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## Political Opportunities and Protest Mobilization in Argentina

### Abstract

*This study applies opportunity structures to the research of protest mobilization. It argues that institutional contexts affect the ways social movements mobilize their supporters. In Argentina, the success of middle class mobilization largely depends on external resources provided by the mass media, while the organizations of unemployed piqueteros use state social aid programs to maintain organizations with participation patterns that can effectively and with few extra costs mobilize members. Lack of media interest in collective action or a different kind of social aid distribution system would render Argentine movements much weaker than they currently are. Thus, there is a divergence between the actual opportunities social movements use and the political opportunities social movement scholarship prioritizes, such as elite reactions and repression. When it comes to protest mobilization in which facilitation by the state and the media play an important role, actual and theoretical political opportunities fall into different categories.*

**Keywords:** protest mobilization, political opportunity theory, social movements, *Piqueteros*, Argentina

### Introduction

In Argentina, memories of military dictatorship (1976-83) and the economic crash that incited the popular resistance that overthrew the president (2001) have created a civil society that remains strong and often even oppositional. Although Argentine civil society values horizontal mobilization structures, it is simultaneously capable of using state redistributions and the vulnerability of political elites to strengthen itself. Therefore, Argentina provides an interesting arena for studying political opportunities in a particular context. This article applies the opportunity structure approach to examine mobilizations for demonstrations in Argentina.

Earlier political opportunity research has largely neglected examining what the actual state institutions social movements interact with are and how state institutions distributing public benefits affect social movements. In order to examine political opportunities really used by social movements, this article concentrates on one country, Argentina, and one type of action, protest mobilization. It recognizes that other social movement activities might rely on different mixes of political opportunities. Indeed, earlier research shows that Argentine civil society utilizes legal avenues and transnational norms to punish human rights violations (Sikkink 2005; Friedman and Hochstetler 2002), and partnerships with the government for service provision (Jacobs and Maldonado 2005). Examining actual perceptions and uses of political opportunities by movements themselves in light of one activity central to social movements, such as protest mobilization, is useful for testing how much political opportunities actually used converge with theoretical macro-level opportunity analysis.

During my two fieldwork periods in 2004-2005 and 2006, I engaged in participatory observation and supplemented it with interviews and casual conversations with people involved. I was personally there at *piquetero*, AMIA and Cromañon demonstrations, among many others. I participated in meetings of two *asambleas* to observe structures of protest mobilization. I watched Argentine television to analyze how demonstrations were reported between December 2004 and January 2007 and examined how movement organizations portrayed their activities in their own publications.

## Political Opportunities

The concept of political opportunity deals with opportunities that are derived from the interaction of social movements and political actors or institutions (Koopmans 1999: 97-98). Political opportunities "influence the choice of protest strategies and the impact of social movements on their environments" (Kitschelt 1986: 58) To utilize political opportunities, civil society actors need to recognize the available external resources (Tarrow 1998: 77), although their perception may be unrealistic or incorrect (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Social movements need to take into account the structure of the political system and political opportunities provided by this system. Yet, the framework of political opportunities has seldom been used to examine how social movements themselves perceive political opportunities available and which particular openings they use. Instead, as Diani (1996) criticizes, from the numerous possible opportunities to explain a movement's success or failure, scholars too often choose only the ones that seem to fit the case. As Koopmans (1999: 102) emphasizes, political opportunity structure is a context-sensitive analytical tool. Therefore, a study of political opportunities should start from an empirical study of a movement's strategies, activities, or the outcomes it seeks. Only then is it possible to determine whether something was perceived as an opportunity or proved useful for promoting a movement's aims. For example, not all movements seek political access, in some cases because of their anti-system values (Hilson 2002). In other cases the movement lacks the political, social and economic power to use opportunities they know to exist (George 2001: 120). Evidently, the availability of opportunities explains social movements insofar as movements really try to use these opportunities (Sikkink 2005).

Nevertheless, the concept of opportunity structures suggests that forces external to the movement have an impact on its success. Although political opportunity research has paid little attention to agency (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), it would be a mistake to highlight only agency at the expense of structure (Morris and Staggenborg 2004). Kriesi (2004: 68) maintains that opportunities consist of objective external constraints and actors' choices among perceived opportunities. Thus, political opportunities cannot be directly derived from external structures and even less can these structures determine outcomes. According to Amenta and Caren (2004: 473), scholarship has failed to predict which political opportunities will be favorable to a particular social movement. Social movements often fail when they are encouraged by exactly the kinds of opportunities the theory sees useful (e.g., McAdam 1996: 28; in fact also Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 112-113). A scholarly macro-level political analysis of opportunities sometimes diverges widely from the movements' own interpretation of the situation, which nevertheless can prove accurate (Kurzman 1996; Kenney 2001). Evidently, social movements themselves participate in shaping political opportunity structures (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Thus, opportunities are complex and negotiated processes that are often unpredictable for both social movement actors and scholars. Nevertheless, research still addresses poorly the dynamic and strategic nature of opportunities.

Goodwin and Jasper (1999) warn researchers from conflating the physical capacities of the institution and their use, which depends on people's intentions and choices. Therefore, political culture, such as prevailing strategies with respect to challengers (Kriesi et al. 1992), is an important

element of opportunity structures. Opportunities open because movements and political institutions react to actions and utterances by the adversary. These reactions can be based on strategic calculations, but also on impressions, emotions, and habits. Movement demands need to be made into electoral issues or legislative motions, potential elite allies need to be persuaded, state-provided financing for civil society activities must be applied for in competition with other organizations, lawsuits must be prepared for and media attention needs to be gained. Because political opportunities are negotiated, their outcome is always unpredictable. Negotiation is not always verbal but is often based on the interpretation of an adversary's prior action.

