

(Re)Membering Peronism:
An Ethnographic Account of the Relational Character of Political Memory

Javier Auyero
Sociology Department
State University of New York at Stony Brook
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Auyero@aol.com

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"When we say 'politics of memory,' how many of us really mean that memory could *constitute* a politics? We aren't thinking of memory as some autonomous force that in and of itself dictates a political situation. We aren't even really thinking of memory as a distinct sphere of our daily lives that has its own political discourse, analogous to 'the politics of housework' or 'the politics of labor.' Most of us, I submit, are really referring to rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes. Is it possible for us to think otherwise, as cultural actors evidently do, and conceive of 'past' events being truly effective in the present --conceive of them, that is, as not really past?" Jonathan Boyarin

Maria is a 54 year-old woman who lives in a slum in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Since she is unemployed, and her husband works "off the books," she does not have any health insurance. "I didn't have money to buy the eyeglasses that the doctor [in the public hospital] prescribed for me. A neighbor suggested that I go to the *Unidad Básica* [grassroot office of the Peronist Party, literally base units, hereafter UB]....This neighbor told me that there, at the UB, I should look for Juan Pisutti [local political broker]. Pisutti would tell me whether I can get the eyeglasses or not." Happily showing me her new eyeglasses, Maria told me that "it was through Pisutti that I got them." When the soup-kitchen opened in the UB, Pisutti called Maria to join the activities in his UB. During the last recorded session of her life story, she reported this invitation in the following words: "While I use these eyeglasses, I have to be grateful to you, because I obtained them through you...." Maria usually participates in Peronist public rallies and internal elections: "I have to fulfill my obligation to him [Pisutti]. If my presence is useful to him, I'll go there...It is my form of saying 'thank you.'"

During the many hours we spent talking about her life in the slum, Maria described a set of recollections and told them over and over again in great detail. There were those that referred to her life under the first Peronist government (1946-1955). "I clearly remembered when I was a little girl, and we got a parcel through the mail. It was a big box...there were my first pair of eyeglasses!!! Evita [Eva Perón] sent them to me. In the parcel there were also school aprons....We, in my family, have good recollections of Evita. She gave us the bonus in the *Mundo Infantil* magazine so that we could go to the post office and get our toys, a pink bonus if you were a girl, and a light blue bonus if you were a boy. They [Juan and Eva Perón] distributed a bag of toys. Every kid was able to celebrate Three Wise Men. And for Christmas, you had your panettone and your cider...I was ten years old."

Maria's life story was an important part of an eight-month long field research project I carried out in the slum of Villa Paraiso, one of the oldest, largest, and poorest slums in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina.¹ While doing fieldwork,² I was only superficially familiar

with the literature of the new and burgeoning field of the sociology of collective memory. However, Maria's recollections caught my attention as a crystal-clear example of Halbwach's dictum, "If what we currently see fits into the framework of our old memories, the converse is also true, for *these memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions* (Halbwachs 1980:22, my italics)." Many events in Maria's life remain obscure to her, but the memories of the "happy times of Peronism" are not some of them. She remembers all the particular details of the presents bestowed by the Peronist government. She remembers, I will argue in this paper, because her old experiences of Peronism are, to quote Mary Douglas (1980:5) renewed "by means of external stimuli" and adapted to her present perceptions. With the necessary caveats I will explore throughout this paper, we could say that the eyeglasses Maria obtained through Pissuti are the lenses through which she sees contemporary Peronism.

It was only after coming back from the field that, while trying to make sense of this piece of Maria's story, I learned about Zerubavel's notion of "mnemonic lenses," Nora's "lieux de mémoire," Schwartz's emphasis on the structuring character of commemoration, and Boyarin's and Tilly's emphases on the politics of memory. Taking heed of these authors' conceptual contributions and critically translating their methodological principles, this essay draws on ethnographic data to explore the relational, structured, and structuring character of the memories of Peronism among the urban poor in Argentina.

"Inútil repetirme," wrote Jorge Luis Borges in *Historia de la Noche*, "que el recuerdo de ayer y un sueño son la misma cosa": It is pointless to repeat to myself that the remembrance of yesterday and a dream are the same thing. In another poem of that same book, he wrote, "I will be my dream." Past, present, and future are always articulated in complex forms in Borges' writings, as much as they are in the lives of Boyarin's cultural actors. Past events are truly effective in the present and in the way we imagine --we dream about-- our future. Walter Benjamin, Franz Fanon, and Michel DeCerteau also emphasized this "presentist" character of the past: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably," wrote Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Fanon, in turn, noted the problematic and contested character of the knowledge about the past by contending that colonization could even permeate the subordinated people's past, thereby becoming a key component of the process of social domination. DeCerteau (1997:129) pointed out the way current lived experiences and projects are made, in part, from sedimentations of the past: "Both the future and the present depend on the archeology of gestures, objects, words, images, forms, and symbols, a repertory with many entrances from

which is composed a landscape of communication and are invented the propositions of innovation.”

