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# *Clientelism or Something Else? Squatter Politics in Montevideo*

*María José Alvarez Rivadulla*

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## ABSTRACT

Through the in-depth ethnographic study of one squatter neighborhood in Montevideo and its leader's political networks, this article illustrates a successful strategy through which some squatter neighborhoods have fought for their right to the city. This consists of opportunistic, face-to-face relationships between squatter leaders and politicians of various factions and parties as intermediaries to get state goods, such as water, building materials, electricity, roads, and ultimately land tenure. Through this mechanism, squatters have seized political opportunities at the national and municipal levels. These opportunities were particularly high between 1989 and 2004, years of great competition for the votes of the urban poor on the periphery of the city, when the national and municipal governments belonged to opposing parties. In terms of theory, the article discusses current literature on clientelism, posing problems that make it difficult to characterize the political networks observed among squatters.

**H**anging from the white walls of a modest yet solidly built house in the middle of a squatter neighborhood in Montevideo, surrounding the table where I interviewed Manuel Gómez, were all sorts of trophies he proudly showed me one by one. Just as we tend to have in our living rooms the pictures of people we love, places we like, maybe some ornaments or paintings that denote a taste or a lifestyle and that constitute part of how we present ourselves to the visitor, this squatter community leader owned a very peculiar gallery.

Manuel had decorated his walls with a picture of himself hugging Tabaré Vázquez, former Montevideo mayor and later Uruguayan president for the leftist coalition Frente Amplio; a big paper clip with many articles about the neighborhood, including a picture of Mario Carminatti, once a candidate for city mayor from the traditional center-right Colorado Party; and another picture of Manuel, this time with Jorge Zabalza, a former city councilor who lives in a squatter settlement politically located to the left of the left, once a member of the Tupamaro guerrilla movement, who has helped and promoted the creation of many settlements in the city. Perhaps the most surprising of all was a letter in a golden frame, which Manuel took down with the help of a chair to show me. Signed by then-president Julio María Sanguinetti of the Colorado Party, it congratulated Manuel for the "thriving human

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group that moves this neighborhood ahead." Besides the celebrity of the sender, I was puzzled by the paradox of Manuel's being congratulated for building a neighborhood considered irregular for its location in a rural area where the Montevideo municipal government forbids urbanization, and being a person about whom I had repeatedly heard rumors of fraudulent transactions.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the meaning of each particular letter, article, or picture described in these fieldnotes, the most curious thing was the combination of them in the same place. It was not mere chance. Just as Manuel saved each of these objects, I saved this vignette because I remember it as one of those moments in ethnographic fieldwork when suddenly everything makes sense, microwindows through which you can see the broader picture, seconds that reveal what months of research had hidden, not because they are anecdotal but because they synthesize what you have already seen but in a confused or fragmented manner.

This room illustrates in an exaggerated manner one of the mechanisms by which some squatter communities in Montevideo seized political opportunities created both at the national and municipal level: a strategic use of political networks. Opportunities were particularly high between 1989 and 2004, years of great competition for the votes of the urban poor on the periphery of the city and during which the national government was held by one of the two traditional parties and the municipal government belonged to the Frente Amplio, a coalition of leftist parties that has now, since 2004, won the presidency as well. This mechanism consisted of opportunistic, face-to-face relationships of squatter leaders with different politicians, from various factions and parties, as intermediaries to get much-needed state goods, such as water, building materials, electricity, roads, and ultimately, land tenure.

Planned land invasions like this one were deeply embedded in political networks. Through politicians, some squatters obtained goods that other squatters without the (right) connections did not. And politicians were interested in squatters' votes. These networks had three important characteristics: uncertainty (they were based on uncertain political contracts lacking a strict *quid pro quo* rationale, founded on expectations of both goods and votes rather than on actual exchanges susceptible to monitoring); continuity (although inflamed around electoral times, they were active regularly); and agency (brokers and clients had relative agency and strategizing capacity, associated with a context of high electoral competition in search of the votes of the poor and a context of no monopoly of public goods or hegemonic machines).

