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The petition ceremony: Letters to the President of Argentina

Ethnography

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eth**Emilia Schijman** 

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Abstract

The thousands of petitions sent to the president from Argentina's cities and far-flung rural areas bear witness to an intense dialogue between the poor and the state. Low levels of schooling do not prevent people from writing down and submitting their grievances, since model letters circulate in family and neighborly networks. More come from women than from men. Far from simple requests for patronage or expressions of submission, they carry a blend of excuses, prayers, proclamations of rights, threats, intimate accounts, and demands. Rather than focusing on a scene of collective mobilization or encounters with state bureaucracies, the article concerns letters that provide accounts of the poor's legal consciousness and the current systems of legitimacy for claiming that they deserve. Based on a body of 200 letters addressed to President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner between 2007 and 2015, this article analyses such letters as a genuine form of action that aims to change the relationship between the poor, state agencies, and the law.

Keywords

Working-class politics, grievances and petitions, legal consciousness, writing, bureaucracy and documents, welfare state, Argentina

I begin this article with an excerpt of my field notes from the ethnographic study I conducted on public housing in the city of Buenos Aires between 2010 and 2012.

One December morning, I got a text message from Clara, a 75-year-old woman I met through a social worker: "We need your help!" Not knowing what was going

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on, I went immediately. “You’ve got to help us write a letter to Presidente Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner [2007–2015] because my daughter Ines really doesn’t write well. We have to go to a ceremony where she’s going to speak. They also said that there’ll be food. Come with us!”

Spontaneously, I accepted. Along with an old Peronist from the neighborhood, all the retirees of Complejo Soldati [*a public housing project*] were invited to the opening of a branch of the social security office in Buenos Aires province.¹ The next day, 19 grandmothers were ready for the trip. The president would be there and everyone had something to tell her.

After we climbed into a school bus Clara double-checked that her letter was still safely in her bag. Thirty minutes later we entered an auditorium where people wearing “National Social Security Agency” t-shirts were handing out meal trays, like on an airplane.

Between the activist groups assembling behind the barrier and the high-ranking public officials up front, the retirees slowly took their places, all wide-eyed and dreaming of a house for her daughter, a supplement to her retirement, more assistance for the community cafeteria or an office for renegotiating loans. All had come to see the president, try to touch her, hand her a piece of written paper—it was all rather miraculous.

Soon I heard a woman calling out in the crowd: “Letters to the president! Who has letters? Give them here!” It was like a call for the lottery, “Try your luck, give us your letters!”

Clara grabbed my arm energetically and pointed out a path, where I could slip through the crowd, murmuring firmly “Go on! Give her Ines’ letter, please.” I approached the collector, only to see about 250 letters already gathered in her big jute bag, which she held firmly by its straps! My neighbors looked at me and realized that all around them, other women from other neighborhoods were also approaching, papers in hand.

“Who’s got a sheet of paper?” a grandmother asked urgently, so I ripped one from my notebook and held it out to her. Her neighbor asked me for one for herself, and a third one, then a fourth and a fifth. They started writing, fists pressed on their lunch trays, in nervous silence.

Each tried her luck. Blanca could not finish hers. She wondered if her writing was readable and asked my advice. I read it aloud:

Dear Madam President,

I have never had a house of my own. I live at the expense of others (“de prestado”).

You are a marvelous woman and you can help me to realize my dream.

Right next to me, Clara was listening in and interrupted me: “Her letter is better than Ines’! We’re going to write a second letter right away. You’ve got to beg for more.” This did not mean asking for more help, but giving a more dramatic

dimension to her narrative. “Can you do it? Say that Ines lives with my grandchildren, that they are on drugs, that they are going to kill her.”

We read each other’s letters, compared them, and rewrote them. They were like a group dictation exercise. They prompt new writings. Those who had not intended to write set about it then, especially after one of them announced that she got a response last year. What if Gabriel Tarde’s laws of imitation were happening before my very eyes? A wave passed through this space, a single gesture repeated with the conviction that something could be gained by writing.

Once calm was restored, another ritual began: The president arrived with a rapid and confident stride.

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This scene is not exceptional. All over the country, the president’s movements are followed by local populations who anticipate her visit for days. Whether it is the dedication of a monument, a factory opening, or a simple town visit, there is always a ritual submission of letters, photographs, and rosaries for the president. These letters join hundreds of others mailed from the major cities, small towns, and countryside of Argentina, adding up to over 40,000 letters a year that are then forwarded to relevant governmental agencies. In 2009, nearly half of the letters received by the president’s office came from the greater suburban area of Buenos Aires province.² According to the Legal and Technical Office (Secretaría Legal y Técnica), the poorest departments send the most letters—about 5000 come from La Matanza and Moreno. Low levels of schooling do not prevent people from writing down and submitting their grievances, since friends and family help each other with the writing and models circulate in family and neighborly networks. These writings are imbued with an obvious collective dimension.

Since the last economic crisis (2001–2002), a whole swathe of Argentine society has left general social security support and switched to another, extremely stratified, social program with changeable and ambiguous eligibility requirements (Procupez, 2015). It is quite time-consuming to keep up with it all, as beneficiaries have to learn how it works, understand access criteria, assemble their applications, cooperate with social workers and neighborhood “referees” (*punteros*), and ensure the continuity of procedures, not to mention the intense work of writing personal letters to the powerful, such as governmental deputies, ministers, and the president of Argentina.

