



UNIVERSIDAD  
NACIONAL DE  
SAN MARTÍN

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## **Collective Action, Violence, and Clientelism during Argentina's 2001 crisis**

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### **Abstract**

In a context of an economic, social, and political crisis that resulted in widespread food riots and uprisings, what explains the absence of collective violence and lootings in a district with a legacy of intense mobilization? I argue that the answer to this question lies in a specific combination of brokerage, clientelism and collective action. Far from dominating their clients and preventing horizontal ties, brokers in the poverty-stricken district of Florencio Varela in Argentina mobilized the population to act together and suppress violence. Drawing on in-depth interviews and secondary sources, I posit that during the peak of the revolts in December of 2001, brokers in this district appeared to validate collective mobilization and organizing seeking to prevent violence and lootings. The primary significance of this work is the differential way in which patron-client ties unfold to promote participation and collective movements.

## Introduction

In December of 2001 Argentina was undergoing an economic, social, and financial crisis that led to an explosion of mass protests and riots and the resignation of the president. Thousands of poor and unemployed workers took to the streets and looted supermarkets as the economy was melting down. Nevertheless, riots only occurred in some regions.

Interestingly, the most poverty-stricken areas of Argentina,<sup>1</sup> such as the province of Formosa and the Buenos Aires district of Florencio Varela, did not experience any looting activity (Auyero & Moran 2007).<sup>2</sup> These two cases thus hint that the level of poverty, inequality, and median income do not explain where looting episodes occurred. Why? Why were these poverty stricken districts not involved in collective violence when similar districts in the area were? Who were the actors involved? What different type of connections between actors led to a non-violent scenario? What type of interaction between routine politics and collective action took place here?

Social movement scholars have studied the 2001 episodes in Argentina as part of a “cycle of collective action” (Auyero and Moran 2007), and as a moment of political

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<sup>1</sup> In “Dynamics of Collective Violence: Dissecting Food Riots in Contemporary Argentina” (2007), Auyero and Moran show that provinces or regions with high levels of poverty (or inequality) experienced no more (or less) looting episodes than provinces with lower levels.

<sup>2</sup> Formosa is the poorest state (province) in Argentina and Florencio Varela, as we will describe later, is one of the most poverty stricken districts of the Greater Buenos Aires area.

opportunities (Rossi 2005), which led to the emergence of a new performance within a repertoire of contention (Tilly 2006) and new forms of social movements. Among the new performances were the occupation and recovery of closed factories by its workers and the creation of new social movements such as the neighborhood assemblies.<sup>3</sup> Although useful to understand some of the consequences of the riots, this perspective can not shed light on the difference between looting and non-looting scenarios in similar contexts of widespread mobilization, suffering, and poverty. What explains the absence of lootings in a district with a legacy of intense mobilization? What mechanisms were at play? The processes and mechanisms that lead to a reduction of violence are much less studied by the social movements literature. In general, the field has focused on understanding what provokes or what leads to violent contentious collective action but has paid little attention to the factors that prevent it. Similarly, the literature on protest control and repression does not analyze the role of brokers and other actors in suppressing or instigating collective action and violence.

The first section of this paper reviews the literature on political clientelism and collective action. One line of research describes political clientelism as opposite to political participation and as fostering the fragmentation of the population. Brokers,

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<sup>3</sup> The neighborhood assemblies (or associations) emerged during the 2001 economic crisis to discuss political and social issues within the neighborhood and fulfill basic needs of the population. The idea was to develop grassroots solutions/alternatives within the city for the situation of poverty, and unemployment. They developed soup kitchens, health service centers, housing occupations, urban organic gardens and childcare associations and youth programs. They had a commitment to gender equality and horizontality.

for this perspective, are said to discourage any form of collective action, community activism or social movement so as to maintain control and domination of their clients. Another intellectual tradition demonstrates that clientelist networks and collective action coexist in different ways. In line with the second tradition, in this paper I will explore some of the ways in which patronage and collective action intersect. The second and third sections of the paper describe the events leading to the 2001 crisis and uprisings in Argentina and the Buenos Aires district of Florencio Varela. Here, I will describe how contrary to what was expected, there were no food riots or violent episodes in this poor area of Greater Buenos Aires. In the following section, I discuss how unemployed *piquetero* movements and brokerage networks functioned during 2001. In the conclusion, I argue that brokers were present, validating collective action in the area in order to prevent and/or suppress violence.

## Clientelism<sup>4</sup> and Collective Action

Scholars agree that political clientelism is a particular form of party-voter linkage, an asymmetric and mutually beneficial exchange of favors for political support between politicians and clients. The linkages are characterized as involving reciprocity and voluntarism but also exploitation and domination (Kitschelt 2000, Stokes 2007). Furthermore, patronage politics are widespread and operate in diverse contexts in both underdeveloped societies and advanced industrial democracies (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007: 3).

Nonetheless, disagreements about the interpretations and specific details of the concept abound. Clientelism is often associated with negative forms of politics such as corruption and vote buying –the proffering to voters of cash or other minor consumption goods by political parties (in office or in opposition) in exchange for the recipient’s vote (Brusco, Nazareno, Stokes 2004, 67). Other descriptions of patron and broker relations include the exchange of favors (such as attending rallies), and not just votes, for political support. Among these favors are collective and symbolic goods such as “alternative channels for ‘getting things done’, while avoiding bureaucratic obstruction” (Auyero 2000).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Following most of the recent literature on the subject, I use clientelist and patronage politics as interchangeable terms (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Levitsky 2007; Wilkinson 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For example, my respondents reported how a *puntero* (broker) from the dominant Peronist party helped them in their daily lives to among other things, get medical

Yet, clientelist politics cannot be reduced to direct transactions of support for favors. The patron-client bond is often a face-to-face relationship, which creates trust and affection among the partners (Scott 1972). As Don Luis –a 56-year-old resident of the Mis Casitas neighborhood of Florencio Varela pointed out when referring to local broker Susana “*she is an exceptional being. Susana made all our problems her own, and took care of them... I truly admire the gift she has for solidarity, passion to help people.*” Don Luis had known Susana for over a decade and Susana, at the time of the interview, was a member of the local City Council. Don Luis insisted, “*I’m proud of her, she deserves being there for all the things she did for us. She is always there for us*”.<sup>6</sup> Brokers are, generally, much more than just that. They are also neighbors with their clients and thus have extensive knowledge of their clients’ needs and daily problems.<sup>7</sup>

“The “way of giving” that brokers and patrons enact –a way of giving in which the patron and/or the brokers (whether a Chicago precinct captain, a Mexican *cacique*, an Argentine *puntero*, or a Brazilian *cabo eleitoral*) portrays him or herself as “just one

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attention and state-sponsored medicines for an older relative which required filling out long forms and presenting them in person at a governmental offices. Similarly, interviewees mentioned that *punteros* helped them get a job, and get construction materials to finish building their home.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted in Spanish. This and all translations from Spanish were conducted by the autor.