Recent developments in the domain of the sociology of memory further emphasize the fact that the lines between past and present are often blurred. Much like the way Durkheim discarded the idea of the lonely suicidal individual, the sociology of memory, in exploring the social aspects of the mental act of remembering, rejects the existence of “mnemonic Robinson Crusoes (Zerubavel 1996:285).” Memory is “a perpetually actual phenomenon,” writes Pierre Nora, “a bond tying us to the eternal present (Nora 1989:9).” Present and past were also mutually implicated in the writings of someone we can now consider the founding father of the sociology of memory, Maurice Halbwachs. “When we return to a city previously visited,” Halbwachs (1980:22) says that “what we perceive helps us to restore a picture, certain portions of which had been forgotten. If what we currently see fits into the framework of our old memories, the converse is also true, for these memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions (for a similar argument see Passerini 1987).” Following the lead of Benjamin and Halbwachs (but contesting the sharp division the latter one makes between memory and history), Barry Schwartz asserts that collective memory vanishes when it ceases to be relevant to current experience; collective memory, he writes, “the way ordinary people conceive the past, reflects the concerns of the present (Schwartz 1997:470).”

By now, then, it is common knowledge that our memory of the past is affected by our present social environment. This *structured character* of past recollections has been recurrently highlighted: The “relational setting” (Somers and Gibson 1994; Somers 1994) in which actors are located affects the depth, the tone, and the very facts of their memories (Zerubavel 1996). In point of fact, Zerubavel argues, we remember as members of “mnemonic communities.” Memory is thus understood as socially, intersubjectively structured (Douglas 1980; Passerini 1987; Boyarin 1994). Memory also has a politics (Tilly 1994). According to this last author the politics of memory refers to “(a) the process by which accumulated, shared historical experience constrains today's political action and (b) the contestation or coercion that occurs over the proper interpretation of that historical experience. (Tilly 1994:247).” Tilly not only insists on the *structured* character of political memories but also points out its *structuring capabilities*: “an observer --historian, ethnographer, or fellow citizen-- cannot account for the shared interests on which people will act without investigating what mnemonic and moral frames they actually had available (Tilly 1994:244).” The “dead seizes the living,” as Bourdieu contends, and structures, as in Tilly's analysis, the way in which people act collectively.

This *structuring character* of collective memory has also been noted by Halbwachs. In a truly Durkheimian fashion, he points out that a shared identity, is maintained through the act of remembering. Remembering structures social groups; remembering therefore “re-members”: in reshaping (and reinventing) memories, members of a group create boundaries and ties among themselves. It is probably Barry Schwartz’s analysis (1996; 1997) of commemorative symbolism which has contributed the most to our thinking about the structuring capacities of memory. According to his analysis, the contrast between memory and history formulated by Halbwachs (and Nora) is not so clear cut. Collective memory is “a representation of the past embodied in both commemorative symbolism and historical evidence.(1997:471).” His analysis of Lincoln’s changing images among Afro-American shows that commemoration “adds to history,” affecting the way in which we imagine the past. Commemoration is thus, “a *structuring process* that partially overrides the qualities of its objects and imposes upon them its own pattern (Schwartz 1997:489, my italics).”

This article can be seen as an attempt to build upon these recent developments in the domain of the sociology of memory, while providing a more fine-grained analysis of the *structuring* and *relational* character of collective memories. Specifically, I examine a) the way in which memories of Peronism vary according to the relational setting in which actors in the slum are located; and b) the role of a certain kind of memory in legitimating current social arrangements.

To begin, I provide some general background information on Peronism and its centrality in Argentine politics. Although Peronism is probably the most widely studied Argentine socio-political phenomenon (both by native and foreign scholars), the comprehension of the memory of Peronism continues to be based more on the weight of popular imagery than on the foundation of serious research and evidence.³ This absence provokes the central question of the second part of the paper: What do Peronist slum-dwellers remember about Peronism? What do they remember about the role Peronism fulfilled in the history of the slum? They remember, I argue, different things. My ethnography finds that people in the slum tell different (and sometimes contradictory) stories about the history of the slum and of Peronism. The third part of this paper seeks to explain the sources of these different memories and stories by embedding them in a relational matrix. After examining the structured character of slum-dwellers’ memories, I offer an hypothesis concerning the role of these memories in legitimating the workings of clientelist networks. To foreshadow, I argue that Maria –and many more in her position-- remembers Peronism and local history through the “mnemonic lenses” provided by her benefactor, the local political broker called Juan Pisutti. In so doing, she fails to see the arbitrary

character of her benefactor's position. She, I will argue, *misrecognizes* the relationship that ties her to Juan, i.e. "client" and broker.⁴ She fails to understand clientelist relations as an exercise of power (rather than as caring favors). This misrecognition lies at the heart of the legitimacy of the benefactor's current position (as a political broker) and the very existence of the clientelist network in the slum. In short, this paper shows that the memories of Peronism are structured by the social environment in which actors are located and also structure present social arrangements. At a more theoretical level, this paper illustrates the "recursive relation" (Giddens 1984) between social relations, memory, and politics.

WHAT BEING A PERONIST ONCE MEANT

"If one distinct strain identifies Argentine social sciences," writes Elizabeth Jelin (1997:302) "it is the analysis and interpretation of Peronism." Understandably so, Peronism has been firmly entrenched in Argentine society "both organizationally and as a political identity (Levitsky 1998:80)" for more than fifty years. Having been one of the most influential political forces in modern Latin American history, Peronism is the largest party in contemporary Argentina. It was created in the 1940s as a mass-based working- and lower-class movement of support for Juan Domingo Perón, and "has survived decades of proscription and repression, as well as the death of its charismatic founder in 1974 (Levitsky 1998:82)."

