that their origin requires an additional explanation. In other words, they feel that 'society' (journalists, passers-by, neighbours, children) constantly demands an explanation about their national origin. Whether or not that explanation is ever overtly requested, immigrants have deeply internalised this feeling: for them, their rights are not a result of having worked for five, ten or 20 years in the country, but rather, a result of having children who were born here.

Since 'being foreign' and protesting are believed to be incompatible, it is inconceivable for them to make their foreign-ness explicit by bringing Paraguayan or Bolivian flags to the demonstrations. This only occurred a few years later, after the so-called 'Tragedia de Caballito' (Caballito tragedy), in which several Bolivian workers died in an informal textile factory, forcing the city government to threaten to close down most of these workspaces. The Bolivians responded with protests and Bolivian flags, demanding that they remain open. Meanwhile, Argentinean journalists speculated that Andean culture, which is 'naturally submissive', was the reason why Bolivian workers would defend their exploiters. In this particular case, which deserves a separate analysis, the government and the media's ethnocentrism led them to characterise the workers' actions and accusations in terms of their ethnicity, which in turn led to the ethnisation of the protests as well.

On the other hand, in the context of the *piquetes*, although the Argentinean flag was used to support the workers' demands for certain rights, many believed that the Bolivian or Paraguayan flags would undermine their claims. This was a common opinion shared by the different actors involved. In other words, immigrants can join the protests as long as they do not stand out, or as long as they hide their national identity once they are at the protest. The highly defined ethnic presence in the life of the *villa*, and in the activities of the unemployed workers' associations from *barrios* with a strong immigrant

population, becomes one of class identification, once they are in the public sphere and presenting their demands.

The relevance and meaning of ethnicity is modified by context. As such, there are groups of Bolivian seamstresses, or groups of construction workers formed by Paraguayans, or movements in which networks of a specific nationality increase to the extent that they become a significant majority. Thus, as long as differences of origin (not only national, but provincial) play an important role and are also a cause for conflict in the construction of networks, and in the daily life of the neighbourhood, this diversity must be incorporated into an Argentinean identity, when workers publicly express their demands.

Final reflections

The three meanings of the term 'class' that I discussed at the beginning of this paper (structural, cultural, and as a form of identification) are present in the *villa* at different times, and in different ways.

Certainly, we have not focused this analysis on the structural dimension, but it is important to point out the impact of time in the types of occupations, jobs, productive knowhow and interventions in the lives of the inhabitants of the *villa.* Underneath the social homogeneity apparent when observing the *villa* from outside, there are construction workers, cleaning women, university students, housewives, 'todistas' (a local category to describe those who perform any odd job), storekeepers, petty thieves, municipal workers, and activists who live side by side. For better or worse they depend on social and political activities for their livelihood, as well as a considerable number of occupations, including precarious businessmen. Generally associated with workers who cannot access a formal job and the corresponding rights that come with it, the notion of precariousness can also refer to those who may have bought a few machines and acquired a certain knowhow, but who continue to develop their activities in a deeply precarious context: not only in their hiring practices, but also in their acquisition of raw materials, commercialisation, installations, and in their absolute inability to access credit.

This composition contrasts with other neighbourhoods surrounding major businesses (like the cement company, or the electric company), or those composed of workers in a specific industry (like the area surrounding the port), or a 'company town', with its neighbourhoods organised by the job hierarchy inside the plant. The *villa* I am analysing presents greater class heterogeneity than all of these other places. However, since the late 1990s, and with the economic crisis that spanned from 2001 to 2003, a tendency towards the homogenisation of the various resident groups and sectors developed. In structural terms, and in relation to living conditions and job types, an increase in

unemployment tends to rapidly narrow the gap between groups. Our fieldwork was developed in a context where these differences had been reduced to their bare minimum. However, it was clear that although this was a catalyst for new social phenomena, traces of occupational heterogeneity remained.

Class, in terms of 'culture', offers more difficulties and dilemmas than clear solutions. If we understand the concept of culture as related to different types of experience, with interpretative frameworks as horizons for social and political imagination, and as the articulation of practices, the *villa* offers enough empirical data both for and against an understanding of it as a culture. This *villa* in particular*,* (but also many others) has very clear borders, and is a relatively short distance, but significantly separated, from the rest of the city. Certainly, from political processes to the news on crime, from the festivities to the fears, all have very different meanings 'inside' and 'outside' of the *villa.* Based on the data previously analysed, it is clear how the '*19th of December*' presents a radically different significance for those in the *villa*, compared to what the *cacerolazo* (the upheaval characterised by people banging pots in protest) may have meant for the middle and upper middle-class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. It is impossible for the people from the middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods to imagine the significance the people of the *villas* give to this date, nor to recognise or incorporate this contrasting experience into their own. Therefore, this contrast is an 'objective' one (there are different ways of giving meaning to the same situation), but is not perceived in subjective terms in the particular example included here.