<sup>7</sup> Political scientist Rodrigo Zarazaga found that 92 percent of the 120 brokers he interviewed lived in the same poor neighborhoods where they carry on political activities and that they know about the economic situation and problems of each family they helped (Zarazaga 2014).

of us, who understands what it's all about" – is a central dimension in the workings and persistence of patronage. The "humanizing and personalizing manner of assistance to those in need," as Merton famously put it, is therefore a constitutive element in the functioning and durability of clientelism" (qtd. In Auyero et al. 2009: 4)." This body of literature emphasizes the regular, routine operation of this network to highlight that this relationship transcends singular acts of exchange.

Other researchers in the field describe clientelist networks as de-mobilizing structures (Rock 1975, O'Donnell 1992, Holzner 2004). That is, far from being a realm of possible cooperation, patronage networks are seen as producing the atomization, fragmentation, and individualization of the electorate and/or the "popular sector". Political clientelism, thus, inhibits collective organization and discourages popular contention. It is antagonistic to most forms of collective action. The vertical and asymmetrical relationships that define clientelist arrangements have been conceptualized as the exact opposite of the horizontal ties that are understood to be the necessary precondition of either episodic or more sustained forms of collective action (i.e. social movements). However, recent research on Latin American societies has shown that protest and patronage politics are not necessarily in the opposite side of the political spectrum. Some arrangements may foster certain types of collective actions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an exception on the ways in which patronage politics and collective action relate see Gould (1996); Auyero and Moran 2007; Auyero, Lapegna, and Page 2009. "Patronage Politics and Contentious Collective Action: A Recursive Relationship", *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol 51, issue 3.

The literature offers a variety of outcomes for political process, however, while social structure has been considered in some case study work, this paper will look at a specific form of structure: that characterized by brokerage position. That is, I will examine the effect of this specific structure on collective action and violence. By looking at a “negative case” –a specific place where, in the midst of a peak of popular contention, no looting episodes or violent actions occurred– I seek to shed light on the concrete ways in which clientelist networks (and, more specifically, its key actors, brokers) act against and in favor of mobilization.

### **Methods and Data**

Data for this paper come from 25 in-depth interviews and life stories that I conducted in June and July of 2008, October 2009, and December 2010, with individuals who live in the district of Florencio Varela. I also collected news records (from national and local media) of the weeks leading to and following the economic crisis of 2001, and visited local NGOs to gather information (documents, flyers) on the internal dynamics of the political parties, social movement organizations, and other groups operating in the district. With the newspapers, flyers and documents collected I did content analysis. In addition, I participated in a rally, a protest and other events organized by the municipality in the district (same political sign and members present in 2001).



I interviewed respondents who lived and worked in Florencio Varela in 2001 and who had an active role in politics or activism at the time because I am interested in how they experienced the popular uprising and cycle of protests taking place in Argentina. Furthermore, I sought people who were expected to participate –or were in the networks of those– in food riots<sup>9</sup> but did not, because I wanted to ask them about their participation in the events. Questions included items on their job situation prior to the context of massive lootings (whether they had jobs or not, and, if so, whether or not they went to work during that week) and about how they made ends meet during the month before the lootings (paying particular attention to the kind of state assistance they were receiving, who was delivering it, and what happened with it during 2001). I also asked my respondents whether they participated in looting sites in neighboring communities.

My decision to use in-depth interviews and document analysis over other instruments of data collection such as surveys stemmed from the characteristics of the phenomenon under study. According to Argentine national daily *Clarín*,<sup>10</sup> for example, lootings during December of 2001 were reported in most of the Greater Buenos Aires area. The information published by *Clarín* does not specify the particularities of the acts of collective violence in each area. In the city and neighborhoods in this study, for example, residents did not engage in violent episodes of collective action, and the mainstream media did not cover this. On the other hand,

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<sup>9</sup>According to some newspaper reports, people from Florencio Varela participated in food lootings in neighboring districts.

<sup>10</sup> Contentious Latin America data base, SUNY Stony Brook.

unlike surveys, using in-depth interviews allowed me to obtain very detailed descriptions of the events leading to the 2001 crisis, and at the same time provided me with contrasting perspectives and observations regarding the looting.

I obtained respondents using the 'snowball' sampling technique. After each interview I asked the respondent to identify other possible respondents (such as people who took part in social movements or had an active role during the 2001 looting). Snowball sampling is an efficient way to obtain respondents from a specific group. To avoid endogeneity risks I started two snowballs in different areas of Florencio Varela, and this led me to a more diversified sample of respondents. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, and were conducted in a place of the respondents' selection (in general their home or work place). I also spent mornings and afternoons with some of the respondents while they conducted their routine tasks. In this context, I also held informal conversations with contacts of my respondents. At the end of the day I transcribed notes from these conversations. I tape-recorded several of the interviews but in some cases the interviewees asked me not to do so. I then transcribed them and read them making marginal notes on patterns that emerged from the texts.

The sample includes men and women who identify as activists, community leaders, social workers, religious community leaders, political party members, and journalists. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the respondents.