Scholars using the political opportunity approach recognize that other factors, such as resources, framing, identities, organizational forms, networks and tactics affect the destinies of social movements (McAdam et al. 1996, Tarrow 1998, della Porta and Diani 1999). Scholars like Crossley (2002) and Klandermans (2004) attempt to build a theoretical framework taking into account several factors explaining social movements. However, there is little research on how political opportunities relate to these other factors. We already know that framing can open opportunities (Kenney 2001; Diani 1996), but how political opportunities relate to grievances, resources, networks and repertoires is understudied. A social movement can hardly emerge if there is no cause, resources and networks, however auspicious the political opportunity structure might be; and political opportunities available to movements vary according to their issue, resources, networks and tactics. This article shows that sometimes there is a direct link between political opportunities and resource accumulation.

Political opportunity research has a very limited perception of the state, which is much more than only a decision-making structure and a mechanism of repression. Social movement research has examined the state mainly with an approach familiar from the pluralist model. Tarrow (1998) lists access, division within elites, elite allies and tools of repression as central elements of opportunity structures. Apart from repression, these are the avenues pluralist theory (e.g. Dahl 1968) presumes interest groups to use. Others assume that social movements can use the same channels as interest groups do (Kitschelt 1986: 63). However, social movements differ from interest groups because they by definition use collective action. What meaning is left to collective action if direct negotiations with political elites or institutions are enough to bring about the desired result? As Koopmans (1999) states, access itself tells very little about whether collective action is needed to promote the cause. Many groups resort to collective action exactly because they are excluded and thus communicate with the decision-makers indirectly through collective action (e.g. Taylor and van Dyke 2004). Even when social movements make demands to the state, collective action often communicates primarily with society and the media. Therefore, research should find out how collective action relates to access to the political system or elite actors that some, but not all, social movements seek. Moreover, apart from policy change social movements pursue other aims, such as mobilization, resource building and attitudinal change and use available political, social and cultural opportunities for these aims too. Evidently, questions of how political opportunities give birth to collective action and of how collective action translates into mechanisms producing policy outcomes remain understudied. This article probes the first question and seeks the opportunities that encourage collective action in present-day Argentina.

Earlier research has examined political opportunities mainly in terms of elite reactions. When political opportunity research has examined political institutions, it has studied division and decentralization of power to determine points of access to the political system (della Porta and Diani 1999: 196-199). This is a very narrow understanding of the state. For ordinary citizens or grassroots organizations the state often presents itself as a bureaucratic structure with which one needs to interact either to comply with laws and regulations or for particular gains. As Einwohner (1999) observes, the analysis of only the broad levels of the state runs the risk of obscuring specific,

localized factors that create opportunities for social movements. Social movements may look for elite allies to promote policies favorable to them, or they may seek access to the system on much lower levels of bureaucracy in order to cause changes in either regulation or implementation, but they may also try to appeal to society instead of the polity to change certain practices. Only some movements seek elite response, but all movements need to consider the lawfulness of their strategies and all registered movement organizations need to cope with rules concerning registration and taxation. Scholars need to pay more attention to local level administration and individual bureaucracies having direct influence on movements. Although power distributions tell something about the location of officials that social movements can target or ally with, examining state institutions on the macro-level reveals only very little about institutions that social movements actually use. As Pharr (2003: 323) notes, states not only enable and constrain but also inspire, create and sponsor civil society activities through legislation, taxation and the distribution of public benefits. The state can both repress and facilitate social movements (Tilly 1978). Therefore, apart from the ability "to gain access to power and to manipulate the political system" (Eisinger 1973: 25), political opportunity structures should include concrete institutions and laws that facilitate, obstruct, or guide organizational forms and activities the civil society adopts. In this way, the external political and institutional context becomes relevant for those movements that do not seek political outcomes (which the customary political opportunity structure model according to Goodwin and Jasper 1999 ignores), but still need to operate within the jurisdiction of a contemporary state and to interact with public institutions. This approach permits analysis of movements taking place in politically, culturally and institutionally different conditions. Foweraker (1995) and Davis (1999) see Latin America as a challenging arena for the standard social movement theories because social needs and civil society relationships with the state are not the same as in European and North American democracies.

Opportunity structure researchers have assumed that, because of their stability, political institutions seldom explain the emergence of movements and changes in the levels of mobilization as well as elite composition does (della Porta and Diani 1999). In fact, stability of institutions is not a problem in explaining new movements and new strategies because in contemporary democratic states political opportunities are so numerous that no movement can exhaust them all. Useful new political opportunities are constantly found by social movements. They innovate by applying for financing through a certain state distribution system or by appealing to individual laws to legitimize their activities or to produce desired judicial outcomes. Although the constitutional features of a political system are relatively stable, contemporary states constantly issue new legislation, introduce new policies, allocate new resources and reorganize their bureaucracies. Below the static constitutional level, state institutions are no less dynamic than elite compositions are. Particular laws, regulations, bureaucratic practices, authorities, electoral procedures, court decisions, etc. can all provide political opportunities for social movements.