The petition thus seems like a last-resort effort to develop an institutional relationship, writers daring to write to the president for her intervention because she is supposed to care for her people, be benevolent and sensitive to their destitution, and be vigilant for injustice and failures of the state. There are commonalities in these acts of writing, which call upon God as much as the president: descriptions of their misery, weak social position, and great dependency in hopes of grace, a favor, or a right.

The use of petitions has been observed in an impressive variety of geographical areas and deep into history (Cerutti, 2018). Over the centuries, people of modest means have written letters, petitions, and statements of claim to the powerful. This

practice was constant and significant in many European countries, including modern-era France and England, where it was an ordinary way for subjects to participate in the law-making process (Bercé, 2014: 13). Requests were an uncontested instrument for representing subjects, allowing them to attract the sovereign's attention and inform them. This was also the case in Russia, where the petition has long been institutionalized (Blum et al., 2018). In Latin America, petitions in nineteenth-century Andean countries were often written by "tinterillos", who expressed the wishes and complaints of indigenous populations in fixed formulas of wording and writing (Baud, 2007; Becker, 2013), according to the content and tone that the state wanted, and was able, to hear (Guerrero quoted in Becker, 2013: 101).

In addition to this breadth and depth of petition use, they have a more recent and locally situated resonance in Argentina. They are especially connected to Argentina's Peronist legacy and the thousands of personal letters that were written to President Juan Domingo Peron (1946–1955; 1973–1974) and First Lady Eva Peron (1946–1952), starting in the 1940s. Although Argentina already had a tradition of writing to political authorities and institutions for private aid, Peron explicitly encouraged the people to write to him. In both his first and second five-year plans, he asked Argentines to send him their ideas concerning the economy and social issues (Guy, 2017). A special service dedicated to processing this correspondence was established, turning the petition into a full-fledged component of governance. While political letters and technical suggestions were addressed to President Peron, his wife Eva received petitions on social issues, mostly coming from residents of rural areas asking her for housing, pensions, or work and addressing her as a mother, woman, and "patroness of the most modest" (Guy, 2017). It is unsurprising that the same themes are found in letters to Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, who laid claim to Evita's legacy.³

As historian Simona Cerutti (2018) has observed, the social sciences have usually analyzed this rich resource in terms of clientelism and patronage. She suggests, however, that "the extraordinary dissemination of the petition as well as its outstanding longevity should stimulate us to reconsider its meaning, and to re-examine the frameworks of 'deference' and 'paternalism' underpinning its conventional interpretation" (2018: 4). Thus, for example, based on petitions that were addressed in great quantity to the Savoyard state throughout the early modern period, Cerutti demonstrates that "the language of poverty that can be read in petitions is not a descriptive language of the social conditions of social actors, but rather a *legal language* referring to jurisdictional relationships" (Cerutti, 2018). One had to testify to one's weakened condition in order to come under royal jurisdiction and be heard and helped. The language of poverty thus refers to the *obligation* of governing authorities to protect, which is at the heart of the pact of government. Bercé's (2014) history of petitions also demonstrates that the request is first and foremost an exercise in adapting and acculturating to the language of the powerful and framing requests in terms of jurisdiction and politics.

Building on this research, I argue that petitioners to President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner of Argentina speak the language of patronage and act in

the language of the law. I assert that the language of patronage that sets the tone in these hundreds of letters approaches a conventional form necessary to getting one's complaint heard and asserting one's rights as a citizen. In other words, the imploring, personal, and very direct style of these letters is a social language allowing writers to express substantial assertions of their rights. This perspective seeks to go beyond the idea that petitioning is an exercise imposed of subjectivation of the poor, involving new modes of subjection (Fassin, 2000: 466) or an interpretation in terms of "clientelist habitus," meaning a "set of cognitive and affective political dispositions" (Auyero and Benzecry, 2016: 226) that would drive them to unquestioningly accept politics as an exchange of personal favors and votes. Most letters request that bureaucracy works as it ought to, rather than asking for personalized favors. It can thus be said that these letters contribute to what could be called "rights-building work".

The following analysis does not focus on the same scale as studies addressing collective mobilization, everyday encounters with state bureaucracies, and clientelistic networks, which have already been widely studied; instead, I explore the relationship to rights and the state reflected in these less visible and rather overlooked letters. Based on a body of 200 letters addressed to Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner while she was president (2007–2015), this article explores the justification, claim-making, and legitimacy work that emerges in these petitions. How do their writers try to create rights? How do they justify their deservingness?

The first part of this article addresses access to this archival resource and describes its nature. It goes on to analyze the main themes that emerge from the petitions and the rhetorical styles and registers of legitimacy that are used in them. By emphasizing the writing, we glimpse experiences that defy both a moralistic view of poor people's politics focused on clientelistic relations, and the holistic view of law and bureaucracy, based on the separation of institutions and social practices.

Letters as an ethnographic source

The observation of handing letters over to the president described at the outset of this article is an example of the fortuitous occasions that can happen during ethnographic research. I was then exploring everyday relationships to law and the state in a social-housing neighborhood in southern Buenos Aires. In an effort to follow the trail of petitions, I met with the head of the president's documentation office and its staff, who are the ones to receive and read the president's personal correspondence, decide on the relevant ministry or institution to which to forward the request, accord it an identification number, and notify the sender of this information. These encounters made it possible for me to acquire some statistics, learn the path that letters take, and discover that they are formally integrated into the system of governance. Petitions signify more than a personal relationship between the "subject" and the "sovereign," as they are intended to activate the bureaucratic process (Blum, 2019).