### **Lootings in Argentina**

The episode of looting that forms the basis of my study appeared after a series of actions that contributed to worsening economic conditions for the state and its citizens alike. In 1999 Fernando de la Rúa (representing a coalition of left-leaning parties) won election for president of Argentina promising change in the corrupt government of his predecessor, and a continuation of economic stability through a fixed exchange rate of the peso to the dollar. Yet, at the end of the year 2000 a political scandal broke out when it was reported that a number of senators had received bribes to approve a controversial law. This led to resignation of key members of the De la Rúa administration, leaving the president with little political support. Meanwhile, the country had entered into an economic recession: unemployment had risen to a critical point (it peaked at 21.5% in May 2002, with even higher rates in some parts of the country) and the fixed exchange rate was showing its most undesirable consequences.<sup>11</sup>

By 2001 an economic, social and political crisis was jeopardizing the emerging democratic political system. Seeking to control the crisis, the government introduced restrictions on the withdrawal of cash from bank deposits and began to renegotiate the external debt. The enforcement of these measures had serious consequences for

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<sup>11</sup> Having a fixed dollar-to-peso exchange rate led to flight of dollars away from the country, and a progressive deterioration of the country's industry. Moreover, this generated an increase in unemployment and precarization. In addition, Argentina had international debts to pay, and keep borrowing money.

the population since cash withdrawals were limited to 250 pesos a week and a total of 1000 a month. Any transactions over that limit had to be carried out with credit, debit cards or checks. The reduction in cash flow affected the normal functioning of the economy. The state reduced state salaries and pensions by 13%, stopped the distribution of part of its welfare programs, soup kitchens, and halted payment to its suppliers (Fradkin 2002, Vilas 2005, Perry and Serven 2002, ). Tax collection also failed so there was no state revenue, which deteriorated the general economic situation. Furthermore, the economic recession led an increasing number of people to turn to the informal economy.<sup>12</sup> In addition, since the general public did not want to part with its cash money, all the businesses that operated on a cash basis –such as domestic workers, taxi drivers, newsstands, and other service workers– were deeply affected by the measure (Rivas and Picchetti 2008). In the midst of this growing economic and political crisis, massive protests developed.

In the first weeks of December, thousands of unemployed, low-income workers, and informal laborers in various parts of the country took to the streets to protest against the government and its economic policies. The number and magnitude of the uprisings did not have precedents in the past. They blocked roads and formed picket

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<sup>12</sup> According to Olmedo and Murray (2002), labor reforms implemented in Argentina during the 1990s institutionalized unprotected, unstable and low-wage employment. “Considering the degradation of labor conditions and the erosion of legal protections in the formal sector, and the reduction in the social security benefits legalized in the new laws, one would be hard-pressed to establish a clear distinction between a formal-regulated and informal-unregulated labor market... Under the terms of the new labor laws, the state administration authorizes private and formal employers to hire workers in conditions already recognized as informal, and where employers are not obligated to contribute to social benefits or the social security system.” (431-2).

lines in both cities and highways that severely disrupted commerce. At the same time, trade unions were holding massive strikes to repudiate government policies as well as banks and privatized companies. Students, state workers, middle class families, and pensioners were also staging marches, rallies, neighborhood assemblies, and pot-banging demonstrations to demand subsidies, back salaries, and other welfare supports. On December 14<sup>th</sup> protesters introduced a different form of collective action:<sup>13</sup> supermarket and store lootings. In the provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Ríos, people gathered in front of supermarkets demanding food. When denied, they broke into the premises and took away merchandise (Auyero 2007: 75). The lootings took place in large and small supermarket chains, neighborhood supermarkets and warehouses. They continued and spread throughout the country for several days. By December 22<sup>nd</sup>, a series of such episodes had occurred in 11 Argentine provinces (states) peaking on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. The collective violence resulted in the death of dozens of people, hundreds injured and thousands arrested.

Lootings and collective violence took place in most parts of the country. The massive protests –in a context of record high levels of unemployment, and a deep fiscal crisis that paralyzed state welfare services– culminated in the resignation of President De La Rúa’s administration on December 20<sup>th</sup>, followed by an institutional crisis.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It was a new form of mobilization for Argentina in 2001. However, it is important to mention that there had been scattered looting episodes during the 1990s in Argentina, and massive lootings during a period of hyperinflation in 1989.

<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Villalón (2007) points out, the deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions related to the implementation of neoliberal reforms during the 1990s and the inefficiencies of a corrupt state system had a strong influence on the

However, in two peculiar locations of Argentina there were no lootings or collective violence episodes. In Formosa –one of the poorest and unequal provinces in the country characterized by organized and active social movements–, no looting episodes were reported. As sociologist Pablo Lapegna wrote in a report, “people in Formosa told me there were no lootings in the province. No lootings appeared in the local newspapers, and nobody remembers any looting activity” (Lapegna 2008). In Formosa, according to press reports, police controls were reinforced to prevent any looting activity. Additional security forces were sent to patrol the most vulnerable and poor neighborhoods and to guard supermarkets. Furthermore, the provincial government declared a state of siege so any scheduled mobilizations and rallies were suspended (Lapegna 2008). Similarly, Florencio Varela –one of the poorest districts in Buenos Aires– suffered no lootings.

In *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina*, Auyero (2007) linked the violent contentious episodes to the often-obscure ties that looters (and many other violent actors) maintained with political entrepreneurs and, through them, with established power holders. He found that party brokers were involved in the looting episodes that took place in the Greater Buenos Aires districts during December of 2001. The brokers’ main activity was spreading news about the location of the lootings –that is, informing the community of safe places to loot. Party brokers and rumors were

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emergence of social movements. The economic and social melt down of 2001 resulted in an increase in the number of these social organizations and movements who used both old and news tactics of claim making.

central in the whole process leading to the 2001 lootings. Rumors informed residents that food was being distributed by certain supermarkets and, in doing so, created the conditions for collective violence. In the districts of La Matanza and Moreno, there was fast and furious gossiping about the goods that were accessible at the looting sites and about the absence of police.<sup>15</sup> In this paper, I will show that in the case of Florencio Varela brokers were indeed present during the events of 2001, but contrary to what Auyero found, their purpose was to suppress violence and put an end to the lootings.

### **Participatory Institution or Institutional Brokerage? UGLs in Florencio Varela**

Florencio Varela is located 23 km to the south of Argentina's federal capital. It is part of the Metropolitan area of Buenos Aires in what is known as the Tercer Cordón del Conurbano. It has a population of 348,970 inhabitants; a total geographical surface of 190km<sup>2</sup>, and it is divided in three types of neighborhoods. About a third of the district is urban, another third is rural, and the remaining third is semi-urban and industrial.<sup>16</sup>

According to Argentina's National Statistics Institute (the *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares del Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos*), Florencio Varela is a part of

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<sup>15</sup> Please see figure 1 in Appendix: map indicating looting points in Buenos Aires.

