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# From Social Exclusion to Social Cohesion: How the *Piquetero* Movement Achieved Social Policy Expansion in Post-Neoliberal Argentina

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## ABSTRACT

Argentina's implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the 1990s caused unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment. In the face of political and economic subordination, the working class and unemployed turned to collective action and formed the *Piquetero* movement, carrying out hundreds of protests between 1997 and 2007 to demand more inclusive social policies. To understand how this social movement became a legitimate vehicle for influencing Argentinian social policymaking, a rigorous literature review of scholarly articles and relevant quantitative data was conducted and three main findings were identified. First, strong social cohesion within the movement made the protest activities highly organized and persistent. Second, the size and visibility of the protests made the movement impossible to ignore. Third, the democratic political structure of Argentina meant that meeting the demands of the movement was necessary for presidents to secure the vote for reelection. These findings highlight the importance of the social sphere in development discourse and emphasize the ability of social movements to influence government action. The *Piquetero* movement was an impressive demonstration for how to effectively assemble people in a democratic space to create immediate social change.

## INTRODUCTION

Argentina has garnered a global reputation for its volatile economy. Since the mid-twentieth century, the country's approach to economic policymaking has swung between a wide spectrum of tactics trying to foster sustainable economic development, with unsatisfactory results. Debt and default crises have plagued the country for the better part of thirty years, peaking in 2001 when Argentina defaulted on over US\$100 billion owed to external creditors. Only recently was the country able to restructure nearly all of its remaining US\$65 billion in debt with the International Monetary Fund and other private lenders. This deficit mainly originates from loans of the post-Import Substitution Industrialization period, when economic liberalization brought new waves of external financing. The volatility and stagnant growth felt during this period of the 1980s, known as Latin America's "Lost Decade," led Argentina and many of its neighbors to turn to more orthodox, neoliberal policies.

While such policies tamed inflation and yielded growth in the short term, they did not lessen the fiscal deficits. With a low government budget, deregulation, and privatizations, the lower and working classes experienced reductions in services

and wages and many lost their jobs. As economic vulnerability deepened for the average person throughout the 1990s, a movement of unemployed people emerged as a voice for those who lacked a formal method for public discourse. This movement became known as the *Piquetero* movement, encompassing hundreds of organizations fighting for inclusive social policies.

Historically, labor unions were the strongest entities for pushing policy reform. They had legal recognition and structure that social movements often lacked and were often given access to official policymaking channels. Throughout the 1990s, union membership dropped drastically as privatizations and other market-oriented policies drove up unemployment, slashing their strength. As a result, unemployed Argentines turned to collective protest and reached national scales demanding better employment opportunities and more inclusive social policies. The peak of the movement came in 2001 and 2002 amid political disorientation and a default crisis. Many of Argentina's Latin American neighbors also experienced social unrest in response to these detrimental economic experiments. However, the *Piquetero* movement became quite distinct in its size, persistence, and relationship to politics.

This paper provides a country-level case study of Argentina, analyzing the causes, scope, and influence the unemployed *Piquetero* movement had on social policymaking. I will consider the timeframe from 1997 (when the first protest of the movement occurred) to 2007 (when Néstor Kirchner left office). Kirchner's exit provides a logical end date because the *Piqueteros* became much more incorporated into electoral politics and social policymaking under his administration. This trend lessened the movement's political autonomy and unification. Generally, I will discuss how economic policies enacted by Carlos Menem and Fernando de la Rúa were central to the rise and continued presence of the *Piqueteros*, and how their demands of each administration helped provoke Eduardo Duhalde and Néstor Kirchner to pass more inclusive social policies. I use Garay's definition of social policy, which encompasses "social transfers and services for individuals and households, such as pensions and income support programs, as well as health care and social assistance services" (Garay, 2016, p.29).

I argue that the movement was able to exert unprecedented influence over social policymaking for three reasons. First, the production of obvious losers through economic austerity measures from the late 1990s into the early 2000s catalyzed feelings of social cohesion and resilience among the groups that Garay deems as social "outsiders." To her definition, the outsiders who made up the *Piquetero* movement include "the urban informal sector – the self-employed, street vendors, and employees hired off the books – as well as rural workers and the unemployed" (Garay, 2016, p.1). The strong sense of common struggle fostered an environment of collective identity, which impassioned the unemployed and their peers to push for change.

Second, the sheer size and persistence of protests organized by unemployed Argentines, who generally would not have such political agency, allowed for constant demands to be made until results were won. Over a decade, the movement encompassed a variety of organizations and hundreds of thousands of people. Their tactics of picketing and street-barricading were highly disruptive, making a direct government response necessary for economic activity to carry on. The *Piqueteros* used their visibility to build legitimacy and position their protests as attacks on neoliberalism. Their strength and persistence were instrumental in winning them access to policy-making channels previously untouched by the unemployed.

Third, the *Piquetero* movement was able to warrant social policy expansion by making the meeting of their demands a political necessity. The lack of political and economic stability enjoyed by the Menem, de la Rúa, Duhalde, and first Kirchner administrations made the unemployed vote necessary to secure reelection. Fernando de la Rúa's 2001 resignation showed Duhalde and Kirchner that ignoring the demands of the social

movements was political suicide. In response, they dramatically expanded social policymaking and opened negotiation spaces for the unemployed to curtail the mass social unrest and maintain electoral support.

Many of the scholars mentioned in this paper describe certain policies enacted by administrations of the time as direct reactions to the protests. I only analyze several policies on a broad scale, as the full transformation of social policy from the late 1990s and early 2000s far exceeds the scope of this paper. I begin by discussing related literature, then move into a brief economic background on the neoliberal structural adjustments of the 1990s and how the results gave rise to the *Piquetero* movement. I then analyze three social policies passed by the state in response to the social movements and discuss my three theories for how and why the *Piqueteros* were instrumental in their passage and implementation.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is a theoretical analysis of mainly qualitative literature covering four central themes: (1) social cohesion and social movement theory, (2) Argentinian labor and social policies, (3) Argentinian political and economic history, and (4) the *Piquetero* movement itself. These sources – in both Spanish and English – are pulled from a variety of scholarly journals, books, and articles from databases accessed through the GWU library system. Quantitative data from international organizations complement the qualitative findings, mainly in economic analysis and explanation of the scope of the movement, but the creation of new quantitative data was not the goal. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, fieldwork was not possible. All conclusions are drawn from reading, analyzing, and understanding existing data and literature.