Requests for food, housing, building materials, and jobs were the main uses of letters addressed to Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. Unfortunately, I was refused access to these letters by the president's office, and so I turned to the Housing Institute of Buenos Aires. There, I discovered several boxes of correspondence addressed to President Fernandez de Kirchner containing 200 letters from the insecure shantytowns and *asentamientos* (settlements) of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.⁴ They had been transferred here because they concerned housing problems, but at the time of my research the distribution of housing was the responsibility of municipalities, not the Housing Institute, and a form letter was sent to petitioners directing them to their town or city hall.⁵ Lying abandoned in a cupboard, these boxes of letters awaited storage in the Institute's basement.

Written on sheets from school notebooks, a piece of cardboard, or the back of a tract, the petitions' media alone expresses their writers' destitution and urgency. Overall, the writing demonstrates a low educational level, which explains why the authors take care to underline words or phrases, put them in color, or write them in capitals to be better understood and create affective intensity. In many letters, the description of insecure housing is blended with family histories and accounts of illness and unemployment, highlighting the difficulties in distinguishing between intertwined social experiences and needs. In this, my sample resembles all such letters sent to Cristina de Kirchner.

Although they are signed by a single name, letters are often written in multiple hands and include words or phrases that were apparently successful for others or heard at a political event or in an exchange with a governmental agency. Models for letters and ways of thinking about and defining one's situation circulate in family networks, everyday encounters with neighbors with similar circumstances, and in contact with social services at their service counters. A social knowledge of current systems of legitimacy is developed in these encounters with state bureaucracies. There are thus "generations of discourse" that correspond with the political economy of every era, in step with the discourse of politicians and the development of social rights. These letters come more from women than from men, who quite commonly abandon the realm of social service counters and administrative correspondence (Lahire, 1997; Retière, 2001; Siblot, 2006). This gendered dimension might be particularly strong because the requests concern the home and its domestic interior.

Authors do not mention the obvious, related to the normal order of things, "not the least because they might also think that this is not what the overseer wants to hear," as Sokoll (2000) noted in his analysis of pauper papers in nineteenth-century England. "It is only when the normal cause of things is disrupted that people begin to tell, and it is from these accounts of the exceptional that we can infer the rule" (Sokoll, 2000: 33). Likewise, letter-writers more easily express themselves on the topics of agency employees and splintering family solidarity than the nature of their work activities. One common expression is to simply say, "We live off odd jobs [*changa*]." No need to say more, because *changa* is by definition insecure, occasional, and on the edge of subsistence. Domestic budgets are also absent; given the dearth and instability of their resources, it would be ridiculous to give

an accounting. They content themselves with signaling the choices imposed by penury: to pay the rent or to buy food.

How to read and interpret this correspondence? Reading each letter individually makes it possible to identify singular language dominated by personal histories, material difficulties, frustrations, and expressed desires. Looking at the letters all together changes the view. In line with the findings of Blum et al. (2018), one observes that authority is not challenged in any way, or to ask for everything: petitions reveal the systems of legitimacy in force and, as written texts, are intended to act on them. This second reading is the one used in this analysis. We consider these letters less as representations of reality and more as part of an arsenal of technical instruments of persuasion (Walker, 2016) that are specifically intended to make and unmake social, legal, and power relations. The basic point is to analyze letters as a particular mode of action in people's encounters with the state (Allard and Walker, 2016; Gronda and Viola, 2016; Hull, 2012; Walker, 2016).

A chronicle of the failures of governmental agencies

If social service counters incarnate the state for the working classes (Weller, 1999), their letters to the president also seek to activate the state, approaching it from another angle, by going around its deficient agencies. Their rounds of service counters often turn to despair (Auyero, 2012), and many a letter says: "I don't know which door to knock on any more." How many forms have these individuals filled out thus far? How many application numbers have they carefully noted so they can follow their case? How many times have they asked where their papers were? All this time and these procedures ultimately end up with their learning that their request has been filed away or did not win the lottery, because although assistance is technically a right, in practice applicants are still subjected to interminable waits at the service counters, the discretion of agents, interpretations of the situation, "conformity" requirements for applications when no one ever has all the required papers, or even a lottery (Auyero, 2012; Dubois, 2005; Murard, 2012). The Federal Housing Program (*Plan Federal de Viviendas*) is telling on this point. It functions through agreements between each municipality and the state, wherein each municipality sets its own criteria and procedure for housing attribution: some use a system or points according to priorities, others use a literal lottery, and others do not explain their procedures.⁶ The public calling on their services is often left in incomprehension, or even in a stupor.

Madam President, I have now been enrolled for 12 months in the *Plan Federal de Viviendas* of city hall and the Buenos Aires government. At the lottery, I was not chosen, although I have four children between 2 and 10 years old. I've got my 5-year-old daughter with asthma, and my youngest son was hospitalized for pneumonia.

Since the state is supposed to be the primary guarantor of physical wellbeing, an ailing body is the strongest argument for claiming a share of social assistance. But

the lottery is blind to medical diagnoses. This is how applications are selected in many Argentine services: whether it is for the attribution of housing or the selection of applications to process, the lottery makes decisions blindly. Seen from above, the lottery introduces random chance to remove the pressure of thousands of requests. Seen from below, some beneficiaries might say, "I was lucky, I got an answer!" This helps to establish the idea in some peoples' minds that they have randomly distributed assistance rather than social rights. This in turn re-enforces the idea of arbitrariness and encourages a search for personal engagements. People slip their petitions to the president through these voids left by the regular administrative system, as the only remaining way to engage in a relationship with the institution.