This political and social movement that erupted in the Argentina of the mid-1940s promoted as one of its constitutive elements the belief in the essential virtue of *the people* (James 1988). In addition to symbolizing higher wages, the generalization of a system of collective bargaining, greater levels of unionization, and better living conditions for the working-classes and the poor, Peronism also --and more fundamentally-- comprised a "political vision which entailed an expanded notion of the meaning of citizenship" and a "heretical social component which spoke to working-class claims to greater social status, dignity within the workplace and beyond, and a denial of the elite's social and cultural pretensions (James 1988:263)." Decency, pride, and self-esteem were central to the meanings of Peronism for the popular sectors. Peronism became a truly "heretical power"⁵ because its moral economy had as its central tenet an affirmation of workers' rights within society and the workplace, and a collective claim for equality and dignity ready to call in question certain social and cultural hierarchies. In short, Peronism expressed a "diffuse social challenge to accepted forms of social hierarchy and symbols of authority (James 1988:32)," and "remained in a fundamental way, a potentially heretical voice, giving expression to the hopes of

the oppressed both within the factory and beyond, as a claim for social dignity and equality (James 1988:39).”

Among those uncontested forms of social hierarchy and authority was a traditional way of doing politics, dominated by fraud and clientelism, that had characterized much of Argentine politics since the turn of the century. The political machines of Radicals and Conservatives, their reliance on local political bosses, the Conservatives' widespread use of fraud, and the Radicals' use of state jobs for the construction of its bases of electoral support are all well-documented aspects of political clientelism in urban settings in early twentieth century Argentina .⁶ The techniques used by Conservatives and Radicals to build political support were said to be based upon “the distribution to individuals of concrete rewards, such as bureaucratic offices, charity donations and petty personal privileges (Rock 1972:233).” Although Conservative or Radical clientelism never existed as the **sole** system for mobilizing political loyalties, the urban political boss (known as *caudillo de barrio* or *compadre*) became a pervasive figure in urban politics during the first four decades of the twentieth century. As Rock asserts,

In return for a biennial vote, the *caudillo de barrio* performed a multitude of petty favors for his constituents, of a kind which won him and his party a not wholly-undeserved popularity within the barrio. By guaranteeing his supporters immunity from the police for their petty transgressions, by organizing local charity services, and by acting as the occasional dispenser of providential loans, the ward boss acted as an intermediary between the individual and the oppressive tentacles of officialdom, and became, with the Union and the Church, a main agent for relief against almost any kind of unforeseen calamity. It was he also who provided the most effective link between the Government, the upper echelons of the Party and the electorate, greatly facilitating the important task of giving both an attractive human face (Rock 1972:247).

These paternalistic measures were said to be effective in breaking down group solidarity and in “atomizing the electorate and individualizing the voter (Rock 1975:79).”⁷ At the center of the Peronist heretical voice was an uncompromising challenge to this machine-like character of politics.

Peronism...premiered its political appeal to workers on a recognition of the working class as a distinct social force which demanded recognition and representation as such in the political life of the nation. This representation would no longer be achieved simply through the exercise of formal rights of citizenship and the primary mediation of political parties.

Instead, the working class as an autonomous social force would have direct, indeed privileged access, to the state through its trade unions (James 1988:18).

Perón addressed the workers as a “social force whose own organization and strength were vital if he (Perón) were to be successful at the level of the state in asserting their rights (James 1988:18).” This is not to deny the caudillistic elements within Peronism. Yet, I want to stress the point made by James that “this personalist element was not present entirely at the expense of a continued affirmation of the social and organizational strength of the working class (James 1988:19).” To the contrary, the collective identity of the Argentine working class “as a coherent national force, both socially and politically, can be traced back to the Perón era (James 1988:37).”

In all their ambiguity, Peronist ideological tenets (its nationalism and corporatism, its emphasis on class harmony, on the ubiquitous role of the leader and on the overwhelming presence of the paternalist state) did not preclude the “possibility of working-class resistance and the emergence of a strong oppositional culture among workers (James 1988:262).” This oppositional culture was the foundation for “the rank-and-file resistance to the post-1955 regimes and [became] the basis for the reassertion of Peronism as the dominant force within the Argentine workers’ movement (James 1988:40).”

Many analysts agree that current neoliberal policies carried out by a government that identifies itself as *Peronist* (President Menem took office in 1989 and was reelected for a second term in 1995) efface all that is left of populist Peronism. According to Adelman’s analysis –characteristically entitled “The funeral of populism”-- the current Peronist government has brought “the country full circle --reopening the class nature of the Argentine state which Perón had sought to elide with a populist alliance...If Peronism and populism aimed to obscure class rule by absorbing contradictory interests of civil society within the ambit of the state, *menemismo* [as President Menem’s version of Peronism is known] expunges this legacy....[T]he current design leaves little doubts about the allegiances of state power (Adelman 1994:91).”