The central research question is "How was the *Piquetero* movement able to influence social policymaking so substantially in the post-neoliberal era?" Research began with theoretical literature on the rise and role of social movements in Latin America, ultimately leading to the identification of social cohesion as the most important conceptual factor for the *Piquetero* movement. This led to deeper exploration into the literature on Argentinian labor systems, economic history, and political structures, especially with respect to the Peronist Party – the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ). With this background in mind, three hypotheses were formulated to answer the research question – the movement's strong and organized social cohesion, mass participation and visibility, and ability to use political circumstances to its advantage. Next, national-scale social policies passed during this time were identified and related to the hypotheses to conclude that the *Piqueteros* had a substantial influence on their creation and passage.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Before 1997, popular demand for new social policies in Argentina mainly came from labor unions, who were able to lobby through corporatist channels facilitated by the government. Without this formal access to policymakers, the *Piqueteros* operated instead in the social space, seeking to integrate social life and the social economy into the political and economic narrative. Sánchez de Roldán argues that much of Latin America's development literature undervalues the importance of social action in shaping development, and introduces the "proper social issues" that must be considered more thoroughly. These issues are social vulnerability, social capital, social exclusion, social inclusion, and social cohesion (Sanchez de Roldán, 2012). I will focus mostly on how the exclusion of the *Piqueteros* from social programs and economic support fostered the last issue, social cohesion. I utilize the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) definition of social cohesion, which is "the dialectical relationship between mechanisms of social inclusion/exclusion and people's reactions, perceptions and attitudes to the ways in which these mechanisms operate in producing a sense of belonging in society" (ECLAC, 2007, p.48).

Considering this relationship between social exclusion and social cohesion, Jenson details how social cohesion can be understood either through the relationship between society and governments or within a broader context to society as a whole (Jenson, 2010, p.7). In this case, the relationship between society and the government was weak, lacking meaningful vertical linkages. This lack of access to the government generated horizontal social cohesion between poorer classes who were not getting the support they needed. The growing number of unemployed Argentines and precarity for those working in the informal sector generated a great deal of social and economic vulnerability. Tokman stresses the relationship between vulnerability and the informal sector, asserting that the larger the informal sector, the greater the public perception of insecurity. As a growing number of people lost their formal employment and thereby social protection, feelings of insecurity drove many Argentines to civil society groups for support (Tokman, 2007, p. 87). What goes beyond Tokman's consideration is that the unemployed used these feelings of insecurity to leverage organizational legitimacy, not just informal workers. It was both the real and perceived insecurity felt by the unemployed that gave the *Piquetero* movement a strong foundation on social cohesion and collective struggle and pushed it comfortably into the political sphere.

Retamozo argues that the rise and success of the *Piquetero* movement hinge on two social conditions: the process of class restructuring as quality of life deteriorated and the visibility of the protests. These conditions align with my hypotheses of the importance of

social cohesion and mass organization, and help explain how space was created for collective action among citizens experiencing the same challenges (Retamozo, 2006, p. 112). Retamozo and Becloweicz both explain how the deterioration of neoliberal hegemony allowed the rise of new alternatives in the social, political, and economic spheres (Bencloweicz, 2006, p. 129). For the *Piqueteros*, this meant an appropriate space to exercise social cohesion.

To develop their insecurity into action, the *Piqueteros* turned to the social and solidarity economy. Veltmeyer describes the social and solidarity economy as both an alternative development model and a vision of development through social transformation. He claims that it can be functional in both capitalist and anti-capitalist movements by becoming a third sector that complements the public and private sectors. This is the case in Argentina, wherein the social and solidarity economy – through mass protest and organized movements – became a mechanism for advocating social policy expansion aimed at lessening poverty and inequality. He deems the 1990s the "Age of Resistance" as the Washington Consensus – the market-oriented structural reforms prescribed by D.C.-based institutions to developing Latin American countries in crisis – fell and a post-neoliberal framework was ushered in (Veltmeyer, 2018, p. 39). Effectively, the goal was to shift the political focus from the growth-oriented economy to the social economy.

To this end, there is an important link between social movements, economic circumstances, and political systems. As unions declined in the 1990s, the acknowledged relationship between the political and social spheres did not fall with them. Instead, social movements distinguished themselves from unions and political parties to demand change in the relationship between individuals and the collective. Bacallao-Pino argues that social movements inherently push against institutional politics by demanding concessions for sectors of the population often excluded from clientelist networks (Bacallao-Pino, 2016, p. 118-119). Indeed, the access to policymaking that the *Piqueteros* won for themselves went against the established corporatism that had long excluded them.

Bellinger and Arce posit the rise of unemployed citizens in the framework of democracy. Much of the literature on the effects of neoliberal reform on society, they state, argues that social demobilization occurs under structural adjustment. Instead, while unions declined, lower socioeconomic classes repoliticized (Bellinger & Arce, 2011, p. 691) and became reincorporated (Rossi, 2019, p. 7) within and outside of formal party politics. Democratization coincided with the deterioration of living standards but "expanded the scope for citizen mobilization against exclusionary economics" (Grugel & Riggiroz, 2012, p. 6). On the heels of the brutal

Videla dictatorship, emphasis on democratic principles created the conditions for social movements to become legitimate vehicles for government agenda-setting. These arguments will support my third claim for the success of the movement in the social policy arena; the democratic nature of the administrations under consideration underpins the need for presidents to respond to the protests to maintain electoral support.