Since municipalities turn a deaf ear, complaints are addressed to the president. They lay out a sort of chronicle of rejections. They denounce them, they revolt against them, and in this way justify their intrusion in the president's office. Writers have no qualms about presenting their rounds of social services in detail, naming the agents they dealt with, decrying their indifference. This is a major trait in this series of letters, and the following quote is a typical example.

I went to all the various organizations and they turned a deaf ear to my demand, which is why I'm resorting to you. Places where I asked: La Matanza City Hall, branch located on route 3, kilometer 40, Mrs. Cecci was in charge of my case. Then, the Defensoria del Pueblo de San Justo on Peru Street, where I saw Mrs. Garcia. I gave a letter to the mayor, Mr. Alvarez, directly, and I never got a response. This is why I'm writing to you.

In these narratives, we discover a body of writing concerning a string of governmental agencies. Each passage leaves a trace. This *network of writings* reflects the rights-construction work that could be called *the rounds of service counters*. Women doing these rounds are either dissatisfied with filing a single request because the outcome is so uncertain, or they take their request from counter to counter in the belief that repetition will ultimately lead to success. It is understandable that they are so attached to even the most minor written documents, which they collect in a drawer, hide under the mattress, or lock up in a cupboard. This *domestic archiving* is a reaction to the discontinuity of procedures, the fact that each agency operates in isolation from the others, and the tremendous uncertainty over access to assistance. The poor know that they have to ensure the continuity of procedures themselves, by reactivating and updating their applications and pursuing their engagement long enough to provoke their rights.

Because applicants are sent from counter to counter and treated badly, and their applications are met with indifference, given no prioritized order, and selected by lottery, they ask the president to intercede to correct the failing functionality of local administrations and the failings of their employees.⁷

I wanted to tell you that I went to Public Housing and I wasn't treated the way I should have been by Mr. Acosta. He hollered at me, what do I want, there isn't

any housing, and I should stop having children. But me, I have always spoken to him properly, because my parents raised me well even if I was born in a poor neighborhood.

In this letter a woman addresses another woman (the president) to denounce the punitive and suspicious remarks of a public employee. As a woman she is subjected to moral judgment for the number of children she has and the suggestion that her poverty is her fault. These forms of class and gender domination at the counter reinforce women's feelings of social inferiority and the idea that they have no rights (Dubois, 1999). This domination leads to anger, exhaustion, and a great weariness among these women, leading many to give up on their quest and distancing them even further from institutions. As Patrick Heller and Peter Evans (2010) have indicated, consistent with Charles Tilly's work, the quality of an individual's institutional relations with the state is even more mediocre when interactions with local branches of the bureaucracy are mediated by "categorical inequalities".

The president is thus called on to restore justice to the administrative relationship. She is called on as witness and mediator, seen as an authority over the administration with the power to sanction a particular branch office, case worker, or elected official. This is the case in the following petition: "I thus humbly come to you in the hope that you could serve as intermediary with the authorities that give out housing."

Lastly, families threaten to take their complaints to the next level of social services, or to denounce the discretionary allocation of housing and clientelistic relations to the head of state. This denunciation operates as a *transfer of disrepute* that is needed to make the request credible and justify asking the president for an exception. The protagonist of the petition tries to reverse the disgrace coming from her family situation, status as an unemployed person, and/or criminal record and support the idea that her situation is actually imputable to someone else—in this case, a lack of honesty among politicians and administrative employees. The writers thus show that they have the same sense of normality as those judging them (Boltanski et al., 1984), and that they are participants in the political economy of reference. An overly hasty reading of these letters might lead one to think that these rounds transform what was initially a claim to a right into a request for a particular favor, but when these petitions are studied systematically, specific complaints emerge that, as Gupta (2012) found in India, assert "the complainant's right to due process and [...] his or her rights as a citizen. If any traces of an ideal-typical Weberian bureaucracy are to be found in contexts such as [*a weakened*] state government [...], then its presence can be detected in that complaint" (2012: 167). These requests are thus the consequence of a failure to apply the law as much as they are a way of making a claim of the law.

While petitions have tended to be read as explicitly clientelistic requests for protection that is against the law, "written by supplicants who desire to obtain something as a favor" (Gupta, 2012: 167), we see that genuine complaints are embedded in the analyzed letters with the intention of remedying the errors of

an agency or person in a position of power. The petition is the only imaginable means for addressing power, denouncing the failure of bureaucracies and obtaining formally recognized rights, since “protection and privilege are not claimed to get around the absence of rights concerning a resource, *but to claim its very existence*” (Cerutti, 2012: 214).

We should nonetheless emphasize the paradox of this situation: despite being addressed to the highest and most powerful authority, the complaint will come back to the initial service counters: the Housing Institute and the municipality.

Making a moral pact with the president

At the national level, in the 2000s the Ministry of Social Development portrayed itself as sensitive to the most neglected parts of the country and openly declared its desire to strengthen the ties between the state and the poor (Perelmiter, 2012). “I am going to work on the basis of demand,” declared Alicia Kirchner when she took leadership of the ministry in 2003. “It is people, not programs, that will guide us.” As minister she confirmed the whole social assistance tradition founded by Eva Peron. The watchword being the personalization of the ties of assistance, all requests received a response and a visit from a social worker. This case-by-case attention had a boomerang effect, ministry employees stressed, because each social worker visit immediately prompted new letters from friends and family and agencies were quickly flooded (Perelmiter, 2012). The longer delays for responses increased the sense of arbitrariness. Social benefits seem to be subject to the good will of a particular social service or employee.