Limiting attention to a fixed set of opportunities only makes it impossible to find out whether factors outside of this set can explain social movements better. Case studies testing more than one type of explanation have seldom corroborated the customary set of political opportunities (see Meyer 2004). This either means that the explanatory power of political opportunities is small or that research has sought the wrong types of political opportunities. In order to refrain from stretching the concept, something should be understood as a political opportunity only if it is political and institutional (or derives from authority that is institutionalized) and is perceived as an opportunity. Non-political external constraints that social movement face should be treated as social opportunities; cultural opportunities, one type of which are discursive opportunities (Koopmans and Statham 2000: 37); economic opportunities and geographic opportunities, such as snowballing, in which democratization in one country encourages democracy movements in other countries in the same region (Huntington 1993). The picture of protest mobilization in Argentina - the focus of this

article - would be incomplete without examining the opportunities the media provides. Some scholars (Gamson and Meyer 1996) include the media in political opportunities, although they might also belong to the discursive opportunity structure, or there might be special media opportunities (Crossley 2002) available. Whichever the category, the media provide an important external opportunity for social movements without which it is impossible to understand some common protest mobilization patterns in Argentina.

## History

Already in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina, people sought political influence primarily through civil society activities and public protests while being inactive in electoral politics, and already then the press and associations played important roles in protest mobilization (Sabato 2001). Waisbord (1996) demonstrates the continuity of the tradition of political gatherings in plazas and streets not only for protests, but also for Argentine party politics. Considering continuities in the political style, it is not surprising that some organizations still active in street politics have decades of history.

One cluster of social movements centers on Peronism. Since 1940s, Peronism has been one of the most successful ideologies for social organization in Argentina and the Peronist party (*Partido Justicialista*) has extended its reach to society through close relationships to various social organizations. Its ideology of social justice, nationalism and citizenship has appealed to the working class (James 1988), but also to radical students and marginalized people. Peronists have their links with some trade unions, student groups and *piquetero* organizations and the party itself still possesses mass character. Some of these relationships are clientelistic (Levitsky 2003, Auyero 1999), others are looser and based more on ideological message than material exchanges. Nevertheless, many Peronist-linked organizations and movements are not mobilized from-top-to-down. For example, left-leaning Peronist president Kirchner (2003-7) eagerly extended his support base by meeting various independent social movements, such as Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Gualeguaychú environmental movement. Even the campaign to reelect President Kirchner in 2007 was launched by the president's supporters, not his own campaign organization. Soon after the campaign was started in summer 2006, president Nestor Kirchner refused to rerun, after which his support group turned to his wife Christina to run for the presidency. Peronism is a loose umbrella and an ideological framework - or, as Levitsky (1998) puts it, its institutionalization relies on value infusion and a little on behavioral routinization. Not all branches of Peronism see that the reality of Peronist party rule accords well with the Peronist ideal. Some have been ready to engage in *peronismo militante* even under a Peronist government. In the 1970s, a radical Peronist guerilla movement even took up arms against the right-wing Peronist government. Consequently, many leftist activists persecuted during the military dictatorship belonged to Peronist organizations. Many of their organizations have been revived since the dictatorship. Now revolutionary Peronists, trade unions, Peronist *piqueteros* and movements built around Peronist politicians are all active in street politics.

The political violence that occurred during the military dictatorship (1976-83) created a human rights front that brought together activists across the political and religious spectrum (Jelin 1994) and gave birth to new groups with political demands centered on human rights violations, such as Madres de Plaza de Mayo, an organization of the mothers whose children disappeared as victims of state violence (Bosco 2001). The human rights movement has been visible in Argentine street politics ever since.

Since the revival of democracy in Argentina, the government's economic policy has created new social movements. The neoliberal policy of president Menem (1989-99) and economic crash during the president de la Rúa rule (1999-2001) caused many people to lose their economic security. The

1990s saw the birth of the *piquetero* movement organizing the unemployed (Isman 2004; Svampa and Pereyra 2003), while pot-banging *cacerolazos* largely from middle class backgrounds protested the government's decision to freeze their savings and general economic distress following the economic crash of 2001. The popular protest movement led to the collapse of the government in December 2001, which caused attempts to create societal alternatives to state structures and services. Neighborhoods saw the rise of *asambleas* as local decision-making bodies (Dinerstein 2003), while workers' cooperatives continued production in bankrupted enterprises (Korol 2005) and housing cooperatives built or squatted residences for homeless people. *Piqueteros*, *asambleas* and worker cooperatives adopted horizontal decision-making structures challenging vertical state structures. Although generally these structures brought more democracy to grassroots politics, their local base and small scale making direct democracy possible simultaneously means that these movements are highly fragmented. In some *piquetero* organizations the grassroots is even subjected to decisions made at a higher level of organizational hierarchy.

In addition, Argentina has many social movements rising from a special grievance. These movements start after victimization happens. Victim movements include those led by the relatives and friends of the dead in the disco fire in Cromañon in 2004 or the anti-Semitic bomb attack against AMIA in 1994. Apart from accidents and crimes, the public can react to threats. The environmental movement of Gualeguaychú began in 2003 to oppose the plans to build two pulp mills to the opposite Uruguayan side of the river. Other construction plans have caused movements on a smaller scale.

## How to Mobilize a Protest

This article examines political opportunities currently used for protest mobilization in Argentina. In order to know what kind of opportunities are decisive for protest mobilization, it will first look into how demonstrations are mobilized. Next it will scrutinize the role of the political system in generating opportunities for mobilization. Then it will evaluate two widely researched political opportunities, state repression and the role of the elites, in an Argentine context.