This *death* of Peronism is not a new idea in Argentine politics. When Perón was ousted from power by the military in 1955, Peronism was also believed to be dead. Even so, unions -- Peronism’s backbone and the main mobilizers of the Peronist masses-- gave birth to the “Peronist Resistance,” and the eventual return of Perón in 1973, after eighteen years of exile where he retained much of his labor support and a great influence in Argentine politics.⁸ A year later, Perón died, and Peronism was again thought to be defunct. The death of Perón, the calamitous

experience of (his third wife) Isabel Perón's government (1974-1976), and the military terror of the dirty war with its systematic repression of unions and popular organizations (1977-1983), were harsh enough to destroy all traces of the populist heresy. Banned and repressed by the military government, the Peronist Party defied all beliefs about its demise by returning to power in 1989. *Menemismo* does not signify --as many seem to believe-- another death of Peronism but a third phase of life of a party that persists in demonstrating its resilience. As Jelin puts it, "Peronism transformed itself but continued as the single most important political force in the country (Jelin 1997:302)."

The political positions that Peronism had taken (mainly a defense of the greater role for the State as the guarantor of social justice) were surreptitiously abandoned by Menem (Sidicaro 1995; Borón 1995). As Levitsky (1997:1) asserts, "[h]istorically one of the region's most powerful labor-based movements, Peronism had long been a staunch opponent of liberal economic policies. Nevertheless, since 1989, the Peronist government of Carlos Menem has successfully implemented a neo-liberal program that clashes with both party tradition and the interests of the party's trade union allies." With respect to labor and unions, Menem's neo-liberal shift entailed, among other things, bans on wage increases not linked to productivity and on strikes in much of the public sector, encouragement of firm-level collective bargaining, and flexibility of shop floor labor relations. Through its resolute adoption of neo-liberal structural-adjustment policies, the semi-welfare state is being dismantled by the Peronist government. As Sidicaro (1995) summarizes, Peronism ceased to be the party of "social equality;" after 1989 it has changed, "from a populist party dominated by trade unions into the country's most important market-oriented party (Levitsky 1996:1)." In organizational terms, the party has also mutated "from a union-based party into something resembling an urban machine (Levitsky 1996:21)."

MEMORIES

"This is a very Peronist slum," the local Catholic priest told me. "Villa Paraiso is a stronghold of the Peronist Party," a state official (gladly) admitted. During electoral times, an important aspect of the Peronist propaganda in the slum invites residents to "keep the memory alive"⁹ when voting. And, in more than one sense, this call has been heeded: The appeal of Peronism in the slum remains strong. In the last presidential elections of May 1995, nearly 60% of the slum population of Villa Paraiso voted for Menem and the Peronist party.¹⁰ The majority of the poor slum-dwellers of Villa Paraiso voted for Peronism in the parliamentary elections of 1997, when

the Peronist Party suffered its first electoral defeat in ten years. Peronism is still the dominant force within this enclave of urban poverty.

Despite the well-deserved attention and the often heated controversy surrounding Peronism in contemporary Argentina,¹¹ there are few works that deal specifically with the memory of Peronism among its main supporters, the working classes and the poor (Nun 1993; James 1988; Rubinich 1992). Electoral surveys consistently show that the majority of poor people are “loyal to Peronism.” Often, however, the power of such images obscures the different meanings that Peronism has for those hard-core supporters. In the analysis below, I concentrate on these different meanings by exploring the distinct memories Peronist slum-dwellers have of what they call “the great Peronist times,” and of the role the Peronist Party (personified in local leaders) fulfilled in the history of the slum. Few residents remember Peronism as that truly “heretical experience,” analyzed by James. Few judge the current Peronist experience according to those standards. Others recall Peronism as an epoch in which “a lot of goods were distributed.” In ideal-typical terms, there is not one but two memories of Peronism. On the one hand, the *heretical memory* narrates the history of Peronism in terms of *social justice*. The *distributionist memory*, on the other hand, narrates the history of Peronism in terms of “what we got from the government.” Likewise, there is not one but two memories of the history of the slum: one emphasizes the role of Peronist leaders in the improvement of the habitat; the other one stresses the collective action of residents in the pursuit of “a better place to live.” It is important to remark that these different memories and narratives are neither clear-cut nor mutually exclusive: they comprise different accents, different emphases within a master narrative of Peronism as (they all agree) a “wonderful time,” and of the slum as a much more livable place than in the past.

One of the aims of my research was to trace a history of problem-solving in a poor neighborhood in Greater Buenos Aires, with the purpose of illustrating the increasing relevance of clientelist arrangements in the way in which poor people solve their everyday survival problems. With that end in mind, I began to pay particular attention to the stories people told me about the history of the neighborhood and of their own history in it. I was looking for patterns in the way people solve their problems in a unitary history of a self-made neighborhood. During my first months of fieldwork, it was frustrating to discover that what I was looking for—a “history of the slum”—was not there. However, the initial unmanageable anxiety gave way when I realized that these conflicting narratives were much more interesting. They were different narratives of the same events.

According to most residents, the slum improved a lot during the last decade, basically because of the paving of the streets. Before that, a light rain could turn the whole slum into a muddy nightmare. Yet, although everybody agrees that the asphalt "made a real difference," there are at least two versions of the "history of the asphalt." One stresses the collective organization of the neighborhood which, so the story goes, "got together" for the first time in the slum's history.

The asphalt was made by the neighbors, we organized soccer competitions, we sold *chorizos and empanadas*, and we collected the money...and the municipality charged us to build it. The whole neighborhood was united... (Roberto)

Not only did the neighborhood change radically due to the asphaltting, but "el asfalto" also implied a very important organizational experience. Within this collective action version, there are those who put emphasis on the role played by the particular organization to which they belonged:

The asphaltting was possible thanks to the church organizations. The neighbors organized raffles, street fairs, festivals, soccer competitions. We collected the money and went to the municipality. That is the way *Villa Paraiso* was asphalted (Toto)

Note that none of them overlook the role played by the Municipality in paving the streets, but the emphasis is placed on the collective organization of neighbors in pursuit of a common objective. This version also stresses the collective action of neighbors which resulted in the building of the sewage system and the health centers that serve the slum.