With this kind of appeal, it is no surprise that the correspondence addressed to the president is characterized by a language of closeness and patronage. This comes as much from the president’s proclaimed desire for “rapprochement” as the need to singularize one’s own case given the overwhelming number of requests. As Laé (2018: 35) said, narratives “are the product of two captures, one of administrative and political injunctions and the other of forms of expression from below.” From this encounter emerges a form of *reflexivity concerning the legitimacy of the requests* and the way to project oneself in the political economy of one’s time, both in legal and patronage relations.

How to spark the personal engagement of this exceptional being thereafter? How to work it so that her role as a woman, mother, and widow take precedence over her political position? The aim of creating a personal pact with the president explains why letters blend familiarity and distance. The president is appealed to as a “person,” “mother,” “woman,” “human being,” “wife,” or “widow” in order to build a sense of closeness, an in-group, and an emotional commonality: “put yourself in my position,” “you are a mother yourself,” and “I also lost my husband and I suffer like you.” The very direct register of the writing, with its characteristic oral quality, is trying to erase the distance between them and awaken compassion: “Listen to me, Madam President,” “lend me a hand,” “I am unemployed and we have no housing. I can call on you and your sensitivity to help us, me and

my family.” Here again, this appeal to sensitivity is addressed more to a person “like us” than to her position. This is not communication with an equal, and yet it tends to have the effect of bringing them closer. This closeness is one of the tools politicians use most frequently in their ceremonies (Pantaléon, 2005: 42). Academic analyses of political populism and clientelism most often treat this closeness as an illusion or bait, but it also has to be understood and appreciated as an effective expression, meaning one that has effects, if only effects on writing.

From the opening lines, it is the private world that is delivered to the president as a sign of confidence and reciprocal engagement. Pictures of the family open the door to this domestic interior. They are also an effort to use the body to give knowledge and convey a vivid perception of suffering—in short, to prompt a moral engagement. These narratives are not about “saving face” in Erving Goffman’s sense of the term (1973); as a matter of fact, “losing face” could lead to a higher return. “I have to look poor,” confided Clara (introduced at the beginning of the article), whose writings and physical posture enact ostentatious poverty. Her expression manifests the strategic nature of the qualification of “poor” in which supplicants are invested (Cerutti and Vallerani, 2015). They know that political authorities base their legitimacy in the act of granting and personally distributing social benefits, which makes poverty an instrument of individual and collective pressure (Cerutti, 2010: 949).

Entering into a *personal pact* with power presupposes this behind-the-scenes solidarity in which one offers one’s litany of woe, confidence, prayer, and (often) a sign of political loyalty. “I leave the happiness of my children in your hands”; “I’m an Argentine that voted for you”; “An Argentine that has faith in change.” The letter itself is conceived as a *contract* in which you engage to give so as to receive in return (Albert-Llorca, 1993: 199). Once word is given, trust and reciprocal debt are henceforth the basis for rights and obligations (Quiros and Vommaro, 2011: 76).

But the outcome of such gestures is uncertain, thus necessitating repetition:

I address myself to you, with all the respect you deserve, to tell you about my situation once again. As a reminder, I am Luisa Tolosa. I sent you a letter to ask your help in finding housing. I then sent a letter to all the addresses I was given, I called all the numbers I was given, and I never got a reply. This is why I’m coming back to you.

This repetition is sometimes successful. The social assistant who processes such letters at the provincial Housing Institute always recognizes those from people who have already written or called, based on their writing or surname. She then transfers the request to municipal authorities, accompanied by a personal letter.

Claiming deservingness and rights as a citizen

The quest for a pact thus reveals that the ideas of exchange, negotiation, and obligation are characteristically present in this body of letters. In line with Max

Weber, the law is clearly a causal factor explaining people's letter-writing, an interpretive framework constructing the meaning of ordinary situations and a resource that is the basis of a kind of power of writing in face of the state (Pélisse, 2005). When Sergio writes "My request: to have decent housing," he knows, consciously or unconsciously, that those two words together indicate a category of law. Likewise, for the following quote: "I want to give my children decent housing and suitable food, this is why I am asking for URGENT HELP by your intercession, so that I be allocated housing from the federal housing plan."⁸ Writing in capital letters conveys a requirement flowing from the fact that "decent housing" and "suitable food" are rights sanctioned by national law and international agreement. The same legal categories that are disseminated in the media, via social programs, and the authorities in their speeches are also found throughout the letter-writers' narratives, in how they think of and present themselves in their letters' denouement. This is why social benefits are thought of less as a favor than as a right, a good that should be given and received. While they openly assert their rights when they are at the social services counter, when writing the president they appeal to her benevolence instead. "Battling with the codes is out of the question, then one would go over to the contentious side." (Artières and Laé, 2011: 95). The writers invest the language of patronage and act in that of law.

At the same time, to nip the risk of stigmatization in the bud, many letters begin by likening the supplicant's case to the fate of a great number of others: "I know that I'm not the only one to ask you for housing"; "Our difficult situation looks like that of many other Argentines . . ." This common condition protects them from the moral lessons directed to such individuals by governmental agencies, courts, and the media. Saying that they are not the only ones highlights both how their situations are a collective problem (by expressing their need in a social scale of need) and warns of the amplitude and urgency of the situation: "At city hall they refused me the things I asked for. This is why I am writing to you. For a social question, I can't buy them. I have six children and these days, there is never enough money." The allusions to this "social question" and "these days" function not only to make this narrative part of a normal collective experience, but also to put the government's responsibility back in the foreground. The letters are manifestations of what Nancy Fraser (1987) calls the "politics of need" which rips them from the domestic sphere to graft them to the social sphere, where needs become a domain of state intervention.