## Mobilization for Single-Issue Movements

In Argentina the middle class is highly politicized. Middle class demonstrators are mobilized around issues like justice, security and livelihood. The pot-banging movement (*cacerolazos*) that emerged in 2001 during the bank crisis is the most famous middle class movement for livelihood issues, while justice is the main demand in victim movements. Many of these movements draw thousands of demonstrators. Television plays an important role in mobilizing crowds not belonging to the organizing networks. It usually reports the location of demonstration in live broadcasts and sometimes even in advance. Television reported the date several times for days preceding the demonstration for security held on 13 July 2006, following some shocking killings in Buenos Aires. The demonstration began as what television described as a symbolic, more than real, attempt to block the road by a small group of people, but it grew into a demonstration of thousands. Many must have come spontaneously when they saw on television that the demonstration was on, although the presence of highly prestigious speakers from several victims' movements show that the event was meticulously organized. Sometimes organizing core networks themselves are extensive enough to mobilize large crowds. The Jewish community in Buenos Aires can itself mobilize thousands of people to commemorate the anniversary of the AMIA bombings each July. Wide preexisting networks were available when over 70 neighborhood associations staged simultaneous street demonstrations against developmental plans in their own neighborhoods (Clarín, 23 Nov 2006). However, in most middle class mobilizations a small core network must seek support from the media to reach a substantial number of people.

Middle class issues receive more attention in Argentine media than most other social groups can expect. It is thus easy for the middle class to reach large audiences as long as activities receive media attention. Without help from the media, mobilization failure often results. For example, the issue of the savings frozen in 2001 by the government must be in the interest of large parts of the middle class. However, without media assistance in mobilization two separate but almost simultaneous demonstrations on 18 July 2006 failed to attract people through personal contacts, such as distributing leaflets. One was even arranged for a place where a gathering of larger crowds would have been possible only by blocking traffic, which the organizers were not prepared to do. Another succeeded in gathering together perhaps one hundred participants, but I saw no media present there either.

Most middle class movements are single-issue movements. These are challenging when it comes to movement maintenance and staying in the focus of media attention. Movements accompanying court cases or involving anniversaries have natural peaks of mobilization and media attention. However, most movements tend to fade unless they adopt new tactics or issues. Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the movement of mothers whose children disappeared during the military dictatorship, has survived by adopting for their agenda wider advocacy of human and social rights and by allying with other political actors, such as president Kirchner, *piqueteros*, or even Cuban president Castro. They regenerate their symbolic moral supremacy in Argentine politics by continuing their ritual Thursday gatherings at the Plaza de Mayo, which nowadays draw few spectators. However, symbolic capital thus gained is used elsewhere when Madres display their prestigious presence in events organized by others. Madres have been successful in combining their popular movement basis and formal organization. They maintain a very inclusive agenda, expanding according to leaders' concerns, not according to organizational ethos.

However, most middle-class movements in Argentina cannot maintain a high level of mobilization or media attention for very long. For example, the victim movement by the Cromañon disco fire survivors and the victims' relatives has used its moral authority to achieve a public memorial center and even dismissal of the Buenos Aires mayor. The movement was still able to gather a massive demonstration on the one and a half year anniversary of the fire on 30 June 2006, since relatives and friends of the 194 dead form an efficient network for mobilization. However, the movement is acutely aware of the fact that the media no longer pays much attention to it (a victim's mother, 30 June 2006).

### Piqueteros: Membership Mobilization

If middle class participation in Argentine demonstrations is mainly issue-based, the same is not true with most leftist groups and social movements. According to De Piero (2005: 174), the *piquetero* movement of the unemployed has managed to bring together a cluster of issues under which many different problems can be dealt with. The *piquetero* movement is characterized by shared concerns and methods but organizational fragmentation. This situation is evident in *piquetero* demonstrations in which different groups march under the banners of their own organization or even suborganization. Organizational symbols and group-based formations in demonstrations reveal that leftist organizations principally concentrate on mobilizing their own members. Although many appeal to the wider public by advertising demonstrations in street posters, a strong emphasis on organizational affiliation hinders inclusion of people without affiliation. It feels difficult to fit in, even if one supports the cause, when one has to march behind the banners of highly politicized groups, some of which use masked security guards armed with batons. I have seen some individual middle class Argentines joining leftist demonstrations, but more often outsiders show support as spectators who hang around or blow car horns.

*Piqueteros* have an organizational structure efficient for intra-group mobilization. Members regularly gather together to make decisions in *asambleas*, which also serve as arenas for mobilization and keep the costs of communicating with members low. I had a chance to observe how Asamblea de San Telmo (AST) organizes the local poor. As in *piquetero* organizations, in AST social and political aspects of its work are tightly interwoven. Its *asamblea* deals with both ideological and practical welfare issues in the same meeting, and after a demonstration members return to the AST canteen to have a snack there. The people with interest only in the welfare aspect of *asamblea* are thus constantly exposed to its political agenda. Many are drawn in because they need basic benefits, beginning with food, offered by AST, and AST welcomes them as such. Its leaders are highly motivated in helping the poor and told me that helping brings them psychological satisfaction (interview on 20 July 2006). It was easy to see in an *asamblea* meeting that many participants were not particularly interested in an ideological topic dealt with, but at the same time it still was ideology, not social issues, that raised the discussion and that a much larger part of the *asamblea* participated in this discussion than I had expected. Constant exposure to the group political values had evidently capacitated many poor and little educated participants politically. Social issues and mobilization for the coming week's demonstration were given as announcements and did not cause discussion. For both needs, *asamblea* forms an ideal arena for informing many at the same time, and information about services AST provides to members must explain many people's attendance. Protest mobilization simply contained information about where and when the demonstration was to take place and a short introduction to reasons why members should take part. Apart from an arena for informing participants, *asamblea* provides wide networks usable for mobilization.