In 1989, in an effort to "rescue the collective memory" of the slum, and to "recuperate our history as part of our identity," the *Grupo Parroquia Nueva* conducted a series of interviews with neighbors, part of which are published in a one-edition document characteristically entitled *Making Memory in Villa Paraiso*. The *Parroquia Nueva* group was associated with the Third World Priests Movement (very much inspired by Liberation Theology) and had a clear leftist political orientation. The document represents an extreme, almost epic, version of the collective action memory. There, Anita --a long-time neighbor-- reports that the sewage system, the improvement (paving) of the streets, and the lighting of the alleyways were carried out "slowly and with the effort of each and every neighbor, [we were] together." That is the reason why according to her, it can be said that "Villa Paraiso was self-constructed...this was truly **heroic**...all the transformations of the area were due to the **collective effort** of the

neighborhood (my emphasis).” In this document, Sergio, another resident, says that “It was through the [neighborhood association] *Coordinadora* that we got an incredible amount of things: the day care center, the new school building, the health center, the asphaltting [...] the free garbage collection.” The document ends up with a testimony that encapsulates this epic version: “What I remembered most clearly is that when the people got together, we got things done....that is the way.”

This collective action version does not stand alone. If one “takes the trouble to look closely,” as W.F. Whyte recommends in his seminal study of the street-corner society,¹² within the same destitute neighborhood, and even among people who live on the same block and who share the same categorical sociological attributes, there are other versions of the same episodes and processes.

J: How was the asphalt made? Was it made by the neighbors?

Coco: No, the municipality did it. It was all made by the municipality...

A suspicious reader may think that they are talking about different sectors of the same slum, but most of the testimonies about the asphalt were gathered from people living on the same block. Although these (other) stories and recollections do not differ altogether --after all, they are talking about the same material asphalt-- the accents, the highlights vary. This narrative of the neighborhood, one I describe as “personalized,” stresses the mayor (Rolo Fontana) or some local politician (like the abovementioned Juan Pisutti) as protagonists in the general improvement of the living conditions.

The mayor built the health center, paved the streets... he did a lot for the neighborhood. He tried to improve the neighborhood....We always get aid from the mayor...We go to see him when we need something and, sooner or later, we get an answer (to our demands). (Cristina)

The neighborhood has improved a lot, and many people thank Rolo. The neighbors put up the money to have the paving done, but whenever they ask him for pipelines, sooner or later they arrive. He sent the machines to do this paving, although we paid for the renting of the machines and for the materials. (Mónica)

The president of one of the neighborhood associations told me that he and some of his neighbors started to “struggle” (*la lucha*) to have the health-center built, by “pressuring” the

mayor. *They* (the members of the community association) built the place. *They* painted it. *They* got the first physician. Lucina, an old time resident who lives one block away from the president's house, has another version of the same health center:

Matilde [another powerful local political broker] was the one who started with the health center at the neighborhood association; she brought the nurse and brought the first desk. Although the president of the association is the one in charge, Matilde always lends him a hand.

Or, as another old resident notes,

The paving was done through politics, it was done by Rolo [the mayor]. The municipality helps a lot. Politics helps a lot.

It is a matter of accents, of course, but the differences can hardly be missed. The *collective* and the *personalized* memories refer to the same place, to the same material improvements, but they do so in ways that give a central place to diverse protagonists: either to neighbors and their collective organizations or to state officials and local politicians.

These varying recollections come from people who identified themselves as “truly Peronists,” some are active members of the Peronist Party, others are loyal voters. Interestingly enough, their different versions of the history of the slum dovetail with their different memories of Peronism. During in-depth interviews and occasional conversations, I would invariably ask the same questions about Peronism: What do you remember about the Peronist epoch? What was the most important thing that Eva Perón, Juan Perón or Peronism accomplished? The *personalized memory* of the history of the slum dovetails with a *distributionist memory* of Peronism. Some people instantly refer to the goods received by the Peronist government:

(When Perón went to the northern State of Formosa during Christmas)... he distributed boxes full of things. On the New Year, (he handed out) toys. It wasn't as they do now...(nowadays) they hand out toys and they keep the toys for those at the top (*para los capos*)... no...(they handed out) toys, dolls, bicycles, sewing machines, bicycles for the guys so that they can go to work, balls for those who knew how to play soccer, soccer clothes. Then, he and Evita went to Asunción (Paraguay), and they handed out toys. That is something that Paraguayans will never forget. At Christmas, they gave cider, panettone, a box, this big, full...