<sup>16</sup> Data from the Interior Ministry, published in [http://www.mininterior.gov.ar/municipales/busqueda/amplia\\_info.asp?ID=BUE040](http://www.mininterior.gov.ar/municipales/busqueda/amplia_info.asp?ID=BUE040)

the poorest region in Buenos Aires, and large sectors of the population depend on welfare assistance programs.<sup>17</sup> The Peronist Justicialista Party (PJ) ruled the district of Florencio Varela since 1983. During the years that followed the end of Argentina's last dictatorship (1983-87), the newly elected democratic leaders fostered an increase in civic participation and debate. In Florencio Varela, this transition towards democracy resulted in the emergence during the 1990s of a large number of community organizations, social institutions and local government programs such as the PROGEL (*Programa de Gestión Local* – Local Management Program) and the *Consejos de Comunidad Barrial* (Neighborhood Community Councils) aimed at promoting community organization. This, a city councilwoman told me “was taken into account to test several welfare programs that were later implemented in the entire Buenos Aires province; such as the *Plan Vida* (Life Plan)”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Florencio Varela had a cultural legacy of organizing in which people in this city had been involved and participating for years.

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<sup>17</sup> In *Cruzando la Sarmiento* Julieta Quirós examines the distribution of government welfare plans in Florencio Varela concluding that in the year 2000 the national government decentralized the administration of welfare programs so that NGOs and other civic associations became involved in their administration. Other authors (Garay 2007) claim that municipalities and NGOs had been entitled to administer the plans –such as Plan Trabajar– since 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Plan Vida was a food program implemented in the Greater Buenos Aires during the 1990s, which is said to be one of the pillars of the PJ Peronist apparatus.



During the late 1990s, groups of local unemployed citizens began organizing and mobilizing in different parts of Argentina.<sup>19</sup> In Florencio Varela, the Teresa Rodríguez Social Movement of unemployed and informal workers (also known as the MTD movement) was created in 1997, one of the first organized picket movements<sup>20</sup> in the country. Thus, in addition to the comprehensive tradition of community organizing mentioned above, Florencio Varela also gave birth to one of the first *piquetero* movements of unemployed workers in Argentina.

With that precedent, and pushed by the mayor, in June of 2001 the City Council of Florencio Varela in coordination with the neighborhood associations (*sociedades de fomento*) approved a decree inviting all welfare entities (*entidades de bien público*) to take part in the *Unidades de Gestión Local* (Local Management Entities) or UGL program (Cravacuore, Ilari, and Villar 2004). The goal of the UGL was to “communicate, explain and raise consciousness among the neighbors of Florencio Varela, about their taxes –what they are for, how they contribute to the functioning of the state, citizens’ rights and obligations– in order to create a tax culture”. It also sought to strengthen “the social fabric through the consolidation of existing social institutions in the district” (Cravacuore et al. 2004, 82).<sup>21</sup> According to a municipal

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<sup>19</sup> The literature on social movements in Argentina argues that there was a change in the repertoire of contention in Argentina during the period between 1990 and 2003 (Svampa, 2003: 23).

<sup>20</sup> Pickets (or *piqueteros* in Spanish) are movements who employ direct action methods, especially picketing, blocking roads, and occupying buildings and factories during moments of intense struggle.

<sup>21</sup> Yet the program did not include the participation of picket movements or trade unions (Cravacuore et al. 2004)

employee interviewed, *“the UGL has the goal of strengthening social networks, and promoting and organizing neighborhood participation.”* In a district lacking basic urban services, the UGL was conceived as a participatory institution to promote residents’ involvement and organization. By June of 2001 –months before the economic crisis– the UGL were fully established and functioning.

Community institutions that promote participation, such as the UGL, are often considered a tool for empowering citizens. Through these agencies, citizens have alternative channels to interact with the state and thus reduce hierarchical, undemocratic relationships that permeate Latin American societies.

The UGL in Varela was formally constituted by representatives of all institutions functioning in that area –the local community/neighborhood associations, the school, the soccer club, the kindergarten, the health center, the women’s league, the after school workshops, the church, and the soup kitchens.<sup>22</sup> The UGL channeled the needs of the neighborhood to the municipality. The delegate who carried out this task was usually a local leader with strong network connections to the community; someone involved in the everyday lives of the residents and neighbors. Often, the president of the neighborhood center who was also connected to the political party in office, the PJ Peronist party, would be the delegate of the UGL in the Municipality. Ideally, he or she would facilitate the flow of information and resources from the municipality to the neighborhood and vice-versa providing access to resources, information and

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<sup>22</sup> Again, picket movements and unions were not included.

power to citizens. Yet, my interviewees complained that, in the actual practice, party brokers –not apolitical neighborhood representatives– controlled the UGL to exert their power.

UGL delegates were, in practice, PJ Peronist party brokers. This broker-delegate reported the problems and needs of the community –lack of sewage, light deficiencies in the streets, no garbage collection, and school building’s problems– to the municipality. The aim of the UGL was to connect the community and the municipality directly, fostering citizen participation, and reducing bureaucracy and hierarchies. Yet, the lack of formal processes, rules, and objectives allowed delegates of these institutions to pick and choose which problems to prioritize (and which ones to bury) based on their own interests and convenience. For example, Mercedes –the 50 year-old coordinator of a private after school program and soup kitchen for children– said that her requests to the municipality “*were never addressed*”. According to Mercedes, her demands were not met because they were not of interest to that particular UGL’s officer. She complained of unequal and privileged distribution of resources but mainly of lack of attention.<sup>23</sup>

The UGL was conceived as a participatory community organization, but it depended of the municipality for resources (that ranged from social welfare plans to

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<sup>23</sup> Some other delegate, with different interests might have acted differently. In spite of Mercedes’ complaint, it could be that the decision not to pursue her project was a sound one, and the lack of transparency is what raised suspicion, and enabled unconnected community members –such as Mercedes– to feel cut out of political processes.

construction material for a building). The dearth of resources allowed the representatives of the UGL to decide how to allocate them by benefiting his/her inner circle while excluding others. It could be argued that this prevented the consolidation of more horizontal ties among citizens, hindering the possibility of organization and mobilization. But, as we will show later, this was not the case in Florencio Varela.