To mobilize its own ranks, *piquetero* organizations need to go through *asambleas* in each of its suborganizations. The procedure takes time, but it makes every member aware of her particular role in the actual demonstration (Masseti 2004: 103). The time lost to deciding whether and how to participate is won back in the time used for mobilization. An organization in which the leadership alone makes the decision needs to appeal to potential demonstrators afterwards, while an organization having made the decision in an *asamblea* can tell whether, or even how many of, its members will come. One could assume that cumulative consensus-building efforts would hinder cooperation between organizations, but this is not the case. Since suborganizations are relatively autonomous and participate in common actions under their own banners, horizontal cooperation between different organizations of the left often enrolls cooperation of a suborganization rather than an organization as a whole. Moreover, there are established arenas for inter-group communication. *Piquetero* organizations try to overcome fragmentation of the movement by establishing umbrella organizations and by organizing forums to find a united line of action. Although these attempts have never succeeded in uniting all organizations, they contribute to friendships, networks and shared identities through which mobilization crossing organizational boundaries is accomplished.

Reliance on either the media or intra-organizational *asamblea* in protest mobilization does not follow strict class division. Poor people without a strong organizational mobilizational base often fail to attract attendance without the help of the media, as happened to the event for indigenous Argentines on 19 July 2006 despite its attempt to attract passers-by with a concert. Some middle-class movements have their own *asambleas* and mobilize through them. One of them is the citywide environmental movement in Gualeguaychú (Salmenkari 2007). When needed, it can activate its networks by phone and e-mail (*asamblea* secretary and member, 11 July 2006). In 12 July 2006, I saw how the Gualeguaychú movement succeeded in attracting perhaps 200 persons and several journalists to an *asamblea* meeting that its leaders had not even known was taking place the day before.



## Opportunities Used for Protest Mobilization

The opportunity structures that directly assist mobilization in Argentine movements include the media and the institutions distributing social benefits. Both help movements keep the costs of mobilization low. Mobilization through television makes extensive mobilization possible even for groups without formal organization, while mobilization through *asambleas* requires much effort in organization maintenance but provides ready-made channels for mobilization.

### Public Resource Distributions

The *piquetero* experience shows the difficulty of sustaining participation without responding to members' concrete economic interests (Kennedy and Tilly 2005), since, as in AST, the majority participates for the socioeconomic agenda. A large part of the resources *piquetero* organizations use for their members' concrete benefit come from the state, which distributes social aid and emergency work to the needy through social organizations. This relationship is sometimes interpreted as dependency of *piquetero* organizations on the state and individual members on their organization (e.g. Franceschelli and Ronconi 2005), but this explanation is too simplistic to explain the *piquetero* movement as a whole. Different approaches to state distributions constitute the most important reason for division within the *piquetero* movement (Muñoz 2005). Some distribute aid only to members showing adequate political performance (Rodríguez Blanco 2006), others initially refused to channel state aid to individual members (Fitz Patrick 2006), while many organizations do so in the absence of state-managed aid programs which they would prefer (AST coordinator, 20 July 2006; Asamblea Nacional de Trabajadores 2004). For an individual member, welfare distributions are important reasons to join and to continue participating. However, clientelist explanations falsely assume that material and political reasons for participation are mutually exclusive. Even apolitical members understand that collective action is needed for expanding future distributions. Moreover, clientelist explanations have difficulties in accommodating ordinary members' power in distribution of resources inside their organization and in choosing the projects it takes on. Even less do clientelist explanations recognize the psychological joys of political participation, such as personal empowerment and strengthening social ties. *Piqueteros* themselves value the articulateness and dignity they have developed through participation (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 475-478). Finally, as Oviendo (2001: 75) notes, clientelism ignores the fact that in Argentina state-distributed benefits are used to build state-challenging movements.

Both an agenda appealing to concrete self-interest and an organization are probably necessary for the sustenance of a truly popular movement. Comparisons between the *piquetero* movement and the parallel middle-class movement of *cacerolazos*, on the one hand, and *piqueteros* and intellectuals' ideologically committed organizations, on the other, demonstrate well this need. In the capital, the *cacerolazo* movement has died out not only due to economic recovery but also because it has not been willing or able to translate its demands into a wider political program (North and Huber 2004: 979), while many leftist organizations have been unable to appeal to the low-income classes. Obviously, the institutions for social aid distribution in Argentina have provided an opportunity to strengthen *piquetero* organizations and their membership base.

Public-private partnerships in social service delivery have a long history in Argentina (Bifarello 2002). Although neoliberal economic policies of the 1990s diminished the social role of the state and the consequent economic collapse made it difficult for the state to maintain many basic services, the Argentine state continues to finance or subsidize various social activities. Therefore, social aid distributions are not the only economic inputs civil society organizations receive from the state. *Piqueteros* apply for or pressure the government to give them monies available for education, cultural events and other types of projects. Other organizations receive direct material assistance

from the government as well. For example, the Gualeguaychú environmental movement receives many practical resources from the local government. It has an office in the cultural center and holds *asamblea* meetings in the city theater. The city government shoulders many costs of using these public buildings (*asamblea* secretary, 11 July 2006).

Protest mobilization can benefit even from commonplace regulations and practices. In the capital, the *piquetero* movement is a movement by the unemployed living in suburbs. Therefore, its ability to demonstrate in the city center regularly *en masse* depends on transportation affordable to its poor members. *Piqueteros* move by train, underground and on foot, none of which costs anything to demonstrators or organizers. Massetti (2004: 104) notes that commuter train companies permit *piqueteros* to travel free to demonstrations to avoid conflicts. Obviously, social movements with a high capacity for collective action against concrete targets are able to negotiate informal or formal<sup>1</sup> practices and institutions exclusively for themselves. *Piqueteros* have supporters inside public transportation as well since they and the political parties having their own *piquetero* wings have supported the underground workers' trade union both in action and in legislative arenas. As a result, underground workers support mobilization of many leftist social movements, *piqueteros* included.