Evita was a great woman, who loved people from her heart, really from her heart, she loved the elderly, the students, the children. (Ana)

I remember when the people of Perón sent clothes, sneakers, and gave materials so that people were able to build up their homes....I remember that they sent books, pencils, sneakers, to my school...a Peronist government should think for the worker, not for those at the top....(Alfonsina)

What really impressed me (about the Peronist epoch), and will keep on impressing me, were the trucks handing out blankets, quilts, and mattresses in the *barrios*...boxes full of sneakers. That is missing now. What really impressed me was to witness how these things were given. We haven't seen that in many years now... (When Perón was in office), I went and asked for things, and they gave them to me. If you asked for a metal sheet, you would get it. If you asked for food, you would get it. (Cholo)

These excerpts are only a few of the dozens of testimonies that stress the things that were distributed under Peronism. As is clear, all of them set their memories against present day life conditions and use the opportunity to criticize the current (Peronist) government. The Mayor and the local brokers, however, are spared of criticism. They are “truly Peronists.” Victoria wonderfully summarizes this association of Peronism with the things distributed by the paternalist State, and the criticism that stems from the absence of it:

[With Perón]...I used to get my cider and my panettone for Christmas. It was different. Now Peronism is in power, but it is different....During the seventies (when Perón was in power) you would go to the health center, and they would give you the best powdered milk (Nido). They used to give me three kilos every 15 days....There was a lot of help. Now I see the celebrations of “Children's day,” and they have nothing to do with those celebrations back in the 1970s: cookies, hot chocolate, candies... each kid used to get a toy at the end of the day...Now they make a raffle, and not everybody gets a toy....

Peronism “supported the poor,” Ana told me. For Marta, the most important thing that Perón and Evita did was to “help the poor, they gave houses to the people, they handed out sewing machines...” Some women stress the “women’s rights” or the “emancipation of women” that were achieved when Eva Perón was alive. But almost invariably the conversation about Peronism will return to the goods that they used to obtain from Peronism.

“Do you have any particular recollection of Evita?,” I asked Toto, who had previously explained to me the key role played by various community organizations in the improvement of the slum (what I called the “collective action version”):

Toto: My mother used to work in a tannery in Avellaneda [southern Buenos Aires], and when Eva began to visit the humble people, she went to that factory to see the working conditions of the humble workers. There were people from the countryside, and they were working like animals. Nobody dared to talk to Evita, and my mother’s work-mates asked her to tell Evita what was going on in the factory. My mother didn’t know how to write or read, and when she saw her, she was so moved that she started crying. Evita calmed her, and she told my mom that she was a common woman, a woman like her. My mom told Evita that every rainy day the whole ceiling fell down, because it was a metal sheet ceiling. Twenty days later, they had everything renovated.

Only a superficial reading can equate this recollection with those quoted before. A closer look sheds light on a nuance not present in the previous ‘distributionist’ testimonies. Toto recalls Peronism as that social and political movement after which they (workers) were no longer “animals.” His narrative locates *dignity* and *social justice* at the center of the meaning of Peronism. It is not that he forgets the goods that Evita sent; however for him, Peronism meant something else as well --respect, pride or in James’ analysis, an affirmation of workers’ rights within society and within the workplace. His is an “heretical memory” of Peronism, much like the memory of another old-time Peronist, who used to be an activist in the clandestine movement known as the “Peronist Resistance” during the 1960s. He succinctly put it: “Perón screwed the oligarchy...When Perón took office, everything changed because the worker ceased to be a slave of the rich people. He awakened (avivó) the workers.”

Where do these different memories come from? What impact do these mnemonic frames have on actors’ political beliefs? In other words, what are the sources and consequences of these diverse narratives? In what follows, I will explore this *structured* and *structuring* character of memory by focusing on: a) the relational matrix in which they are embedded, and b) the function of legitimation fulfilled by the memories I call *personalized* and *distributionist*.

THE CLIENTELIST RELATIONAL MATRIX

More than 60% of the economically active population of Villa Paraiso is currently unemployed and underemployed, more than 50% has unmet basic needs, and approximately 70% has incomes that are below the official poverty line.¹³ In this context of outright deproletarianization and extreme material deprivation, one of the most relevant and reliable means of satisfying the poor's basic needs for food and health care is through the political organization that has direct access to the state's resources: the Peronist Party. This party

is deeply entrenched at the base level....Peronism is linked to its mass base through trade unions, neighborhood associations, and soccer clubs. The party is also linked to working and lower class society by means of clientelistic ties to local and neighborhood bosses, who serve as brokers between the municipal and provincial Peronist governments and the mass base (Levitsky 1996:20).

In poverty-stricken neighborhoods, squatter settlements and slums, the *Unidades Básicas* [local offices of the Party] constitute one of the most important places through which basic needs can be satisfied and basic problems can be solved. These *Unidades Básicas* give incredible organizational strength to the Peronist party and are the sites where Peronist brokers (such as Matilde or Juan Pisutti) are located.

Brokers usually do favors (such as distribute food and medicine) for their potential voters and for others, but they are not alone in their work. They almost always have an inner circle of followers. These followers are the brokers' "personal satellites," to use Marshall Sahlins' (1977) expression. The problem-solving network consists of a series of wheels of irregular shape, pivoting around the different brokers. The broker is related to the members of his or her inner circle through *strong ties* of long-lasting friendship, parentage, and/or fictive kinship. Both Matilde and Juan --the two most important and powerful local leaders in Villa Paraiso-- have this effective network (Epstein 1969) around them, people with whom interactions are more intense and more regular. This inner circle helps the brokers to solve the everyday problems of slum-dwellers: they run the soup-kitchens that function at the broker's *Unidad Básica*; they are normally in charge of opening, cleaning and maintaining the locale; they usually announce when the broker is available at the UB to the "outer circle," and they spread the news when food is being distributed at the UB or the Municipal building.