Lastly, the vast majority of writers stress their belonging to the Argentine nation. They are claiming that their status as "member" of the nation gives them rights to assistance from the state (and the president who represents it). This reminder is the last basis for legitimacy for those who feel as if they have no social value: "I know that the way I am, I'm not worth anything, but I am Argentine and, quite sincerely, I need help," wrote one man, who later added "My respectful greetings from an Argentine who trusts in change." This man recalls the tie of patronage (by citing his trust) and at the same time demands recognition of his citizenship rights as a full-fledged member the Argentine state. The language of patronage and that of citizenship mingle and inflect each other.

Rights are experienced as a mix of citizenship and personal trust in the president, as we can see in the following letter from a mother:

I am a citizen that voted for you and that believes in you, that's why I'm writing you to see if you could help me get a little piece of land or housing for our child and to not think that we have to go from place to place when the rent man evicts us.

Proving, attesting, collecting evidence

It is not enough to simply tell the truth about oneself and agencies' misdeeds in these letters—they have to be proven with considerable evidence. How to be believed and reverse the disrepute stemming from the family's situation, being unemployed, having a criminal record, or having strayed from school young? Letters are rife with this question and manifest a very strong association between moral and social hierarchies. Writers unfailingly emphasize that they have tried everything to get by (“I wandered everywhere looking for my own means and I didn't find anything”). This image refers to political economies of reference: the “good poor” demonstrate their will to get by on their own, on the path to social inclusion, as opposed to the poor beggar sponging off others and the state. Authors of about half of the analyzed letters reject the “welfare mooch” identity and this moral judgment of the unproductive beneficiary it represents, and insist to the contrary: “I do not want you to interpret my request badly. I do not want hand-outs. I want to pay for my housing by working”; “My request: to have decent housing. I'm not requesting that it be given to me; monthly payments could be set and I could pay them.” Promises to keep to the contractual order and someday achieve ownership through subsidized credit are guarantees of merit and normality.

Attesting, proving, and confirming are all approaches many letters take in anticipation of the endemic disrepute suffered by poor neighborhoods. “I swear to you that what I have told you is true”; “Send me a social worker so she can confirm how I live”; “Everything I am telling you, you can corroborate. I have never given up where my children are concerned.” In this way, social workers are summoned for visits, and in turn will write reports, a copy of which will then be requested for presentation elsewhere. Letters of intercession from a political representative or important figure in the neighborhood may sometimes round out this “official” personal story. Credibility is proven by testimonials from various circles of protection: “We are well-known around here and we work with a variety of institutions, and as proof I am attaching a testimonial from Representative Carlos Bello, worried about our situation.” Neighbors also participate in this space of verediction, as can be seen in a letter signed by 17 people (who provided their ID card numbers), introduced as follows “These are the people that know me in Las Flores neighborhood.” As Numa Murard has stressed,

to hold your head high under these conditions, when you are the subject of a fat file in institutions' filing cabinets, it is necessary to enroll yourself in a peer group, as we see

in the total institutions described by Erving Goffman, whose members mutually guarantee a degree of respectability and mutually attest to the truth of the biographical narratives produced for this effect. (Murard, 2012: 11)

Despite all their efforts, these verdicts often fail. When this happens, the only option is discrete threats and blackmail to get their rights. “I don’t know what to do any more. I’m not a thief. [. . .] We have thought about expropriating a house, but we do not want any problems with the law or the state,” wrote a father with young children. He feels like he is on the edge of legality, and takes care to make it clear he is on the right side. He stresses just how close he is to that line, and how fragile that position is. Only the safety net of presidential intervention can prevent him from going over the edge. It is almost a warning, an announcement preceded by a declaration of good will.

Letter-writers present themselves as being at the cusp of destitution and criminality, in a posture approaching preventative blackmail. Their writings remind readers that need is a major argument for exemption from criminal liability on par with legitimate defense,⁹ an ultimate weapon that justifies expropriation or theft to feed or shelter one’s children. Many petitions contain some form of threat—blackmail, we might say—in which the president’s action could prevent breach of the social contract. Writers fluctuate between petition and complaint, preventative blackmail and discrete threat, confirming that achieving rights is ultimately about power relations and the negotiation of rewards and punishments.

Conclusion: Petitions and the search for legitimacy

No answer, missing documents, requests passed from counter to counter, left to the lottery or the good will of counter agents: one thing to be emphasized about the state is its mysterious character. The inscrutability of its procedures, the proclaimed eligibility criteria, and the conditions for maintaining benefits—over which people have nearly no control—re-enforce the “structurally asymmetrical” character of the relationship to social service counters and the uncertainty over acceding to their rights (Dubois, 1999: 58). When poor people lose unemployment assistance, they are shifted into another, incomplete social security system with inconsistent eligibility criteria (Castel, 1998). This situation requires that the poor invest heavily in visiting agency service counters, and as in the domestic economy, it is women who are on the front line. It is serious work to visit numerous agencies, wait for replies, exhibit proof, build personalized relations, endure discourteous remarks, and climb the bureaucratic hierarchy, but it is also humiliating and *invisible work* that is hidden behind everyday sociabilities and seen as being part of the natural order of things. From the perspective of poor people, however, there is nothing normal about it, and no pride in doing it.