## The Media

In Argentine society and politics, popular movements are influential in identifying new issues and shaping public opinion because the media seems to understand demonstrations as the voice of people and thus eagerly reports them. In Argentina, television news gives much time to demonstrators or victims to express their views in their own voices. Apart from the will to report citizen demands, the media broadcasts demonstrations because they are easy to cover in interesting ways: they provide visually interesting footage, leaders and participants are present for interviews, and live pictures are easily available. Therefore, demonstrations are a regular element in Argentine television news not only in domestic but also in international news coverage. The media can even ask movements to set up a demonstration scene. When a television channel reported the latest developments in the pulp mill controversy between Argentina and Uruguay on 12 July 2006, it wanted to broadcast an environmental protest in its report. The Gualeguaychú environmental *asamblea* instantly gathered a demonstration of around twenty people, enough to appear convincing in a close-up picture.

Demonstrating is a way to draw media interest to a complaint. In Argentina, calling the media in to report a demonstration does not require special media strategies or cultivation of contacts. Television channels advertise phone numbers for the public to introduce news items and are ready to hurry to the scene, sometimes to find out on the spot what the demonstration is about. To guarantee their positive visibility in the media, social movements plan their action to attract the media. For example, the Gualeguaychú environmental movement holds events where children give emotional speeches about saving nature for future generations (*24 horas*, 12 Oct 2006). *Piquetero* demonstrations continue for hours to provide live footage for several news programs. Usually movements have some control over media content since reporters like to interview spokespersons or broadcast speeches given at a demonstration. Argentine television prefers relatively long excerpts in people's own voice. Still, to guarantee truthful representation of their activities and ideas, *piquetero* organizations publish their own alternative media, including newspapers, bulletins, Internet home pages and even radio broadcasts. Alternative media is also a way to tackle possible silence in the mainstream media. *Piquetero* organizations are highly aware of other actors competing with them

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<sup>1</sup> There have been proposals for a reduced price ticket for *piqueteros*, but I have been unable to confirm whether it is in use.

for media attention and their own weakness in this game compared to powerful competitors like president Kirchner.<sup>2</sup>

## Other Political Opportunities in Argentina

Scholars usually assume that state repression and relations with political elites largely determine the political opportunities available for social movements. Examining what kind of role they play in Argentine protest mobilization will show that in a democratic state like Argentina the level of repression is often so low that it has little influence on social mobilization. Elite relations give quite a mixed picture, because some social movement organizations reject and others accept them. It makes sense to seek independence or use elite vulnerabilities to pressure for change instead of seeking access to the political system and risk to be co-opted by the elite.

## Repression

In present day Argentina, political repression is a cautiously used instrument. After the military dictatorship, the democratic state needs to distinguish itself from the bloody past. The range of repression it can legitimately use is limited. For civil society, victimization by the state has been one of the strongest moral claims when appealing to popular opinion. Police violence in December 2001 and June 2002 even turned the society against the state, both times defeating the president instead of silencing social protest. In contrast, *piquetero* groups have been willing to confront repression and use memories of repression to consolidate their own ranks and to draw outside sympathy. *Piqueteros* turn their losses into assets and keep the memory of their martyrs alive in names<sup>3</sup> and symbols to communicate to their supporters that sacrifice may be necessary but will not be forgotten.

The government of president Kirchner has used repression very selectively. Scholars, *piqueteros* and the Argentine press alike call his tactics a combination of cooptation and coercion (e.g. Svampa and Pereyra 2003: 121). Although the government has passed and even implemented some policies limiting the rights to picketing in recent years (Svampa and Pandolfi 2004), the *de facto* situation is the recognition of the *piqueteros* as a permanent element in city life in Buenos Aires.<sup>4</sup> In July 2006, the police arranged only minimal forces to face *piquetero* demonstrations in central Buenos Aires. Often there are only a few regular policemen at the door of the public building, somewhat more to regulate traffic, and possibly a row of a dozen riot policemen ready somewhere out of sight. Even outside the presidential palace, where riot fences are ready for use and are used with most other groups, with *piqueteros* police do not always even care to use them and mark the permitted area with a police chain instead. Obviously, the police are less concerned with demonstrations by groups with radical ideology and disruptive tactics than average demonstrations. The reason for this tolerance is the *piqueteros'* competence in policing themselves. The police even tolerate order maintenance with a threat of violence when some *piquetero* organizations use masked guards with batons to stop traffic. All of this shows standardization (Waddington 1995) of certain places and forms of demonstration. Standardization has even led to practices to minimize harm to outsiders caused by picketing. The city of Buenos Aires has erected a traffic warning system informing

<sup>2</sup> In the demonstration of 20 July 2006, MTD Aníbal Verón and CCC leaders demanded truthful presentation of *piqueteros* by the government and the media. They accused President Kirchner of only symbolic attention to problems, of dismissing *piqueteros* as a relevant movement and of consciously diverting media attention away from *piquetero* activities.

<sup>3</sup> *Piquetero* organizations named after a martyr of struggle include MTD Aníbal Verón, CTD Aníbal Verón, MST Teresa Vive, Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez and Frente Darío Santillán.