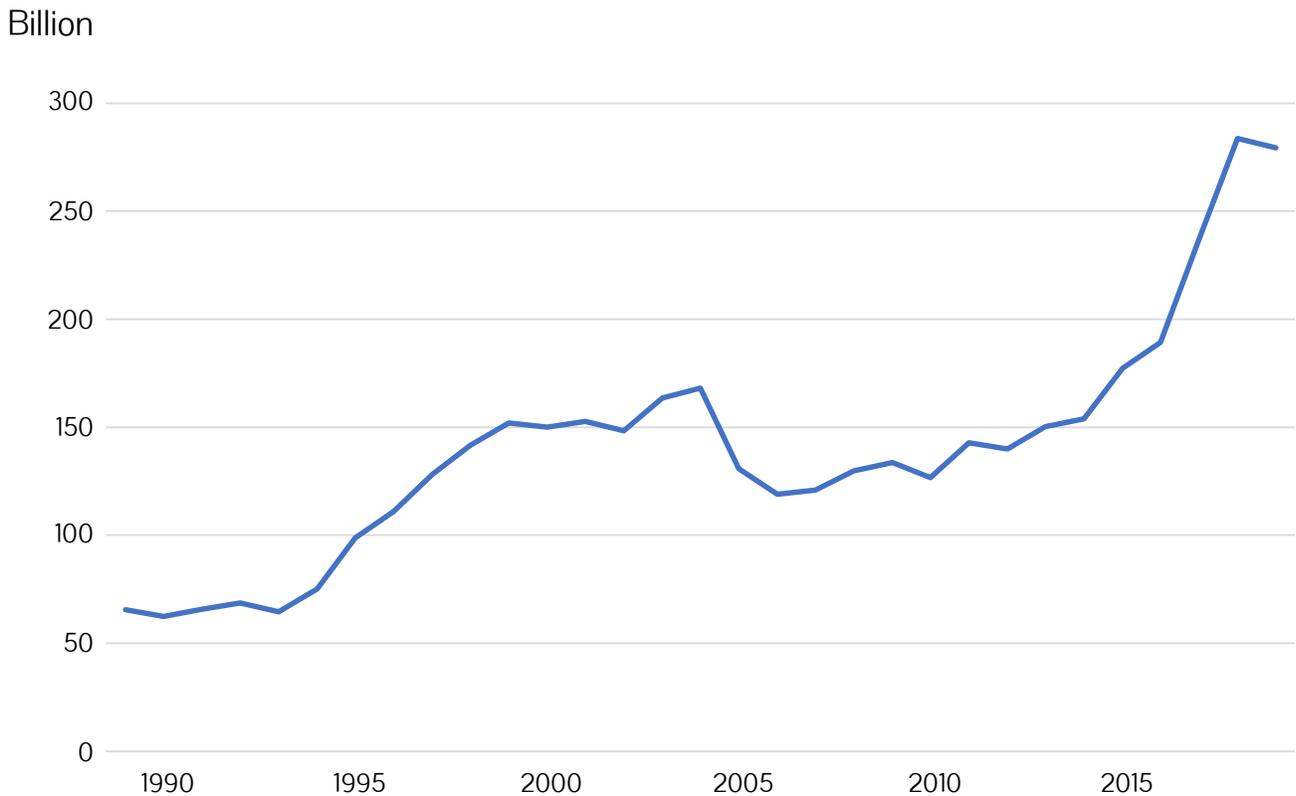
I will begin with a brief economic history of Argentina that explains the structural changes that catalyzed feelings of social exclusion and cohesion, and ultimately led to the rise, strength, and success of the *Piquetero* movement.

### THE ERA OF NEOLIBERAL REFORM

Argentina’s economic history over the twentieth century is riddled with volatility, stop-and-go economics, and frequent shifts in economic models. Along with many of its neighbors, Argentina adopted Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) from 1945-1976, enacting industrial policy and restricting trade. Despite early growth and investment, the shortcomings of ISI became clear in

the 1960s; Argentina lacked competitiveness in its manufacturing sector with an overvalued exchange rate, left its agricultural sector under-invested in, and racked up large fiscal deficits. Attempts to finance these deficits brought the average consumer price inflation to over 300% between 1975 and 1990, slashing the purchasing power of Argentine citizens (Brown, 2004, p. 222).

When the country fell under the military government of General Jorge Rafael Videla in 1976, drastic measures were taken towards austerity and liberalization - a common approach among hyperinflationary economies in Latin America at the time (Kaplan, 2013, p. 49). The move away from economic populism brought rigid defense of a fixed exchange rate, which required increasing external borrowing (Franko, 2019, p. 84). The massive fiscal deficit and lack of export revenues to finance the high ratio of debt to GDP left Argentina, alongside many of Latin America’s nations, vulnerable to the domestic and international shocks of the 1980s “Lost Decade.” Once democratically-elected President Raúl Alfonsín took office, he deepened economic commitment towards Washington Consensus-guided reforms to tame the inflation and reduce the



**FIGURE 1.** Argentina Total External Debt Stocks (Billions, Current USD), 1989 – 2019

Source: “External debt stocks, total (DOD, current US\$) – Argentina.” World Bank Data (Washington, D.C., 2019).

deficit. Despite his intentions, public backlash curbed his attempts to fully commit to the neoliberal approach, and by 1989, price inflation rebounded and reached over 3,000%, spelling the end of Alfonsín's rather slow-moving term (Brown, 2004, p. 266).

Neoliberal structural adjustment truly took place under Carlos Menem in 1994. Despite being a member of the *Partido Justicialista*, which often promoted state spending and redistributionist policies, Menem also undertook swift policy action to implement neoliberal reforms. Along with selling off hundreds of state-owned companies to the private sector and reducing trade barriers, he proposed and enacted the Convertibility Plan in 1991, which reduced government spending, increased privatizations, and most notably pegged the peso to the dollar at a 1:1 rate with fully backed reserves (Tiechman, 2004, p. 57). While meant to bring currency stability and tame inflation, the continued reliance on fiscal spending to fill the gap between tax revenues and government expenditures meant the deficit kept growing (Brown, 2004, p. 270). During his term, international debt obligations grew from \$62 billion to \$127 billion, as seen in Figure 1, and a wave of capital flight ensued. Argentina became reliant on the IMF and other external creditors, and eventually the IMF refused to issue more loans until the country complied with its austerity conditionalities. By the late 1990s, the effects of the loan cycle on the lower classes were massive.

At the heart of the socioeconomic struggle was increasing unemployment, shown in Table 1. Between 1991

and 1997, unemployment rose from 6.5% to 16.8%, largely due to privatizations. Profits from these privatizations were used to service debts rather than engage in social spending (Teubal & Rodriguez, 2001, p. 68). Accordingly, many Argentines felt that neoliberal policies had only harmed them. Services that had once been accessible were suddenly expensive and becoming increasingly complex, and prices were soaring. Any macroeconomic growth potential from the 1990s restructuring was offset by rising social exclusion. The country's Gini coefficient, which measures wealth inequality on a scale from 0 (perfectly equal) to 100 (perfectly unequal), increased from 46.8 in 1991 to 49.1 in 1997 and peaked in 2002 at 53.8.

Anger over these conditions rose steadily after Menem's reelection in 1995, and 1997 marked the first wave of protests considered part of the *Piquetero* movement. Early protests took place in select provinces that had been hit especially hard by unemployment. They demanded greater workfare benefits and better distribution of existing funds, claiming that social safety nets were insufficient. In 1998, several of the largest unemployed organizations merged into strong coalitions that would become foundational in the *Piquetero* movement.