When the subjective character of these distinct realities is taken into consideration, in the sense that 'walking the streets by night' is not the same in the upper middle-class neighbourhoods, which are guarded, as it is in the *villa,* or the way in which dirt roads contrast with asphalt, and so on, then the experience of living together in the *villa,* with all of its heterogeneities, also becomes a form of identification.

It is evident that different labour, provincial, ethnic, national, gender, or generational groups, or sometimes several of these aspects articulated together, perceive, classify, imagine, fear and act in truly different ways, even while living in contiguous houses. I argue, however, that, in a general sense, there are shared experiences that highlight not only misery, hunger or poverty, but also the understanding of certain different types of meanings between the different groups that coexist in the *villa*. In other words, in some ways, they share and understand their own daily heterogeneity. If we do not claim that 'class' and 'class culture' imply total homogeneity, we can find very interesting elements in this context.

The different perspectives that give meaning to daily events simultaneously generate a greater distance and a porous identity between Argentineans and foreigners. There is a greater distance, inasmuch as groups can instrumentally manipulate their and others'

national and legal identities in different contexts, in order to compete for access to scarce resources. There is a greater porosity, because sometimes foreigners are admitted into organisations for the unemployed, and sometimes they themselves lead those organisations.

Laclau has asked, in what situations is there a differentiation or equivalence between the demands of different organisations. In terms of Laclau's model (1996), if we compare the situation in the 1990s with the period after 2001, we can detect a change from a regime originally based on differences between organisations and their demands, to one based much more on their equivalences. However, the case of these *barrios* illustrates processes that are difficult to reduce to such a model.

There is a reduction in differentiation that occurs when people with ethnic identifications are incorporated into organisations in which the dominant form of identification is through class alliance. A certain equivalence of people, one that includes both the unemployed and Bolivian residents who are also victims of the crisis, is established. The demand for employment reorders and subordinates all other demands, but is not part of a chain of equivalents with demands for documents, regularisation of land ownership, or legalisation. In other words, there is a certain transfer of people who were previously involved in those demands, who later become part of organisations that emerge in relation to the immediate unemployment crisis.

This contrasts with the protests by the UOCRA (Unión Obrera de la Construcción de la República Argentina) on 5 August 1998, when more than 10,000 construction workers rose up to demand better safety measures at construction sites. This was the result of several accidents where workers were being killed at an average of 85 deaths per month. Bolivian workers also took part in these protests, since security issues have no bearing on nationality. However, they had to march together as a separate group, together with Peruvians and Paraguayans, all of them victims of discrimination by their fellow workers. Chants arose from within the columns of the unions: 'We are Argentineans and Peronistas', and also, 'We are Argentineans, not *bolitas*'. A worker even declared to the newspaper *Clarin:* 'They [the foreigners] are responsible for us not earning more.'

Evidently, the debate during the *villa's* assembly, and the generalised inclusion of immigrant organisations for the unemployed, contrasts with the success of those xenophobic campaigns organised by the unions. Until now, however, equivalence between the demands of the organisations has not been established, which is a necessary condition for the creation of a new consensus. In other words, neither the Junta Vecinal nor the organisations for the unemployed are demanding that immigrants be granted official documents, just as the immigrant organisations are not specifically demanding employment or employment plans. In fact, the organisations of border-

country immigrants were the only groups from the popular sector that were not transformed by the 'Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados'.

Although there is a flow of people between organisations, each remains associated to a specific type of demand, which impedes any kind of aggregate effect. Furthermore, certain junctures may alter the relevance of certain demands and the organisations that express them. There is also a change in the forms in which ethnicity and class are articulated. The distance created by the years since I conducted my fieldwork allows me to question whether the overlap of people, but not their demands from one organisation to another, ultimately meant a less permanent, fragile phenomenon, which was rapidly reversible once the acute moments of the crisis were over. Whatever the case, the experiences shared during protests, the organisations themselves, and the joining together of demands are experiences that are potentially personal, social and culturally different, and their effects still need to be compared and analysed with other cases.

In this context, the labour and food crisis of the *villa* caused, among other results, the instrumental manipulation of internal differences. The shared experiences also compelled the residents to cross yet another frontier: to leave the *villa* as a group and present themselves in a public space, in order to reiteratively demand employment and social plans. Thus, social heterogeneity was thought about and processed in a new way, creating what we could call a 'strategic classism', through the use of class as a basis for identification. In ethnicity studies it has been accepted that the claims of indigenous peoples, or minority groups, based on the past, inheritance, a relationship to a specific environment, or a shared culture, do not always imply a full or necessary conviction from the actors that their rights originate in nature. In that sense, the recognition of a relationship between forces, and the social legitimacy of certain preservationist discourses of diversity, can push a group to make use of a culturalist essentialism as a political strategy to legitimate their claims. Similarly, in the context of the 2002-03 crisis, the inhabitants of this *villa* seem to have been compelled to make use of the only category that could unite them above all forms of difference, and to suspend those differences, although still often functioning silently (and sometimes at the heart of an assembly) in shared organisations. Classism, in this case, more than the definite, final and irreversible constitution of a 'class for itself', seems to have become the best political strategy that some (if not all) residents of the *villa* found in this specific historical juncture.

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