<sup>4</sup> The situation in the center of the capital is not generalizable to other parts of the country or even to the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

drivers in advance about obstacles in the vicinity of governmental buildings, while *piqueteros* let ambulances through the occupied streets and follow the police signs to open lanes for traffic when the number of demonstrators is dwindling.

### Access and Elite Allies

This article deals with mobilization and organization building, not policy change brought about by social movements. Access to decision makers is much less central to resource mobilization through public institutions than it is to pursuing a certain policy outcome. However, since access and elite allies are listed as central elements in political opportunity structures (e.g. McAdam 1996: 27), I will examine them from a perspective wider than mere mobilization. When it comes to outcomes that Argentine movements seek, almost all demands by middle class demonstrations are directed to the state or city authorities. However, *piquetero* organizations make many intrusions on levels much below the elite level. Along with general demands directed to the government, they have particular micro-level demands directed to individual public and private entities, including private firms and public service providers. For *piqueteros*, elite allies are often not the first opportunities sought. The ability of *piquetero* organizations to generate some resources by community mobilization means that many of their demands on the government are defensive. They do not demand that the state act, but that it refrain from intruding into workers' cooperatives, slums, or community kitchens occupied or built without legal authorization.<sup>5</sup>

Ponce (2006) claims that the emergence of the *piquetero* movement was a calculated strategy by governor Duhalde to enhance his position within the Peronist party. Firstly, this explanation forgets that there was a common reason for the rise of the *piquetero* movement and for the need for the national and local governments to design new welfare programs. Both were answers to rising unemployment and poverty. Meyer and Minkoff (2004: 1462) remind us that often the same factors give rise to social mobilization and to policy change and warn against "ascribing all policy changes to movement activism, without allowing for the influence of broader social changes that create the conditions for movements." Likewise, it can be social change, not policy change, that explains movement emergence, even when the timing of the two correlates. Secondly, Duhalde's attempts to expand Peronist networks failed. Many receivers of support through programs initiated by Duhalde changed into programs channeled by local leaders and civil society organizations, including *piqueteros*, designed by other parties in the coalition government to weaken Peronist control over social aid distributions (Lodola 2003). Consequently, *piqueteros* have considerably weakened Peronist networks and worker organizations by providing credible alternatives to them (Delamata 2004).

Many Argentine social movements have found an elite associate in president Kirchner whose own sympathies for social equality and human rights make him a desirable ally to them. Sometimes these alliances are mutually empowering. When the leaders of Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo stand by Kirchner's side, they signal their agreement with the presidency during which courts have finally started to punish crimes committed by the military government, while their support strengthens the president's image. Kirchner and *piquetero* leader D'Elía have even been accused of collaborating so that D'Elía mobilizes his *piquetero* supporters to picket targets in ways that strengthen Kirchner's attempts to introduce policies to control price rises (Reel 2005). President Kirchner has even appointed some social movement activists to his government. By putting D'Elía in charge of social policy and environmentalist Piccolotti in charge of environmental policy the president probably sought expertise, but simultaneously he has tried to use these appointments to

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<sup>5</sup> I have seen demonstrations defending rights to live in squats and illegally built houses, run expropriated enterprises, or earn a living in the informal economy.

pacify social movements by providing them formal access to the state. A Greenpeace campaigner (interviewed on 5 July 2006) assessed that Piccolotti was chosen because she, as an earlier helper, has the authority to persuade the Gualeguaychú environmental movement to accept the situation if legal action against the pulp plants it opposes fails. I have no doubt that the skilled grassroots politician D'Elía has learned to use his position to benefit the poor, although not necessarily the *piquetero* movement. I am less sanguine with Piccolotti. When I saw her communicating her views to the Gualeguaychú *asamblea* on 12 July 2006, I had the impression that she let herself be led by the environmental movement. No doubt a skilled politician like Kirchner will be able to make her play his tune as well.

Elites use movements for their own ends in many ways. Apart from co-option, electoral calculations can explain their contacts with social movements. When president Kirchner visited the Gualeguaychú *asamblea* in 5 May 2006, he knew that through this act he could demonstrate to the electorate his responsiveness to social demands. However, after his speech in Gualeguaychú he was not even interested in discussing environmental policy with NGOs. This case permitted NGOs to pressure the government to fulfill its environmental promises, which led to the appointment of Piccolotti, a person genuinely interested in the issue, to head environmental administration (Greenpeace campaigner, 5 July 2006). In the worst case, politicians want to neutralize social movements. Something like this happened on 29 June 2006, when Kirchner's electoral campaign for the next presidential election was launched in Parque Norte. There were drummers present to symbolize *piquetero* support for the president. They were from the social group giving rise to the *piquetero* movement and probably appeared real to the president's middle class supporters who had never participated in a *piquetero* demonstration, but gone were the authentic *piquetero* symbols of group affiliation and some drummers did not even know how to drum. President Kirchner enjoys real support from some *piquetero* organizations, such as Barrios de Pie. However, it is a genuine *piquetero* organization that occupies streets to make demands on the Kirchner government. Instead, the Kirchner campaign organization wanted *piqueteros* who neither make demands nor picket, but merely support the president.

Not all *piquetero* organizations perceive elite allies as opportunities, but see that unrepresentative elites prioritize moneyed interests over the poor. Polo Obrero or MTD Aníbal Verón frequently accuse *piquetero* organizations allying with president Kirchner of clientelism and the government of attempts to co-opt the movement.<sup>6</sup> When asymmetry of power is a reality, they conclude that there are more opportunities to gain from an oppositional stance than from sacrificing their militancy and independence to gain minor concessions. Their rejection of elite allies does not result from the need for "cognitive liberation" opening their eyes to see that opportunity is there, but from rational evaluation of the nature of the relation that they know their peers see as an opportunity. Evidently, social movements' own perception of political opportunities can diverge widely from scholarly understanding.