## THE RISE OF THE PIQUETEROS

I pull strongly from Rossi's 2019 work to explain the rise of the *Piquetero* movement. He deems the struggle for reincorporation by the unemployed as the driver of the movement, with the central grievances being the

Year	Unemployment	Year	Unemployment
1990	7.6%	1999	16.1%
1991	6.5%	2000	17.1%
1992	7.1%	2001	19.2%
1993	11.6%	2002	22.5%
1994	13.3%	2003	17.3%
1995	18.9%	2004	13.6%
1996	18.8%	2005	11.6%
1997	16.8%	2006	10.2%
1998	14.8%	2007	8.5%

**TABLE 1.** | *Unemployment by Year (1990–2007)*

Source: "Argentina – Unemployment Rate," *Knoema: World Data Atlas*, 2019.

lack of work opportunities and social safety nets and the exclusion from clientelist politics. The *Piqueteros* became “the main national, social movement in the struggle to shape a post-neoliberal arena in Argentina, made up of unemployed citizens and informal workers” (Rossi, 2019, p.5). Their methods of picketing and blocking roads began in the Neuquen Province, where thousands of workers lost their jobs when YPF, one of Argentina’s largest energy corporations, was privatized. Newly jobless, hundreds of people organized their first roadblock in 1996 to demand compensation and new opportunities (Almeida, 2007, p. 123). The method quickly spread across the country as an effective approach to organizing people outside of workers’ strikes and manifested into the name of the movement as the “Picketers” – the *Piqueteros*.

The *Piqueteros* tended to be affiliated with groups from the left, most notably with the *Partido Justicialista*. Over time, the party underwent extensive restructuring into a machine party, which pushed some party members towards civil society groups more on the political periphery. This reformulation gave way for alternative avenues for the poorer classes to organize alongside the party, which were also fueled by the reduction in union power (Rossi, 2019, p. 72). Between 1985 and 2000, union membership rates fell from about 67.5% to 31.7% (González, Medwid & Trajtemberg, 2009). No longer having a structured group through which to fight for social policy reform, former union members and the unemployed turned to social movements to voice their demands.

Scholars seem to settle on three social movement organizations (SMOs) that truly founded the *Piquetero* movement. The first was the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* (MTD), comprised of left-wing Guevaras and autonomists who remained more on the periphery of the political sphere. The second was the Maoist Classist and Combative Current (CCC), estimated to have about 70,000 members and known to be more central on the political spectrum than many of its left-leaning counterparts. The final SMO was the *Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat* (FTV), which aligned with the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA) labor union. The FTV had an estimated 125,000 members and was most involved in direct political negotiations with the government (Salvochea, 2008, p. 305). The spectrum of political alignment and involvement among these three central SMOs, which each encompassed a variety of smaller organizations under their ideological umbrellas, contributed to the movement having a wide range of followers. Accordingly, the various arms and offshoots of the movement were differentiated by region, collective identity, and general approaches to social dialogue.

The first wave of unemployed protests considered part of the *Piquetero* movement broke out in 1997. Menem’s unwavering commitment to the Convertibility Plan and structural adjustment cost him electoral popularity,

and each successive year of his incumbency saw more organizations joining the movement. Though protests briefly subsided when his successor, Fernando de la Rúa, took office, the continued inability of their administrations to sufficiently meet the demands of the unemployed population set the stage for the continued momentum of the *Piquetero* protests into a national movement.

## REACTIONARY SOCIAL POLICIES ON THE NATIONAL SCALE

It was not until after de la Rúa’s resignation that targeted and nationally reaching social policies were truly proposed and passed. Among many others, three key policies were passed under Duhalde and Kirchner that helped to alleviate the economic burden felt by lower-class Argentines in the sectors of unemployment, pensions, and health care. The *Piquetero* movement was instrumental in shaping the social discourse and provoking the passage of each.

### Unemployment

After five presidents passed through the *Casa Rosada* in just a week, the beginning of Duhalde’s 2002 term brought the recognition that the government needed to listen to the demands of the people. His first attempt was the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* (Program for Unemployed Heads of Household, or PJJHD). The plan involved a monthly cash transfer of AR\$200 (about US\$66 at the time) to unemployed households with children under 18 or disabled persons. To incentivize productivity and opportunity within beneficiary households, Duhalde attached conditionalities to the funds that children had to be attending school and household members had to be involved in local community projects (Colina, Giodano, Torres, & Cárdenas, 2009, p. 339–340). Eventually the plan supported almost 2 million households, making it “the most far-reaching unemployment program ever applied in Latin America” (Rossi, 2019, p.178–179). Funds were dispersed among the provinces to consultative councils as well as other groups including the CTA and, in about 10% of the cases, the *Piqueteros* (Kaese & Wolff, 2016, p. 50). Movement leaders in the CCC and FTV were even included in meetings to help design the program, and they took the opportunity to press for national coverage and extension of universal benefits (Salvochea, 2008, p. 306).

The main flaws of the program were that its guidelines, eligibility criteria, and beneficiary lists were highly centralized. Alterations to the program could not be made to reflect regional circumstances and the government was still able to use clientelism to influence who received funding. Notwithstanding the shortcomings, the policy was seen as a good complement to existing assistance programs and was a direct response to the persistent

demands of the *Piqueteros*. Duhalde hoped the program would “disarticulate the movement. He tried to inundate the country with benefits to remove the motive to launch protests...to internally demobilize movements” (Garay, 2016, 184). The PJJHD was more widely known than previous social policies and seen as a step in the right direction for Argentinian policymaking. Indeed, it helped pave the way for several more social policies under Duhalde and provide more spaces for *Piquetero* participants to exert more control over their own well-being.

## Pensions

Another critical demand from the *Piqueteros* was a more inclusive pension system. Unions had pushed for pension reform since the 1990s, but the outcry from the unemployed highlighted the need to finally overhaul the system. Under pressure from social actors, Duhalde met with leaders from the CCC and FTV, among others, to negotiate pension expansions in exchange for a reduction in protests. The resulting policy was an extension of pension coverage under PJJHD for seniors in 2003. The program only reached a fraction of households needing the service and left many social outsiders unaccounted for, since beneficiaries of PJJHD had to have children (Garay, 2016, p. 197). In the end, more extensive pension reform was left to Kirchner.