Thus, the officers at the UGL generally acted according to their own discretion distributing resources, and addressing demands.<sup>24</sup> Being in fluid and regular contact with the municipality, the UGL delegate channeled goods, services and information regarding the procedures and requirements for obtaining whatever a community member needed. Here the representatives of these organizations acted as resourceful bridges between the community and the municipality. Each UGL –as a branch of the municipal government in the neighborhood– also had the role of assigning provincial welfare and unemployment plans<sup>25</sup> by registering beneficiaries, setting criteria for

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On December 10th of 2001, *Varela al Día* newspaper published an investigation condemning the many heads of neighborhood associations (*sociedades de fomento*) who were also paid municipal employees of Florencio Varela.<sup>24</sup> In the following days, the newspaper published letters to the editor complaining about the article. The editor, in turn, responded: “maintaining both jobs is incompatible and unethical... Let’s assume that the neighborhood decides to present a petition to the municipality, what role would the head of the neighborhood society take? As representative of the community or municipal employee? The residents of the neighborhood have reasons to doubt and this might have de-mobilizing effects in the community, and when a neighborhood is de-mobilized there are no claims. Divide and reign... this also leads to abuses of authority.” (*Varela al Día*, 12/17/2001 and 12/18/2001). Once again, the lack of transparency raised suspicion.

<sup>25</sup> In 1996 the national government created the *Plan Trabajar* to show concern about increasing unemployment. The program required that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and municipal governments organize labor-intensive community infrastructure or community service projects and to hire unemployed

the distribution of plans, and organizing the service/work each beneficiary would carry out in consideration for the plan received. Olga –a 46 year-old mother of five children–, for example, had to do cleaning chores for a few hours a week at one health center in return for what she received from the UGL. She did not talk about which plan she received and what were its terms, but she was well aware that to maintain it *“I have to be in good terms with Rosa, the local broker (‘puntera’)”*.

Although UGLs in Florencio Varela appeared in 2001, brokerage positions and networks in the area pre-dated the UGLs. For that reason, Mercedes does not identify Rosa as the president (or delegate) of the UGL but as the local broker. For Mercedes, Rosa and her circle of followers are disgraceful. Mercedes claimed she did not exchange political support for favors: *“I have clear political convictions and I don’t like Rosa. I’m not one of Rosa’s clients.”*

Despite the new roles and names that the introduction of the UGL gave the citizens in each community, local residents maintained the same structural positions and relied on the same social networks they always had to provide them with access to

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workers, whose salary was paid for by the program, for a limited term. Community associations and/or municipalities partially financed the materials needed to implement the projects and had discretion over the hiring and firing of unemployed workers as well as their workfare activity. The administration of benefits raised the critical distributional issue of how to determine the allocation of scarce benefits among participants. To solve this problem, associations developed decision-making processes such as submitting decisions to popular assemblies and/or creating specific rules to determine eligibility. Among these rules, some organizations began to score their members based on whether they joined protests (a principal mechanism for obtaining benefits) and allocated resources according to those scores. (Garay 2007, 306)

resources, jobs, and information. With the creation of the UGL, the district of Florencio Varela institutionalized existing social networks in each community.

A newsletter published on the municipality's website in 2006 titled "The UGL celebrated five years of work" (*Las Unidades De Gestion Local Festejaron Cinco Años De Labor*) reads "it is important to remember that the creation of the 80 UGL took place during the recent economic crisis. They helped lessen the social conflicts that emerged during the crisis, through the administration of community employment programs (heads of households, for example) and others created for the just distribution of social welfare" (November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006). According to the newsletter, the function of the UGL in 2006, in addition to organizing demands from the neighborhood in terms of public works, services, health and security, also involved implementing production programs, training and job searching.

Even though the formal rhetoric versed around promoting participation and strengthening social networks, the UGL became part of the client patron system. The UGL could be characterized as a more formal problem-solving network between patrons and clients. Personal ties, informal communication, and demand channels between the broker and her clients were formalized and secured with help of these local institutions.

During the months leading to the economic crisis, these organizations became a key participant in Florencio Varela society. Whereas food distribution and unemployment

subsidies were severely curtailed during the second half of 2001 in many poor Buenos Aires districts (Auyero and Moran 2007, *Clarín* December 2001), the coordinator of each UGL in Florencio Varela continued to distribute food, medicine, merchandise and some of the government's unemployment and welfare benefits even during the peak of the crisis. In Moreno and La Matanza –with similarly low values on the Human Development Index to Florencio Varela– residents complained, *“they gave us subsidies, and then they cut them. They gave us bags of food, but they suddenly stopped giving them. Nobody can take that.”* (Vales 2001)

Unemployment plans and food distribution were suspended in most places. Yet, in Florencio Varela, residents were able to rely on their networks, and on the UGL as usual. These networks continued the flow of resources. In doing so, they sustained and institutionalized the interaction between patron and client (Kitschelt and Wilkinson). Brokers had an institutional form, the UGL, with which to expect and encourage exchanges. Brokers were everywhere.

Whereas in Florencio Varela food distribution continued, in other districts of Buenos Aires and the rest of the country residents were invited to join the crowds and loot supermarkets (Auyero 2001, Auyero and Moran 2007). In Florencio Varela the system of UGL organizations linking the municipality to the community kept functioning. Here, there was no dismantling of networks and the role of political entrepreneurs was not the promotion of violence and looting. Thus, what happened in Florencio Varela that lootings did not occurred? Why did the networks continue to

function? What was different? I will explore this by looking at the event leading to the 2001 crisis in detail.

### ***Piqueteros and Patronage Networks***

In November of 1997, groups of unemployed workers (*piqueteros*) of Florencio Varela blockaded a main road (Ruta 36) in the district demanding jobs, and sustained the protest until police arrested the protesters several weeks later.<sup>26</sup> In the following years, the *piqueteros* of Florencio Varela were divided into several different groups (MTD, MTR) becoming some of the most active and notorious groups in the country. They held pickets, marches, roadblocks and other forms of protest and mobilization. On August 1<sup>st</sup> of 2001 *piqueteros* in Florencio Varela took over and occupied a bank. Only two days later the groups broke into and occupied the provincial labor ministry in the Buenos Aires capital city of La Plata in demand of unemployment plans (*Clarín* and *Página 12* August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001). In other words, by December of 2001 Florencio Varela was one of the most active territories of contention; it already had a legacy of collective action and established conventions of contention. It was therefore surprising, that during December of 2001, popular violence and contentious collective action in the area was nonexistent or minimal.

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<sup>26</sup> Contentious Latin America data base, SUNY Stony Brook.