Tarrow (1998) argues that division among elites changes opportunity structures by providing incentives and elite allies to social movements. There surely existed common aims between social movements and traditional parties willing to bring down the military dictatorship in the early 1980s and again between social movements and the left-wing inside the Peronist party in terminating the neoliberal policy line in 2001. However, on other occasions division among the elite has split society. The impeachment of mayor Ibarra in March 2006 witnessed mobilization and counter-mobilization in which both sides were able to bring tens of thousands of people to the streets. The Cromañon victim movement demanded justice and blamed city government for corruption, while Ibarra appealed to human rights and constitutionality. Both messages appealed to influential people

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<sup>6</sup> The terminology is revealing: *piqueteros oficialistas*, *piqueteros clientelistas*.

and social movements and split victim families, some of whom publicly supported Ibarra.<sup>7</sup> The case of mayor Ibarra was a zero-sum game, in which one party definitely wins. The winner proved to be the victim movement, demonstrating that demands from civil society influenced the outcome. However, often division renders civil society weak. For example, the security demonstration of 30 August 2006 initiated by victim movement leader Blumberg was challenged by the simultaneous demonstration led by *ex-piquetero* leader D'Elía and was condemned for its right-wing orientation by many other civil society organizations (*Clarín*, 1 Sept 2006). In this case, division within civil society helped the government dismiss the challenge as unrepresentative.

## State Capacity

Argentine social movements enjoy the political opportunity emerging from the state's incapacity to provide the benefits and services that citizens think it should. Apart from being an opportunity, state incapacity is a threat, but a threat benefiting civil society action and punishing inaction. When the state does not provide public benefits and services, many individuals are left without them unless civil society organizes their provision. State incapacity leaves social space for social movements that a stronger state would occupy or dominate, a space that fits well with the ideology of self-government and community building of many *piquetero* organizations and brings them supporters. Furthermore, the Argentine state recognizes the need to deliver services it itself cannot and is willing to direct some state allocations to civil society for their provision.

It is not only in service provision that the Argentine state does not function properly. Argentine social movements believe that elitist political and court structures are not responsive without civil society pressure. Argentine civil society uses extra-electoral means to force responsiveness to the electorate. Social movements have overthrown several politicians, including president de la Rúa and mayor Ibarra. Consequently, Argentine politicians are concerned about civil society demands. An environmentalist estimated that politicians' vulnerability is one of the main benefits the Argentine sociopolitical environment offers for civil society organizations (Greenpeace campaigner, 5 July 2006). Likewise, there is little trust in the adequacy and impartiality of the judicial process, considering that social movements pressure legal process in all of its stages. Various movements use collective action to demand legislative change, the start of a legal process or punishment of the guilty. General distrust in politicians and courts also brings cultural opportunities to civil society actors who can utilize the attitude that since politicians are always under suspicion, civil society is justified in blaming them for either inaction or injustice in almost any situation. But there is also an institutional element giving rise to distrust. It is difficult to believe in the impartiality of the court system as long as impunity of corruption and political violence prevails or in the electoral system as it has been toothless against political corruption.

## Conclusions

This article has demonstrated the divergence between political opportunities seen central by social movement research and those pursued by the social movements themselves. This suggests that the logic of political opportunities in normal times might not be the same as the political opportunities needed for a major political change that are examined by many classical political opportunity studies. The most important opportunities for protest mobilization in Argentina are frequent and mainly positive media coverage of protests, state distributions channeled through social organizations promoting organization maintenance and membership recruitment in the

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<sup>7</sup> My information about the pro-Ibarra movement comes from the television channel *24 horas*, especially from its coverage of the demonstration of March 2, 2006.

organizations by the poor and the ability by the organized poor to take a free ride on public transportation.

For protest mobilization Argentine social movements utilize political opportunities that help them in building resources. This finding is likely to be generalizable beyond Argentina. Evidence from the Czech Republic shows that civil society resources prove more decisive for collective action than access since access encourages individual, not collective, forms of interaction with politicians (Carmin 2003). In the US civil rights movement, protest activity correlated positively with emerging issues, media attention and a supportive political atmosphere, but negatively with political access (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Snow et al. (2005) find grievances and resources explaining protest activities, but again access correlates negatively with protesting. However, public resource distribution patterns make a difference. In the US, protest mobilization decreased together with increasing state funding for civil rights (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004), probably because state inputs alleviated problems. In Argentina innovative social movement organizations have managed to install themselves into the system of state distributions and use this position for maintaining their capacity to protest. Likewise, resource distribution to the US homeless increases their abilities to protest (Snow et al. 2005).

Evidently, actual opportunities used by social movements are often more concrete than what political theorists assume. In democratic countries state facilitation may be more important for the movements' development and strategies than state repression is. Moreover, some political opportunities that scholars assume are crucial are not always deemed worth pursuing by social movements themselves. Instead of elite allies, social movements may instead seek to utilize vulnerabilities of political elites to make them act. Some movement organizations reject cooperation with elites because they see no advantage of being co-opted by the elites and instead look for an autonomous provision of solutions or radical changes in the political system. This is not the first study to show that actual choices made by micro- and meso-level movements and macro-level generalizations made by social movement research differ and still perceptions by social movements can contribute to successful movement outcomes (Kurzman 1996; Kenney 2001). To make political opportunities a better tool for describing and explaining social movements, scholars should be ready to revise their understanding of what consists of opportunity and of how states and social movements interact.

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