Garay cites Kirchner’s decision to expand the pension system as a direct result of continued public frustration with PJJHD (Garay, 2016, p. 201). The most important reform for the *Piquetero* beneficiaries came through Law 25994 in December of 2004. The legislation allowed unemployed women over 60 and men over 65 to receive a pension even if they had not contributed to social security for the required 30 years. Kirchner created a moratorium in which non-contributory beneficiaries would become contributors by paying part of their benefit back (Niedzweicki, 2014, p. 38). Combined with the added flexibility to the system between private and public plans, pensions were deemed universally reaching once the reform took effect.

Pension reform had been a high priority for many groups since the 1990s, not just the *Piqueteros*. When unions still carried superior strength, their push for pension reform came from the desire for stability in the financial crisis. During the Menem era, the inclusion of unions in helping to craft reforms was at the top of the political agenda (Berniell, de la Mata & Machado, 2020, p. 1302). In the era of the *Piqueteros*, unions and other formal-sector groups were still quite involved in fighting for more comprehensive reforms and were instrumental in convincing Kirchner to do so. However, I argue that in the early 2000s, the *Piqueteros*’ spearheading of the cause for *universal* coverage influenced Kirchner to reform the system as a whole rather than just add provisions to an

inherently non-inclusive system.

## Health

The healthcare system was among the many aspects of life that had been decentralized in the 1990s with neoliberal reforms. Medicine prices soared by 309% amidst the inflationary crisis between 1991 and 1997, pushing them out of financial reach for many people (Tobar, 2004, p. 6). Falleti and Cunial assert that the “first national-level health program to promote civic engagement in health policies” was *Remediar* (Falleti & Cunial, 2019, p.4). The 2002 program provided medical consultations and 36 essential medicines at no cost to those who could not afford them through primary health care centers. At the time, more than 15 million people lacked access to these services (Tobar, 2004, p. 15). Furthermore, the program’s ten goals included measures to enlist civil society participation in the distribution of medicine kits, helping to ensure the neediest populations were being reached (Homedes & Ugalde, 2006, p. 127).

Research has proven it difficult to state surely that some of these civil society actors involved were *Piqueteros* (Falleti and Cunial do not elaborate on who is included in “civil society”), and the direct line of their influence on the program’s passage is less clear than the previous two policies. However, I argue again that it was their strength and visibility that turned inclusive health policy – alongside employment, pensions, and other social services – into a government priority. While initially local participation in the program was confined to monitoring, over time civil society members became more involved in planning and executing. Today, despite variations in the quality and distribution of insurance plans and facilities, health care in Argentina is among the best in Latin America, and *Remediar* is still in operation.

The social policies mentioned, along with many others, helped reduce poverty and the wealth gap and improve well-being for those marginalized by the neoliberal era. The efforts of the *Piqueteros* were paramount in pushing for the expansion of social policy. I believe that without the movement, the governments of the time would have remained far more focused on economic policy. Social cohesion, mass organization and visibility, and their influence on electoral politics to make passing social policy a necessity explains their success.

## DISCUSSION

### Social Cohesion

The first factor I consider causal in the success of the *Piquetero* movement as an agent for social policy expansion is social cohesion. Understanding social cohesion means recognizing the relationship between inclusion and exclusion in the economic, political, and social spheres of society. The importance of democracy

in Argentina at the time was instrumental in allowing an environment in which civil society could come together to share and act on their struggles. As Bellinger and Arce argue, “grievances – as those generated by economic liberalization – create a strong will for collective activity, while democracy creates a favorable environment or opportunity for collective responses” (Bellinger & Arce, 2011, p.691).

Retamozo describes two factors alongside conditions of marginality that explain the emergence of collective response from outsiders. The first is class restructuring. Throughout the 1990s the increase in unemployment and the changing face of labor unions was drastic. Many Argentines could feel their quality of life deteriorating and quantify the toll the reforms had taken on their incomes. Ordinarily, unemployment is seen as an individual problem that should be overcome through individual means. However, once it became clear that the government was not living up to its perceived role as the guarantor of social well-being, space for collective action emerged as economic vulnerability deepened. Neoliberal policies generated a gap in social life wherein the middle and upper classes remained able to voice concerns through labor unions or clientelist politics, while the lower classes began to develop other ways to counteract the neoliberal order and propose alternatives (Retamozo, 2006, p. 119-126). The *Piquetero* alternative was one of collective struggle and social cohesion. The second factor central to Retamozo’s argument on the emergence of collective action, protest visibility, will be revisited in the next section.

My argument is not that a movement of hundreds of thousands of people nationwide was entirely united. In fact, the make-up of the movement by many different SMOs and their offshoots suggests that there was significant variation in the collective identities that brought people together (Rossi, 2019, p. 21). The movement was quite territorialized, though I will not go into detail about the geographic dimensions and characteristics in this paper. While generally well organized, the unemployed workers’ movement functioned in a decentralized manner, with individual municipalities providing spaces for their own organizations and protests. What is important is that each SMO within the movement had varying priorities and positioned themselves at the forefront of a variety of policy demands that were not always perfectly aligned.

The SMOs involved also varied in their political ideologies. This was especially true once Kirchner was elected and began to splinter not just the PJ alignment with the left, but various groups within the *Piquetero* movement. The CCC maintained a “radical, anti-capitalist rhetoric” and remained detached from the Kirchner government in the early 2000s, while the FTV and other organizations aligned themselves closely with the administration (Kaese & Wolff, 2016, p. 51). Between these differences, the unifying threads were the anger over

insufficient government support and the tactics they used to draw attention to their demands.

Salvochea highlights how reliance on the idea of social cohesion can be problematic. He states that the capacity of the *Piqueteros* as a civil society agent was the most important aspect of their movement, but asserts that sometimes it meant they prioritized continuous activism over qualitative activism. He states, “some accuse the *Piquetero* organizations as acting as mercenaries in exchange for political favors or economic advantages. Indeed, the *Piquetero* organizations have been involved in protests completely unconnected with their principles and purpose” (Salvochea, 2008, p.310). In this way, social cohesion is important to social movement in general, but targeted goals can get lost in the need to simply maintain the movement’s momentum. His observation is truthful, but with a movement lasting nearly ten years, it seems inevitable that some events will not be perfectly executed or eloquently articulated. The emphasis on social cohesion worked for the *Piqueteros* by developing into a consistent and impassioned movement that was impossible to ignore.