The outer circle --i.e. the potential beneficiaries of the brokers' distributive capacities-- are related to brokers through *weak ties*.¹⁴ They contact the broker when problems arise or when a special favor is needed (a food package, some medicine, a driver's license, the water truck, getting a friend out of jail, and so on); but they do not develop ties of friendship or fictive kinship with brokers. Although they may attend some of the rallies or gatherings organized by the broker, or even vote for him or her, they do not have an everyday, close, intimate relationship with them. In other words, the brokers' ties to his/her inner circles are dense and intense; their ties to the outer circle are more sparse and intermittently activated.

The bases for this strong relationship are multiple. Those who are part of the brokers' inner circle have known their brokers for quite a long time (usually more than four or five years), and the brokers have "lent them a hand" --as one inner circle member told me-- in a time of extreme hardship. In the life-stories and interviews I recorded, most of the members of the inner circle highlighted a foundational favor that inaugurated this long-lasting and, in their words, "very useful" relationship. Brokers are portrayed as coming to rescue them without ulterior motives. With that foundational favor (exemplified by Maria's eyeglasses, mentioned in the Introduction), a relationship of mutual help is established.¹⁵ The foundational transactions develop into ties, which in turn will concatenate into networks.

Within the Peronist problem-solving network, Peronist brokers function as *gatekeepers* for the flow of goods and services coming from the executive branch of the municipal power (the mayor) and the flow of support and votes coming from the "clients." Resources (food and medicine) come from the Municipality to the *Unidad Básica* where the brokers have discretionary power to do what they want with them. The information concerning food distribution at the municipal building also circulates through the UBs. As a woman from a UB told me: "Every month, at the Party meetings, the mayor informs us (the 140 UBs that usually attend the meeting) of the date when they are going to give out food...We tell the neighbors."

Being members of the Peronist party, brokers have the connections that enable them to gain access to knowledge about resource-distribution. They enjoy what network analysts call positional centrality (Knoke 1990). Although neighbors know, in general, about the food distribution at the municipality, they do not know the precise date on which the distribution will be carried out. Furthermore, they ignore the always changing procedures to obtain the bags of food. Brokers do know the dates, and have the specially designed cards without which people cannot obtain the food. These cards are small tickets that have a number on them that indicates the date on which they can go to the municipal building. Whether or not the general population's ignorance is deliberately created, or is an ignorance that "just happens,"¹⁶ it is clear that

Peronist brokers constantly attempt to establish themselves as **the** (only) channels that facilitate transactions or resource flows.¹⁷

In very schematic terms, this is the relational matrix on which the memories of Peronism and of the history of the slum are embedded. This is the social environment in which the diverse memories originate. Members of brokers' inner circles invariably recall Peronist "wonderful times" in terms of the goods they obtained from the paternalist state personified in the figures of Perón and his wife. At the same time, members of brokers' inner circles recall the history of the neighborhood in terms of the decisive influence of the broker and/or the mayor. Thus, the distributionist and personalized memories are rooted in an ongoing network of favors, goods, and support. The clientelist network structures the shape, depth, and form of these memories. In the final section of this paper, I want to offer an hypothesis concerning the *structuring function* of these structured memories.

RE-MEMBERING

The closer to the local center of power the resident is, i.e. to the broker, the more the history of the neighborhood will be recounted in terms of the key role played by brokers Juan or Matilde or Mayor Rolo. The stronger the relationship with these centers of power, the more the history of Peronism will be remembered in terms of the personalized favors received from the Perons. When confronted with the *personalized* and *distributionist* memories, we face what Gans (1992) calls a "structurally encouraged case of forgetfulness," a reference to the production of sociological amnesia. The inner circle structures these memories and, at the same time, these memories structures the workings of this relational matrix.

These memories are "truly effective in the present," not only because they are retold now but because, as Boyarin notes, they constitute a politics. They fulfill the important function of legitimating brokers' current positional centrality, i.e. of justifying their power. The mnemonic lenses with which members of brokers' inner circles read the history of the slum are infused with brokers' current centrality. And this centrality, this power, is justified not only because brokers are perceived as historical protagonists in the improvement of the slum but also because these brokers are seen as fulfilling the function the Peronist government once fulfilled: distributing goods. In this sense, brokers are seen as today's Perons. Not because members of the inner circles perceive them as modern incarnations of these Populist leaders but because they perform the role that, it is believed, the Perons once performed: doing personalized favors.

The brokers' way of doing politics (i.e. the personalized, paternalist, and arbitrary distribution of goods, services, and favors) resembles a form of political activity that Peronism had attacked in the past (i.e. Conservative and Radical *clientelism*). However, those who receive the best benefits from that distribution (i.e. the inner circles) live this clientelism as "true Peronism." They live clientelism in this way because what they remember of Peronism is what brokers are doing today. It is as if the history of Peronism is constantly being retold –rewritten-- in the present tense, by the everyday enactment of political clientelism.

Within brokers' inner circles, there are traces neither of the collective action version of the history of the slum nor of the heretical memory of Peronism. These memories are dysfunctional to current political arrangements because they present other possible scenarios. And clientelism works better without being constantly reminded of its arbitrary character. Clientelism, as the strong functionalist argument goes, does not need the presence of counterfactuals. It is presented as a social arrangement that has been with us (the members of the inner circles) for a long time, since the time of the Perons, since the time when the brokers were working hard for the improvement of the slum.