None of my interviewees or any of the people I met in Florencio Varela recalled seeing, or even hearing about violent episodes or lootings in their neighborhood. *"I remember that in my neighborhood, the supermarket were distributing food. I remember the signs at the entrance saying that there will be food hand outs between 5 and 7 and the piqueteros were waiting in line"* (Luciana). Food distribution and gathering in front of supermarkets to claim for food had been organized by unemployed organizations –which was not the same as food looting. As Svampa and Pereyra (2003 p 84) point out, during the episodes of December 2001, unemployed organizations gathered to discuss the looting episodes. According to leaders of these unemployed organizations, given the situation of the country they planned to make collective claims for food in multinational supermarkets. They specifically point out that this was not looting, but asking for food; their slogan was: *"Looting no, asking yes."*

On the week of December 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> of 2001, the newspapers and other media outlet reported several looting episodes in the communities neighboring Florencio Varela. In Quilmes, for example *Varela al Día* reported looting episodes while over 150 police officers were deployed to guard supermarkets. Yet, stores were sacked. In the two sites with heaviest looting and collective violence episodes of Buenos Aires - La Matanza and Moreno– reporters noted the presence of Peronist party brokers. Here, as mentioned earlier, Auyero (2001) found that Peronist patron's main activity was disclosing and spreading information of safe places to loot.

While popular violence and lootings spread through Buenos Aires and Argentina, food distribution networks operated in Florencio Varela. Local daily *Varela al Día* reported that unemployed workers from the district made a collective claim for food at the provincial ministry on December 18<sup>th</sup> (*Varela al Día*, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> 2001). In this case, the organizations of unemployed coordinated, organized, and negotiated the delivery of food with provincial authorities and no incidents or violence was reported. Moreover, there were no reports of free food distribution in other neighborhoods.

Thus, the people of Florencio Varela were expecting food riots that never happened. *Piqueteros* were expected to take part in lootings or violent episodes that never occurred. Instead, they successfully acted collectively to demand food (for their members and their soup kitchens) from supermarkets. Were concessions made to quiet protests? By whom? What was the role of brokers and UGLs that resulted in peaceful food distribution while their counterparts suffered lootings and violence?

### **Violence and Broker-Client Collective Action**

Based on the specialized literature and media descriptions, the popular poor neighborhoods of the *conurbano* of Buenos Aires beginning in the 1990s could be characterized as *organizational desserts* (Wacquant 2004). As a result of the retrenchment of the state and the reduction in welfare plans and policies combined

with the degradation of the social fabric, people lived in abandoned, degraded neighborhoods. This desertification, in turn, paved the way for the spread in the 1990s of both protests and clientelism. The latter one –by channeling the needs of the community to the political power holders– filled the gaps left by the absence of organizations (Schipani 2008). Nonetheless, in Florencio Varela, UGLs, Peronist patrons, along with *piqueteros*, were present and active during the peak of the 2001 crisis.

Residents of different neighborhoods of Florencio Varela mentioned that in December of 2001 they were afraid of imminent lootings. From the narratives, it is not clear how it started but, through word of mouth, people spread the news that looters were coming to take over the houses and sack their properties. There were also rumors that the looters would come from the neighboring districts of Quilmes and Almirante Brown, among others, which prime time television news programs were showing live.<sup>27</sup>

Rumors have been described as public communications that are infused with private hypotheses about how the world works, or more specifically, ways of making sense to help us cope with our anxieties and uncertainties (Rosnow, 1988, 2001). In Florencio Varela, rumors were rampant. Thus, during the evening residents began mounting guard in street corners; they started organizing and planning ways to

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<sup>27</sup>Please see figure 1 of looting episodes in Appendix.

prevent violence. Rumors, in contrast to what Auyero found in most of the Conurbano, here served to mobilize *against* collective violence.

*“People were desperate and there was like a psychosis that ‘they’ were coming...they were going to come and loot here. So everyone started to make bonfires at street intersections. I don’t know what they would come for... they said they were coming from Fuerte Apache, from Pepsi... (Mirta, a fifty something year old resident)*

*“Residents in most neighborhoods made bonfires and entrenched in the corners because there were rumors spreading that people from La Matanza were coming to take over houses and lands in [Florencio] Varela. The mobilization was spectacular: street intersections blocked, and men waiting in trenches to prevent the occupation of their homes.” (Julio, former municipal employee in his mid-50s).*

*“You have no idea of how people got ready. The men started mounting guard in each intersection. I remember that I had this white curtain... I truly regret it now that I don’t have my curtain anymore. We had to put something white on the arms of people who were from the neighborhood to distinguish them. I made small arm-bands with my beautiful curtain. All our men had something white in the arm... and they were all ready”... “But they were three nights of tension that we had and we thought that we would kill each other... we made bonfires, burnt tires so we had light and could hold on during the nights.” (Mercedes)*

As residents recall, the rumors in Florencio Varela spread terror and were believed to be true. Speculation and fear were further transmitted and acted on them. Mostly men, armed with knives and sticks, climbed to the roofs of their houses, and mounted guard at street corners. The media was reporting that small supermarkets were being looted in neighboring districts, but rumors circulated that looters from those areas were moving on to continue sacking stores and homes in Florencio Varela. As a result, residents wore arm-bands to identify themselves from a “violent other” that was coming. Even public buses and livery cars were prevented from passing by the neighborhoods for fear of transporting the looters.

At that time, Roberto was the priest in charge of a small parish in the area of Bosques, a very poor neighborhood of Florencio Varela, he recalls: *“I was there with the people waiting (haciendo el aguante) for the lootings to happen and the violent people to come. They were going to come so I decided to take my car and drive around to see from what direction they were coming. I went with the car in all the directions but saw nothing ... and nothing happened.”*

While residents of Florencio Varela were preventing violence, other districts of Buenos Aires (and other regions of Argentina) were going through a wave of looting episodes or “food riots”. Auyero and Moran (2007) label these episodes food riots because an overwhelming majority of these lootings occurred in food markets. In most of these cases, party brokers or other organizers (union leaders, grassroots activists, militants from unemployed organizations) were present among the

claimants or the looters; in many cases they were seen directing the crowds to and from their targets.