Another argument made by Salvochea is that the use of social protest to demand welfare programs and increases in government social spending impedes the development of human capital. By choosing to spend their time organizing protests, SMO members chose not to engage in capacity-building activities that would increase their employability in the future (Salvochea, 2008, p. 316). Once again, I do not dispute his point, but this argument seems easier to state in theory than execute in practice. An unemployed person may not have the resources to improve their human capital independently or might be spending all their time outside of the movement searching for work or caring for dependents. They may not understand what human capabilities might be best for them to build or have the means to engage with resources to do so.

At a time when many Argentines’ basic needs were not being met, engaging in social protests to obtain social safety nets for immediate needs took precedence over sustainable development. Indeed, it should be the government’s role to encourage practices that promote sustainable development, rather than expecting the people to have an intrinsic recognition that attending night school might have a greater relative impact on their economic mobility in 10 years than attending a social protest. Human capital-building and personal investment are both individualistic behaviors, but the period of the early late 1990s and early 2000s was instead a period of great collectivism among struggling Argentines. It was more productive, at least in the short term, for citizens to turn to social cohesion and harness its unifying nature to demand more directly attainable concessions for their well-being. The beauty of the movement is that it encouraged people to put aside their individual struggles

to achieve change on behalf of society. Eloquently put by Dees-Mason, the *Piquetero* movement was viewed by many of its participants as “a space where power relations are turned upside down, and new social relations are formed based on solidarity and trust” (Dees-Mason, 2020, p. 103).

## Mass Organization

The mass participation in *Piquetero* activities and the disruptive nature of their tactics are perhaps the most important characteristics of the movement. The *Piquetero* protests attracted people from a wide variety of professions who had been laid off or seen their benefits slashed. Though the heart of the protests saw jobless people at the forefront, the informally employed, part-time, or underemployed workers also saw their well-being decline during the neoliberal era. As a result, the movement encompassed citizens of many ages, races, and ethnicities. Women made up as much as 60% of the protesters (Dees-Mason, 2020, p. 101). Because of the constant and decentralized nature of the movement, estimates of the total number of participants across the country are not well-documented. At the very least, the movement is understood to have included hundreds of thousands of people over the ten-year period under consideration.

Urban centers served as the main setting for *Piquetero* activities, becoming subject to hundreds of roadblocks per year. Buenos Aires alone experienced 23 in the movement’s first year, and from April to June of 1997 there was an average of 1.6 protests per day across the

country (Salvochea, 2008, p. 305). The earliest protests were centered around demanding workfare benefits in response to the shortcomings of Menem’s *Plan Trabajar* (Garay, 2016, p. 173). The 1996 Plan gave funds to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security to create jobs for the unemployed in local projects. Its limited and clientelist-influenced reach, unclear criteria, and low supply of benefits prompted the *Piqueteros* to push for more reforms (Garay, 2007, p. 305). Whereas some of the early protests relied on general economic principles like privatization and deregulation to drive their goals, *Plan Trabajar* provided an easily identifiable starting point in which to criticize policies rather than practices. This made identifying concrete policy options easier to articulate.

August of 2001 saw the largest and perhaps the most organized protest since 1997. Nationwide, over 100,000 people shut down 300 highways to demand social policy expansion. Not only was the event quite visible, but it effectively shut down the economy for the duration. Further driving the movement’s passion was the fact that in the months leading up to the 2001 roadblock, at least five *Piqueteros* were killed and over 3,000 arrested across several protest events. At this point, it was clear that de la Rúa prioritized containing social unrest over politically addressing it. As the *Piqueteros* increased their activity in 2001, his resignation and the freeing of jailed protesters were added to the growing list of demands. In September, the *Piqueteros* organized another massive highway block in Buenos Aires in conjunction with a general union strike to disrupt government activity and commerce (Petras,

Year	Acts	Duration (days)	Average Estimated Protest Participants
1997	66	183	625
1998	20	22	171
1999	21	49	796
2000	103	180	672
2001	157	273	1921
2002	394	570	1587
2003	200	224	1649

**TABLE 2.** *Unemployed Protest and Organization (1997-2003)*

Source: Candelaria Garay, “Social Policy and Collective Action: Unemployed Workers, Community Associations, and Protest in Argentina,” 312. Original data set compiled by author.

2001, p. 4266). De la Rúa's resignation came amid his inability to control the masses of people organizing in the streets, looting storefronts, and engaging in the popular Latin American protest practice of *cacerolazos*, the disruptive banging on pots and pans to draw attention (Mayekar, 2006, p. 61).

After the tumultuous political turnover that ended in Duhalde landing the presidency, 2002 became the peak year for the movement with over 2,000 protests throughout the country (Kaese & Wolff, 2016, p. 52). More than 1,000 gatherings occurred in Buenos Aires province alone (Salvochea, 2008, p. 305). Duhalde's attitude towards the protests was more accommodating than his predecessor's, but his intent alone was not enough to provide the policies being demanded. Between January and May of 2003, "unemployed workers' organizations performed 89 acts of protest," with as many as 80,000 – 100,000 mobilized in just Buenos Aires (Garay, 2016, p. 199).

The blockage of roads and highways as the *Piqueteros'* primary means of protest was quite strategic. I return to Retamozo's argument that visibility is the second causal factor in the rise of collective momentum for the *Piquetero* movement. Claiming Buenos Aires as the movement's clear epicenter allowed for maximum visibility, as thousands of people could see and hear the protests out their windows. The *Piqueteros* positioned their protest activities not just as spaces to demand help from their government, but as confrontations to Argentina's social order. SMOs drew on widespread feelings of collective struggle and social exclusion to build legitimacy, which is vital to understanding how the movement became so large and yielded the policy responses it did (Retamozo, 2006, p. 126).

The act of picketing roads was symbolic as an attack on neoliberal capitalism. Large highways symbolized the movement of goods in and out of the crucial sites of capitalism, wherein production, trade, and free markets relied on the transport of people and goods through well-organized supply chains. By blocking the way for these supply chains, "the piquete was an entirely effective form of disruption and protest of contemporary capitalism" (Dees-Mason, 2020, p. 102). In this way, the key benefits pushed by neoliberal capitalists – cheaper and better quality goods, diversification, and economic growth – could not be delivered.