In sum, social assistance is either thought to be arbitrary, a matter of randomness or luck that works in your favor or not, or to be a right that is acquired thanks to the incorporated effort of making the rounds of social services. This invisible

rights-building work has several components, including their *physical presence* at service counters: decisions are sometimes obtained in the vehemence of the body, the energy and ardor of defending a claim, most particularly through the bodies of women accompanied by their children, who make noise, slam doors, and play with the chairs. Camping out with one's children it is to exercise a right to be seen and exhibited meant to disturb and create pity. Women demonstrate authority over the children, issuing behavioral reminders as if they were also addressing the employees behind the counter (Schijman and Laé, 2011). All these moves for the attention of employees and other claimants alike exercise a genuine hold over administrations, with regular failures and a handful of successes.

A second component of rights-building work is *domestic archiving*, meaning a whole system for managing administrative paperwork containing proof of means, or rather lack of means. The folder stuffed with papers that the claimant will spread out for the administrative employee is the critical unit configuring interactions at the counter. It will first serve to clarify a seemingly tangled request, prove a situation, remind of all the procedures already underway, or simply to reduce the chances of being sent home for lack of a missing document. This survival file possesses a force of opposition that can be put into action at any moment. The greater the distrust of the administration, the greater the sacred worth invested in paper, capable of taking a kind of action, which is jealously kept on one's person or in a locked cupboard. This is far indeed from the relationship to bureaucratic writings described by historian Donna Guy in her work on initial Peronism, "when paperwork had little value for the people, who created charismatic connections with Peron and Eva" (Guy, 2017: 165).

The last component of this invisible work concerns the *writing of petitions* addressed to authorities—especially to deputies, mayors, and governmental ministers. At the interface between public and private, these writings receive as little recognition as domestic work, and are part of a gendered division of labor between men and women. They are largely deserted by men (Lahire, 1997), surely even more so as they concern feminine topics like housing and the household budget. When requests fall between the cracks of formally recognized rights, writing to the president imposes itself as the last resort. The requests are much the same, one letter to the next aiming for the right to a quality relationship with the state and basic resources allowing them a degree of social independence. But letter-writers, discredited by institutions and the market, are immediately confronted with the nagging problem of the legitimacy of their request and the need to do considerable legitimation, justification, and claim-staking work in order to argue for those rights. This rights-building work is not merely a reference to sympathy, virtue, or the simple mobilization of legal rules, but the transposition of each in the others. It combines several registers, meaning the different kinds of evidence backing their justification (Fassin, 2000: 967). Registers mix and contaminate each other, offering these colorful rhetorical styles mixing excuses, prayers, proclamations of rights, threats, and intimate narratives (King, 2010: 1157).

Writers fit together registers corresponding to as many currents of legitimacy. The leading register lends petitions their tone and refers to the ties of patronage in

the old sense of the term, in which protections stem from a moral pact with authority. In this pact, rights and obligations are based on trust, compassion, and one's word. This is the language politicians use in speeches, encouraging claimants to provide subjective testimony of their distress in an imploring tactical approach. This is why petitions have been interpreted as a form of subjectivation of the poor, imposing an identity of someone who lives off welfare (Fassin, 2000), or even interpreted as "participating in a political culture dominated by patronage and clientelism" (Cerutti and Vallerani, 2015). One might think that the non-application of the law would push social benefits closer to charitable liberality than law, but these letters also contain the form of social action that Susan Silbey (2018) referred to as legality. The ritual of writing can be understood only through deeply embedded and historical notions of *social rights* that have deep roots in the Argentine legal system, and by examining the work of doing it effectively.

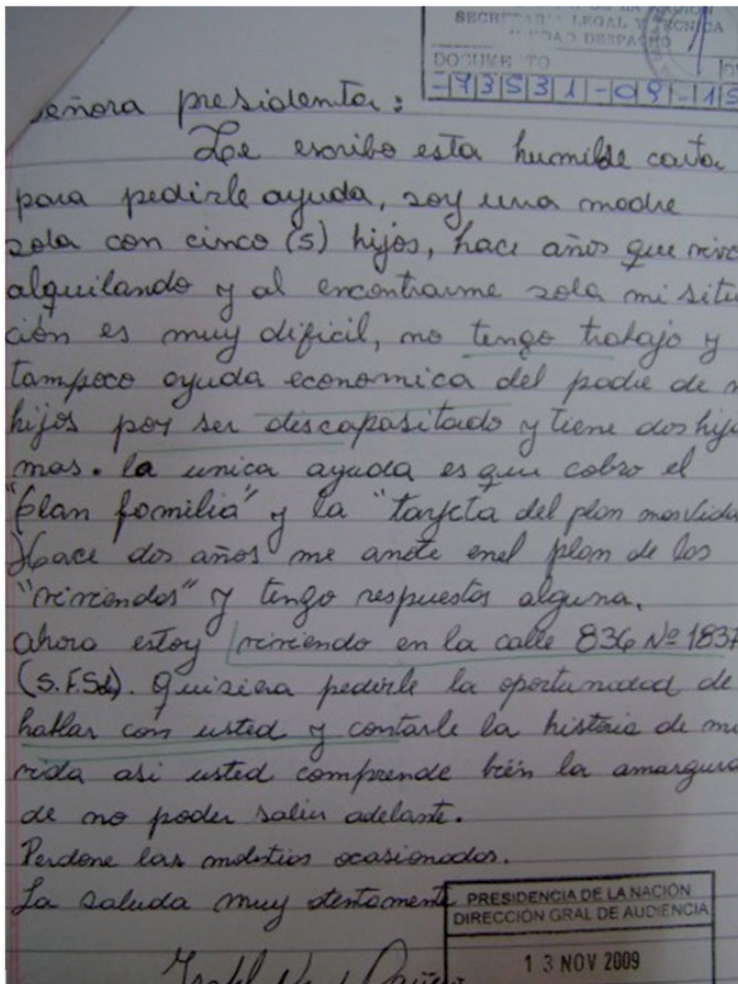
The second basis for legitimacy lies in the legal system and the ideal of a rational legal and bureaucratic order, wherein one's rights are formally acknowledged, the procedures are clear, and claimants are treated fairly and have the right to be kept informed. It could also lie in the abstract symbolism of citizenship as claim to legitimacy. Letter-writers do not hesitate to define themselves as citizens requiring help and the presentation of the situation includes the categories proposed by social, civil, and penal law. Through complaints and the denunciation of service counters, petitions are meant to be a way of socially controlling bureaucratic practices that are seen as arbitrary and discretionary. By threatening to turn to the penal system, they confirm that the conquest of rights is ultimately a matter of struggle and negotiation between support and punishment—in sum, power relations. This demonstrates that, while letters of petition are indeed a way of taking recourse after numerous failures at agency counters, they are likewise a way of enrolling the law.