Food riots were expected in Florencio Varela but instead, residents and brokers acted jointly and passionately to protect their communities. As Roberto recalled, he drove his car around the neighborhood to see where the looters were coming from. However, the people that were expected to loot –because of their structural conditions, and their legacy of contention– were mounting guard and making bonfires to prevent violence. One way to explain this is by highlighting that, unlike the situation in other districts, social assistance continued to function in Florencio Varela during the peak of the crisis. In poor working class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, like Florencio Varela, the poor and the unemployed rely on patronage networks and particularly on *punteros* (the local name for brokers) to solve their most pressing everyday life problems (from access to food, welfare plans and medicine, to pavement for a road) (Auyero and Moran 2007). In December of 2001, subsidies and welfare programs that channeled flows of goods and services from the political patrons to their clients were suspended in most places. Not in Florencio Varela.

It maybe that the history of activism in the district of Florencio Varela, the organizing, picketing, and protest experience facilitated continued food distribution when it was suspended in all other districts. It is probable that the municipality had different negotiation capacities, and that brokers were better able to negotiate with supermarkets.

Auyero and Moran (2007) point to Peronist brokers as central figures in the lootings who communicated the location of targets, the presence or absence of police and thus the feasibility of risky practices. Signaling, a crucial mechanism in the generation of collective action (McAdam et al. 2001) was at work.<sup>28</sup> Friends and neighbors, in cooperation with political brokers linked to the largest patronage-based party in Buenos Aires (the Peronist Party), indicated to each other: a) when lootings were about to start, and b) where it was safe to loot.

Yet, contrary to what Auyero and Moran (2007) find, the brokers were indeed present in Florencio Varela but did not encourage looting (they were not signaling when lootings were about to start, and the places it was safe to loot). Brokers in Florencio Varela acted to prevent collective violence and looting; *“My job was to go around the different bonfires and send the people to sleep. I would tell (the people at the bonfires) what could they take from us?”*(Mirta explaining her role during the days of the massive uprisings in Argentina).

Brokers thus performed a different role in Florencio Varela. As Jorge recalls, *“During 2001 I could see how people’s lives were deteriorating; men were laid off, so they started coming to the soup kitchen with their entire family ... it was a serious crisis*

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<sup>28</sup> Signaling refers to a set of events whereby participants in a risky situation “often scan each other for signs of readiness to incur costs without defecting, modulating their behavior according to estimates of the likelihood that others will flee” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001:28).

*and the local Peronist responded immediately. There were tons and tons of merchandise distributed to everyone [...] It was full of brokers (había punteros a lo loco). They appeared everywhere. They run everything”*[Jorge, describing the days of the major lootings –December 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>]. Brokers in Florencio Varela did not prevent collective action, brokers prevented violence by helping residents organize collectively. As mentioned above, rumors were also present but preceding and suppressing collective violence.

The patrons interviewed in Florencio Varela credited their leadership more to their personal skills and negotiation capabilities than to their resources. That is, brokers here had to deal with lack of resources and unsatisfied needs on a constant basis so the patron-client bond had its own specific particularities. Patrons were also neighbors, and sometimes, also friends with their clients. They lived in the same area and shared similar problems so they provided their clients with solutions to their never-ending, daily needs (i.e. land disputes, access to a kindergarten, a new traffic light to prevent accidents), which strengthened the patron-client bond. Brokers in Florencio Varela had known their clients, their communities, for decades so it was not surprising that they were organizing against violence. This was the case in other districts as well, but the UGL as an intermediary participatory agency was unique to Florencio Varela.

During the 2001 crisis, brokers in Florencio Varela were at the bonfires telling people that nothing would happen, that they could go to sleep. But brokers in other districts



also had strong familiar ties with their communities and lootings did occur –they were directing the crowds to and from looting sites. So, what was different in Florencio Varela? Where did the Florencio Varela brokers get the resources? Why did rumors here served to disarticulate violence while it instigated it in other areas? Was the goal of rumors to prevent mobilization? Further research is needed to explain it.

As Mirta remembers, *“There were no lootings or violence because there was an order from the government, from the municipality or someone there to put an end to this ... The mayor called all the brokers in the district and right after that everything came to normality again... Police came and said that everything was normal, that there had been some kind of misunderstanding. I felt so ridiculous because everyone was expecting a looting attack.*

*...So to end with the bonfires, the police came and said that everything was clear, that everything was normal... I don't know what purpose they had to create all this in the first place, but they had to have a motive. And right there, in those days they (the brokers) started distributing merchandize.”*

The presence and actions of brokers during the 2001 episodes is confirmed by other sources. The day of the heaviest food riots throughout Argentina (December 20<sup>th</sup>), the mayor of Florencio Varela announced the creation of an Anti-crisis Committee for the district.<sup>29</sup> And in stark contrast to what was happening in most parts of the country,

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<sup>29</sup> An announcement of the new Anti-Crisis Committee and coverage of the press conference appeared in the local daily “Varela al Día”.

where state welfare plans, unemployment subsidies, and food distribution had been suspended (Auyero and Moran 2007, *Clarín* December 2001, Fradkin 2002), the mayor reminded the population that this municipality would pay unemployment and other welfare plans as scheduled. In addition to that, food distribution was to be continued and reinforced. This was unique to Florencio Varela since the government was introducing severe budget cuts that affected the distribution of all state plans (Scaletta 2001).

*“When the [2001] crisis broke out, the municipality carried out a very strong job with its social and political networks. For example, we developed a “seeds program” we handed out seeds and taught people how to grow them and all that could be obtained from one product... I had over 70 community gardens, in addition to the one I had in the neighborhood association where people could drop by and take a tomato...”* (Peronist broker Rosa remembers.)

*“That (social and political) network allowed us to bring clarity to people. There was a very clear and strong leadership, in everything. We had to tell people what were the risks of the decisions they could make... because people were watching the lootings on TV.”* (Rosa) In other words, Rosa suggested that specific people were potential looters and through her strong leadership, this was prevented.

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, *Varela al Día* newspaper published the mayor’s statement in connection with the reinforcement of food distribution. He said: *“there will be no new*

*distribution centers of merchandize because they will be distributed through the social networks... We want to prioritize the social networks.”* The mayor’s quote illustrates another characteristic of clientelist exchange. Neither patrons nor clients were willing or even able to describe the clientelistic relationship as a quid-pro-quo exchange of scarce and desirable goods, but instead interpreted it in flowery terms as an enactment of community relations and civic solidarity (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, 18). When asked about the social networks, Julio, a former municipality employee said that this was due to the mayor’s vision: *“I think the networks in the district were functioning so well because the mayor has a sort of gift, or knack, for this... he knew, he know how to build networks. Just think that during the peak of the crisis he had the manzanas, the UGLs, everyone in the district working. I think that stopped any looting attempts.”*

Thus, in a context of widespread uprisings and lootings, and in a place with a strong legacy of contention, brokers’ presence was intensified. Brokers appeared everywhere. But, what exactly were they doing? Brokers visited bonfires, distributed food, and developed programs. They assured citizens that their lives would continue as had been. They were suppressing violence by organizing collectively.