"Memory, then, no matter how small the piece remembered, demands my respect, my attention, and my trust," writes Toni Morrison (1996:214). The seemingly insignificant story of Maria's eyeglasses commands our sociological imagination. In other words, those eyeglasses can help us link the "the personal troubles of milieu" and the "public issues of social structure" of which C. Wright Mills so perceptively talks about. The Marias that form part of clientelist inner circles are not "mnemonic Robinson Crusoes (Zerubavel 1996:285)." They are embedded in "remembrance environments (Zerubavel 1996:284)" that structure what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. As other social actors, they tend to idealize the past as part of their moral work; their golden past is located in the first and second governments of Perón (1946-1955). In this paper, I have argued that this idealization implies a social construction of remembering/forgetting. By paying attention to the form of clientelist networks, I tried to explain the specific relational support for this social construction of memory. I have also argued that, within these clientelist networks, we can detect a process of (re)invention of a tradition, a tradition that serves to legitimize existing social arrangements. Although Peronism (still) means different things to different people, there is one meaning of Peronism that tends to be the dominant within brokers' inner circles. Within this Schutzian world of truth, Peronism has to do more with the distribution of things than with an oppositional, heretical, culture. By paying direct attention to this dominant meaning and to this reinvented tradition, I have sought to provide a more nuanced analysis of the structuring capacities of political memories. Further research is

needed on: a) the process by which different memories constantly impact on the rewriting of the history of this political movement (see, for example, Schwartz's analysis of commemoration [1997]); b) the struggles for control of the images of the historical figures of Peronism (Juan and Eva Perón. See, for example, Fine's study of *reputational entrepreneurs* [1996]); c) the influence that public narratives of Peronism (Somers 1994) --official validations of one legitimate, "truly Peronist," memory—have on mnemonic communities.

ENDNOTES

¹ For an ethnographic description of the slum, see my "This is a Lot Like the Bronx, Isn't It? Lived Experiences of Marginality in Argentina." Forthcoming in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

² Fieldwork was carried out from December (1995) to February (1996), and from July (1996) to January (1997), as part of my doctoral dissertation project. The original aim of my fieldwork research was to reconstruct a history of problem-solving in a poor neighborhood in Greater Buenos Aires, with the purpose of illustrating the increasing relevance of "clientelist" arrangements in the way in which poor people solve their everyday survival problems. Specifically, I studied the complex and changing relationships between problem-solving networks linked to the Peronist Party and the survival strategies of slum-dwellers.

³ Taylor's analysis (1979) of the "myths of Eva Perón" is one of the few exceptions to this lack of first-hand knowledge.

⁴ Following Bourdieu (1977; 1991), misrecognition is here understood as the denial of the economic and political interests present in a set of practices.

⁵ This was not a process without limitations and contradictions. As James himself notes, "much of the Peronist state's efforts between 1946 and its demise in 1955 can be viewed as an attempt to institutionalise and control the heretical challenge it had unleashed in the earlier period and to absorb this challenge within a new state-sponsored orthodoxy. Viewed in this light Peronism was, in a certain sense, a passive, demobilising social experience for workers. It stressed increasingly in its official rhetoric the controlled, limited mobilisation of workers under the aegis of the state (James 1988: 34)."

⁶ See Rock (1975; 1972), Walter (1985).

⁷ The "atomizing and individualizing" effects of clientelist practices are a contested issue. As Burgwald (1996) shows in his analysis of clientelism in the squatter settlement of "La Lucha de los Pobres" in Quito, clientelist practices can coexist with a specific type of repertoire of collective action. See also Escobar (1995) and Gay (1998).

8. For an analysis of this period, see James (1988).

⁹ Two photographic portraits of Perón and his wife, Eva, were enclosed in the first issue of the Peronist Party magazine, *El Bonaerense*. The caption reads: "**To keep memory alive.** Pictures of the General Perón and of the *compañera* Evita are included in this issue, as a way to keep alive the legacy of a Just, Free, and Sovereign Motherland."

¹⁰ Data from one of the voting centers in the slum and from my own survey.

¹¹ As Jelin (1997:302) remarks in Argentina “the dispute about Peronism is still open, continually regenerated.”

¹²Whyte (1943).

¹³The data come from my survey based on a stratified random sample (300 cases), carried out during the months of September-October in Villa Paraiso, and from INDEC (1991, 1993). In 1993, the poverty line for a family of four was \$420 a month (Minujin and Kessler, 1995:63).

¹⁴On the difference between "strong" and "weak" ties (time, intimacy, and emotional intensity involved in the relationships), see Granovetter (1973).

¹⁵Paraphrasing Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984), we may say that the members of the inner circle are linked to the brokers by ties that extend well beyond the brief moment when the act of exchange is being accomplished.

¹⁶For the relationship between access to information and network structure, see Erickson (1996).

¹⁷See, Gould and Fernandez (1990:91). These functions of gatekeeping and information hoarding are shared by many of the different types of brokers in diverse historical and geographical settings. Precinct captains (Guterbock 1987; Katzenelson 1980; Knoke 1990), *capitulares* (Stein 1980), *cabos eleitorales* (Gay 1990) *caudillos* (Rock 1977) partake of the same structural location and function. As Carlos and Anderson put it (1991): “A political broker can either obstruct or facilitate the flow of demands, favors, goods and services to or from some constituency.”