Lastly, the third basis for legitimacy is the moral order of neighbors who attest to supplicants' credibility and merit. Letter-writers enlist their help to accrue credit regarding their work, their contractual willingness, parenthood, and their participation as citizens.

These three orders of legitimacy inform us as to how the poor project themselves in the political economies of reference, and a comparative study could demonstrate that the emphasis may shift from one to another according to the time period, in relation to the unemployment rate, current political discourses, and developments in social rights. It is certainly the representation of these three orders—patronage, rights, and community—that orients petition writing. This does not presume that letter-writers subscribe to them or that they are convinced of the "normative justice of the principles of justification" (Duran, 2014: 23); they could also go along with them because they think others subscribe to them. "The basis of the validity of legitimacy is the order of actors' social relations and practices, and not subscribing to values or norms alone" (Duran, 2014: 22).

In conclusion, petitions fulfill their distinctly political dimension through this justification work, qualifying petitioning as a form of the "politics of need interpretation" (Fraser, 1987). As soon as the letters are studied side by side, it becomes

clear that they outline one single struggle for the definition of need, one single appeal to governmental responsibility. The petitions are much more than simple representations of lived experience; they are actions in and of themselves, intended to transform social, legal, and power relations. Accordingly, we should not merely study collections of writings as impotent “words on paper,” but should instead consider how they try to transform relationships with institutions. We must cease to approach such letters through internal analysis of writing, representations, or indigent working-class expression, and instead address their active dimension, acting to modify the power relationship over “minimum requirements for living” and the meaning of dignity.



Single mother seeking for social housing

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Notes

1. Unidad de Atención Integral, Agencia Nacional de la Seguridad Social, Lomas de Zamora, Inauguration ceremony, 21 December 2011.
2. Source: Presidencia de la Nacion, Secretaria Legal y Técnica, 2009. This source declares that president Nestor Kirchner received somewhere from 38,000 to 50,000 letters a year during his presidency (2003–2007), a figure well below that of the considerable number of letters received by Carlos Menem in his first term (1989–1995), nearly 90,000 a year.
3. This affiliation is strengthened by the symbolism of the presidential couple composed of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her husband Nestor Kirchner, president from 2003 to 2007, who she succeeded. Both laid very explicit claim to the Peronist legacy while trying to set themselves apart from the neoliberal turn taken by Peronism that dominated the Argentine political scene in the 1990s, whose economic policies led to the considerable economic, social, and political crisis that erupted in 2001. In the fertile field of rising personalization, “Kirschnerist” administrations maintained a discourse of social justice, human rights, and economic sovereignty and tried to build a cross-cutting front with other political figures that had historically been critical of classic Peronism, including center-left parties.
4. The “Area Metropolitana de Buenos Aires” (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area) includes the city of Buenos Aires and 24 surrounding districts. It contains nearly a third of the population of Argentina.
5. The Housing Institute of the Province of Buenos Aires first established a register of letters in 1995, under pressure from the Family Council, which was seeking rapid responses to specific cases. Between 1995 and 2001, the Housing Institute received 24,661 letters. Of a sample of 2419 letters, more than half come from poor areas of the suburbs (68%). Source: “Análisis y propuestas de abordaje de los pedidos de vivienda por vía epistolar,” Dirección Social, Instituto de la Vivienda de la Provincia, 2001, internal document.

6. The *Plan Federal de Viviendas* was created in 2003 and aims to urbanize slums and construct social housing neighborhoods. Reports on many municipal governments by experts from human rights organizations denounce the lack of public information about beneficiary selection, the interpretive discretion left to administrative employees, the lack of control by the populations concerned, and the absence of bodies for making appeals (Centro de estudios legales y sociales, 2009; Cravino, 2010; Rolnik, 2011).
7. The denunciation of bureaucratic misdeeds is an enduring theme among claimants. It is at the heart of the theory of the Soviet regime, which encouraged citizen control over the administration by promising immunity to those deposing complaints (Blum, 2019), and closer to Argentina, central in the letters addressed to president Lula da Silva of Brasil (2003–2011) that were unearthed by Amalia Cohn (2012).
8. Art. 14 of the Argentine constitution (Constitución Nacional Argentina).
9. Art. 20.5 of the Argentine penal code.

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