Though the government was the main target of the protests, road picketing was disruptive to everyone. As a result, many Argentines not involved in the movement viewed the *Piqueteros* as a public nuisance, punishing everyday people for grievances they had with the government. This disdain was heightened any time violence was involved in a *Piquetero* event, regardless of which side it came from. Indeed, some of the activities carried out by the *Piqueteros* were quite ruthless, and seemingly tried to tip the use of clientelist politics in their

favor by forcing the hand of political leaders (Brown, 2004, p. 285). Regardless of any negative perceptions of the *Piqueteros* by their often richer, employed counterparts, the external distaste for the movement had little impact on the movement's mass appeal and its consistency in influencing the political agenda.

The resignation of Fernando de la Rúa signified that countering the protests with repression was an ill choice. Without this lesson, the likelihood that his successors would have granted the degree of targeted social policies they did is low. Rather, the constant and widespread unrest drummed up by the *Piqueteros* provoked much of the social policymaking undertaken, whether it was successful or not. The approaches of Duhalde and Kirchner were much more accommodating, and they opened communication channels that were previously closed to people outside of the formal, union sector. Despite the importance of the movement's visibility in developing these more accommodating attitudes, the concessions given by Duhalde and Kirchner to the *Piquetero* movement were also linked to their involvement in clientelist politics; they knew that the loss of the *Piquetero* voter base could push the PJ out of office.

### Political Necessity

The success of the *Piquetero* movement to provoke social policymaking is quite interesting when considered against the political circumstances of the time. Indeed, the democratic landscape of the country provided the right circumstances for many people to become involved in political life through the social sphere. Despite being a PJ member, which historically enjoyed support from the working and lower classes, Menem was unpopular among the *Piqueteros* as the spearhead of neoliberalism. The restlessness of the country under his leadership opened the space for Fernando de la Rúa, a member of the center-left party *Alianza para el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educación*, to run on a campaign of anti-corruption, macroeconomic stability, and job creation. His platform quickly won over many of the PJ's historical constituencies. After his election, there was a brief decline in *Piquetero* protests due to an expectation that de la Rúa would provide the redistributionist policies they sought (Garay, 2016, p. 176). This, of course, did not turn out to be the case.

While in office, de la Rúa reduced workfare benefits and other social programs with the intent of replacing them with programs less politically entrenched. In the end, many of the programs were never rejuvenated. Coupled with restrictive fiscal policy and reductions in public sector salaries meant to preserve convertibility and reduce the public deficit – valued at about \$141 billion in 2001 – de la Rúa quickly made many enemies among the unemployed. The *Piquetero* movement strengthened substantially between 1999 and 2001, increasing from a territorialized set of protests into a national-scale

movement centered in Buenos Aires (Brown, 2004, p. 272).

Aware of the mounting social unrest, the de la Rúa government proposed a number of social programs from housing and pension reform to family and child allowances. Despite the efforts, disagreements within his party and Congress prevented most of the measures from being implemented. Those that passed were insufficient or delayed substantially. Furthermore, many of his proposed solutions were strongly contested by labor unions like the CGT – one of the strongest unions in the region since the 1970s – for being poorly designed (Garay, 2016, p. 171). While the demands of the *Piqueteros* and many of the unions were fundamentally rooted in different struggles, on many occasions they were able to come together to contest poor policymaking. Alignment between the unemployed movement and unions allowed for an even greater scale of roadblocks throughout the country and a partnership between street protests and workers' strikes. In the face of such contention, as Garay puts it, "de la Rúa declared a state of siege, thereby banning meetings and protests to contain conflict...this measure immediately triggered massive anti-government protests, provoking his resignation amid police violence and riots" (Garay, 2016, p. 181). His inability to prevent the country from defaulting on billions of dollars of debt on top of meeting desperate protesters with repression resulted in his ouster.

Duhalde, a member of the PJ and Menem's former vice president, was appointed President by Congress after three fleeting presidents passed through the Casa Rosada between December of 2001 and January of 2002. He ran against de la Rúa for the 1999 presidency but was ultimately hurt by Menem's tarnishing of the PJ appealability to lower and middle-income voters. His main focus was restoring government legitimacy and simply getting the country through its day-to-day until the 2003 election, keenly aware of the need to address the social unrest to maintain electoral support. As a machine party, the PJ was subject to fluid waves of support and unpopularity among its followers. It was a clear possibility, as seen under Menem, that Duhalde's actions could impact the general attitudes towards the party as a whole and risk driving voters away. *Piquetero* activities were instrumental in setting this mentality into motion by using the protests as a threat to withdraw their votes if social policy reforms were not made.

Duhalde's passage of the PJJHD, several large food distribution programs, and the creation of informal spaces for negotiation between the movements and the state were crucial in shifting the government agenda from economic issues to social policies. He also extended the de la Rúa-era Labor Emergency Program and tried to improve cash transfer programs to provide immediate relief (Garay, 2007, p. 313). By the end of his term, his efforts were still insufficient.

In the 2003 election, Argentina fell among the many

Latin American countries considered part of the "Pink Tide," a period of political left-turning in response to Washington Consensus-era economics. Initiated through the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, the pink tide swept across the region into the early 2000s to include Ricardo Lagos of Chile in 2000, Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva of Brazil in 2002, Néstor Kirchner of Argentina in 2003, Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay in 2004, and Evo Morales of Bolivia in 2005 (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011, p. 1) Many of these candidates' campaigns utilized populist tactics to appeal to the working class, and the widespread shift to the left represented a regional frustration with the effects of market-oriented economic policies. While some countries under leftist leadership maintained more orthodox macroeconomic policies, Argentina folded in civil society and created more societal linkages – with unions and with movements like the *Piqueteros* – to help guide policy orientation (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011, p. 4).

The PJ historically represented a coalition of left-leaning politicians and constituents, though its alignment with the left was and remains far more fluid than most other machine parties in the region. Indeed, the PJ is "flexible and pragmatic in their policy orientations. As such, their location on the Left is not fixed by ideology; they may tack to the Left or Right, depending on the policy preferences of the party leadership and the social, economic, and political contexts in which they operate" (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011, p.21) Such swings were seen when Menem pushed the party further to the right under neoliberalism, then Kirchner reorienting the party towards the left. This concept is central to understanding how the *Piqueteros* were able to yield social policy expansion from the national government, especially when Peronist leaders were in office. Even as incumbents, presidents of the time knew they would need to provide inclusive social policies to maintain electoral support and reduce social unrest.