## **Conclusion**

One line of research describes political clientelism as opposite to collective mobilization and as fostering the fragmentation of the population. Patrons, for this

perspective, are said to discourage any form of collective action, community activism or social movement so as to maintain vertical control and domination of their clients. Another intellectual tradition argues that clientelist networks and collective action coexist in different ways. The dynamics in the district of Florencio Varela with both strong clientelist networks and a tradition of neighborhood institutions of civic participation seemed to support both lines of research. In different forms, political patronage in Florencio Varela coexisted with a history of community associations and neighborhood participation. Political clientelism did not, for instance, prevent the emergence of an unemployed *piquetero* movement in the area. Far from that, Florencio Varela was a stronghold of the *piquetero* movement.

But what prevented violence in this particular district? Multiple factors. First, unlike what happened in other parts of Argentina in December of 2001, in Florencio Varela, the flow of resources that routinely circulate within patronage networks was not only sustained but intensified. Second, the UGLs were created and fully operating before (and during) the contentious episodes of 2001. Third, *piqueteros* organized themselves to orderly request food and not loot, and finally, the mobilization of the population was also widespread and fostered by patrons: residents and patrons acted collectively demanding and organizing food distribution, making bonfires, and preventing violence.

Patrons here mobilized the population to prevent violence and to defend each other against potential lootings. Thus, the presence of patrons in the contentious episodes

of the 2001 crisis is confirmed. Yet, brokers from the Peronist party did not act in only one way (instigating lootings and signaling where it was safe to loot as Auyero points out for La Matanza and Moreno). In some situations, patrons mobilized the population to prevent violence; much as in Auyero's work, rumors also served this purpose: preventing sacking and violence. In other words, the case of Florencio Varela indicates that a social structure characterized by patronage and collective action can coexist, and can act to suppress collective violence as much as to promote it.

Additionally, it is also possible that the nature of patron-client bonds and networks in Florencio Varela might have had different characteristics than in other parts of Argentina. All my respondents had known their patron, or clients, for decades, which allowed for the targeted resource flow. They were old neighbors, or even friends. It is not clear how patrons were able to guarantee the flow of resources and services during the peak of the crisis when they had been curtailed everywhere else. Further research should address this question. But, it is also possible that patrons acted to prevent violence in order to protect their clients. Protection and safety –during a moment of madness and fear– were precious services to provide. As Scott (1972) shows, the more client's vital needs a patron can meet (if he can supply not only land and security but also influence with the administration, help in arranging mortgages or schooling, and so forth), the greater the tendency for the tie to be invoked frequently and to endure over long periods. In this way, the efforts of patrons to organize and protect their clients, further demonstrates that clientelism can generate collective action.



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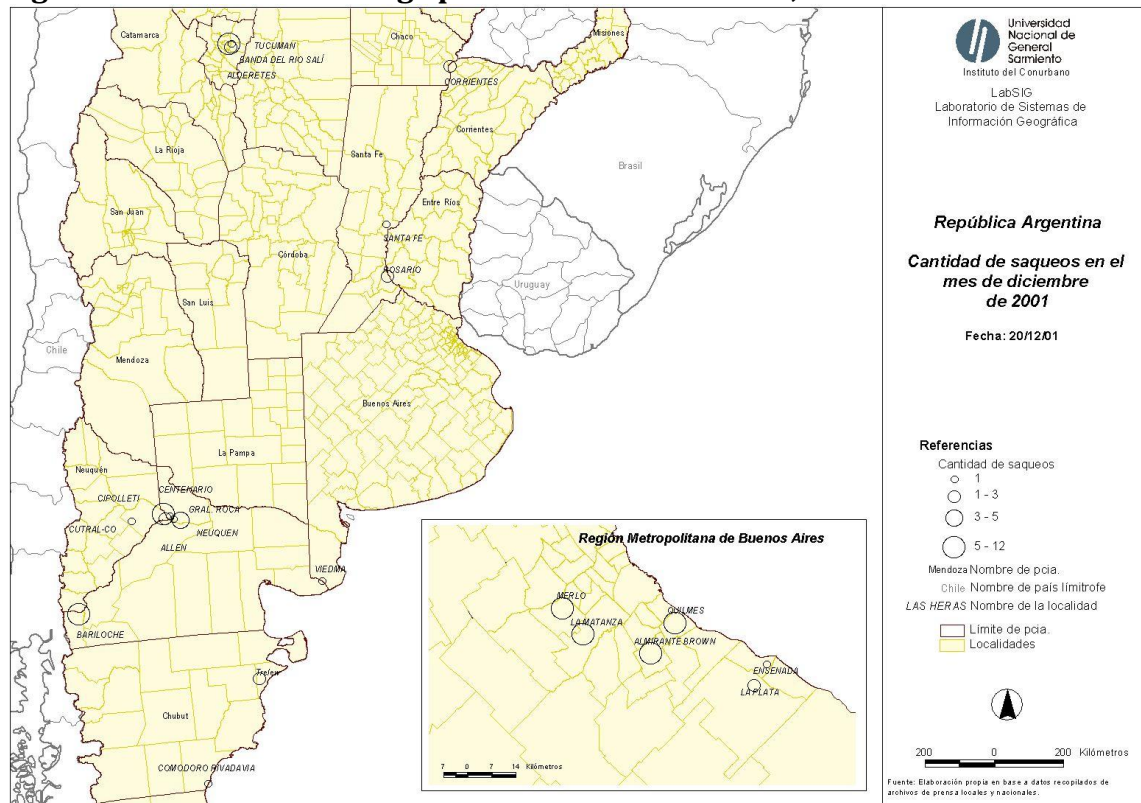
La Nación (Argentina)

Página 12 (Argentina)

El Día (Buenos Aires)

Varela al Día (Florencio Varela, Buenos Aires)

**Figure 1. Location of looting episodes. December 20th, 2001**



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30 Map, courtesy of Javier Auyero.