Having seen the disastrous result of the de la Rúa administration, Kirchner emphasized the importance of reducing protest – which remained high during his first term – and responded to the popular mobilization through incorporation measures. He allowed unprecedented access to the state through meetings and policy councils for the unemployed. Having run on an anti-neoliberal platform, he reformed the pension system, expanded *Remediar*, passed new employment policies, and increased *Piquetero* participation in distributing benefits (Garay, 2016, p. 199-201). By this time, the *Piqueteros* began to fragment based on their political ideologies, and Kirchner was able to distinguish between groups in the movement who supported him and those who remained outside the political sphere.

By the end of Kirchner's term, the incorporation of many of the movement's SMOs into mainstream politics lessened the strength of the *Piqueteros* as an autonomous

social movement. Etchemendy explains that Kirchner successfully contributed to the splintering of the *Piqueteros* by absorbing “a significant portion of urban social movements that operated outside the machine politics of the Partido Justicialista” into his party networks (Etchemendy, 2019, p. 169). Many groups chose to remain outside of party politics but did not enjoy the same degree of social policy benefits or policymaking influence as those that openly backed the Kirchner administration. Unlike his successors, “Kirchner is the only president who utilized a more nuanced strategy to fully coopt certain factions of the *Piqueteros* at the expense of others in order to utilize protests to his advantage” (Mayekar, 2006, p.45). For many of the *Piqueteros*, this was a positive thing, as they gained access to policymaking channels and were rewarded through the social policies. For others, it lessened their legitimacy in the social space and reoriented collective bargaining back towards unions.

By 2007, union bargaining re-emerged as the central social policymaking tactic. The *Piqueteros* evolved from more of an external coalition in 2003 and 2004 to a partially incorporated coalition into 2005 and finally a “territorial allied sector of the government” (Rossi, 2019, p.201). Indeed, after 2002, *Piquetero* protest events in the largest cities declined steadily. The movement by no means stopped at the end of Kirchner’s two terms, but by 2007 the strongest days of unemployed workers’ protests were behind them. Kirchner’s success in incorporating many of the *Piqueteros* into party politics contributed to the victory of his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in the 2007 election and the maintenance of support for the PJ.

## CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated how the *Piquetero* movement of unemployed and informal sector Argentines was an effective agent for provoking social policy reforms. At a highly economically-focused time, the *Piqueteros* utilized social cohesion, mass organization and visibility, and tools provided by the political landscape to shift the paradigm to one that better recognized the need to foster inclusive growth, rather than just macroeconomic growth. The *Piquetero* movement defied history by overtaking labor unions as the main collective bargaining body between 1997 and 2007. Though unions have since been restored in Argentina’s political arena as the strongest collective actor in politics, the *Piquetero* movement was instrumental in making social-sector coalitions a legitimate vehicle for political negotiation and agenda-setting.

There are several aspects of the movement that exceed the scope of this paper that are important to address. First, this paper takes a fairly positive perspective of the *Piqueteros*, and I have elected not to elaborate on several of the mentioned criticisms of the movement. The *Piqueteros* were viewed by several segments of

society as violent, criminal, or unproductive, and indeed not all of their activities were effective in yielding the desired results or executed in the most efficient manner. Ultimately, I sought to evaluate the degree to which the movement achieved policy outcomes rather than analyze the specific characteristics of each protest.

Second, I do not elaborate on the territorialization of the *Piqueteros*, which is important in understanding the emergence of the movement and the many offshoot groups. The movement began in select provinces and eventually spread to the urban centers where they would be more visible, but activities continued throughout the entire country alongside the largest urban ones. For the purposes of my research, focusing on national-scale movements and policies was the most effective way to assess the influence of the *Piqueteros* on social changes.

Third, it is quite difficult to define “success” in social policy expansion. I cannot identify how many social policies were passed in the ten-year period under consideration, the degree to which the *Piqueteros* were involved in those decisions, and whether there is a benchmark for defining when a movement is successful versus moderately influential versus a failure. However, I feel that the evidence I have provided and the arguments from many of the scholars cited in this paper that the *Piqueteros* had direct linkages to political decision-making is quite telling in how effective the movement was in shifting the agenda towards social policy.

What makes this conclusion so significant is the fact that the movement was organized, executed, and led mainly by unemployed citizens rather than existing, legally recognized organizations. Social movements have such potential to be disorganized, short-lived, and illegitimate, but overwhelmingly, the *Piquetero* movement did not suffer from these challenges. Of course, the movement by no means achieved all its demands, and Argentina is not exactly representative of inclusive development in the present. However, these shortcomings are more likely attributed to the lack of political and economic capacity within Argentina than the shortcomings of the *Piqueteros* to get their point across.

Finally, I would like to clarify that neoliberalism cannot directly be credited for all of the protests and the rise of the *Piqueteros* entirely on its own. While neoliberal policies exacerbated and accelerated the negative economic trends of the time, the circumstances were compounded by the global financial environment of the time, including the contagions from crises in Russia, Mexico, Brazil, and East Asia and regional trends of overborrowing. My main point is that the fundamental shift in economic policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s seems to underpin most of the effects that external shocks had, and therefore, citing neoliberalism as the root of the problem is an acceptable way to identify a turning point. It is important to consider, though, that political corruption also underpinned much of the social

discontent of the time.

Argentina's development trajectory is quite unusual. Given its educated population, thriving cities, and massive workforce, one would expect the economy to be in better shape. However, it faces many of the same challenges of poverty and lack of government accountability as developing countries across the world. What sets Latin America apart in many ways is the ability its citizens have to influence policymaking through social channels. Latin America's regional development is often compared to Asia because of the similarities of their trajectories during the mid-twentieth century, then stark divergence leading into the 2000s. Social protest is widespread, respected, and allowed by most of the governments of Latin America, whereas many Asian countries are more likely to meet protesters with force. The *Piqueteros* cannot be credited with this phenomenon, and part of this is simply because most of the Latin American region is governed through democracy while much of Asia is not. However, the *Piqueteros* are exemplary in demonstrating how to utilize these democratic conditions to create social change.

The reality is that solutions to problems like poverty and inequality are complicated and take generations to take effect. Decades of debt restructuring have overshadowed Argentina's focus on long-term sustainable development beyond initiatives that bring short-term relief. Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and economic atmosphere of Argentina, it seems unlikely that the economy will settle into a path of stable growth for some time. However, if the rejuvenation of social protest across Latin America in 2019 is any indication, social movements will continue to ensure that social policy expansion will not become subordinate to economic aspirations as the region struggles towards sustainable, inclusive development.

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