Ground-level political networks of the poor in Uruguay have not received the same scholarly attention as other cases in the region. Yet they are relevant not only because they have been overlooked but because they pose an interesting theoretical puzzle to the literature on

clientelism. Specifically, this study argues that the political networks observed in this research remain underspecified by available theoretical tools, particularly those associated with the concept of clientelism.

In order to give flesh to this argument, this study first addresses some relevant concepts in the theory and research on clientelism. Then it introduces some features of the Uruguayan political context, focusing specifically on clientelistic ties as mediators between the state and civil society and their changes over time. Next it describes the methods of this study, which is part of a broader, multimethod project. It then engages directly with the case of Manuel and his particular network, although in dialogue with other cases, ultimately to select some important analytical points to discuss as the main findings.

## **CLIENTELISM: A CONTESTED CONCEPT**

Political clientelism refers to the particularistic exchange of favors for political support, generally understood as taking place in an unequal relationship between politicians and clients. Although once believed to identify politics in underdeveloped societies, it has appeared in different contexts, including wealthy democracies.

Agreements about the concept end there. Clientelism means different things to different people, including academics. The kind of goods is contested; some scholars consider clientelism to be exchanges of individual goods, while others also consider collective goods. Emphasis on material versus other types of goods, including symbolic goods, also varies. The concept of political support is also contested, since for some it refers specifically and only to votes, and others think of it as including other forms of support, such as attending rallies.

Most of these debates can be summarized by juxtaposing a minimalist and a broader definition of clientelism. The minimalist definition considers clientelism a very specific exchange in which a politician or party offers material benefits only under the condition that the recipient returns the favor with a vote. Recipients are generally individuals or small groups of citizens, provided that their vote can be monitored (Brusco et al. 2004; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Medina and Stokes 2007; Stokes 2005, n.d.).

This definition is becoming common wisdom in the political science literature, and has the virtue of defining very clearly what it leaves in and out, although observing the conditionality of the exchange and the monitoring mechanisms is always a challenge. Yet this definition leaves aside many of the political networks observed on the ground, including the ones observed among Montevideo's squatters.

The broader definition, in turn, includes not only the exchange of political support for favors, contingent or not, but also subtler

exchanges, such as those in which (often low-quality) policy directed toward vulnerable populations is later rewarded electorally and is therefore conceived of as a favor rather than a right. Gay calls the former thick clientelism and the latter thin, institutional, or implied clientelism (Gay 1997, 2001). This definition has the virtue of being more adaptable to different contexts and therefore including phenomena the former does not, such as less contingent exchanges and seemingly universal programs with a clear electoral intention and consequence. Still, it has two problems. It runs the risk of becoming a sponge concept that, in trying to explain a lot, ends up not explaining anything; and it is more difficult to falsify.

Squatter politics in Montevideo have significant theoretical implications for this debate. As developed in this study, they fit better the second broader definition; yet that is arguably problematic.

## **CLIENTELISM AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF URUGUAYAN POLITICS**

Uruguay is a society with a strong tradition of statism and clientelism. Both features have, however, changed over time and suffered mutations, particularly in the last few decades.<sup>2</sup>

The Uruguayan state in general and its welfare branch in particular have been highlighted in the region for their early and enduring universal coverage (Centeno 2002; Filgueira 2000; Mesa-Lago 2000). Welfare policies were one of the tools that the Colorado president José Batlle y Ordoñez (1903–7 and 1911–14) used to consolidate the power of his party over the country, after a bloody nineteenth century of revolts and fights between the two bands, Colorados and Blancos. The state bureaucracy also served as an instance of political negotiation between the two parties. Although the Colorado Party was in power for most of the twentieth century, the Blancos always participated in government in diverse ways. From the two experiences of a Swiss-style collegiate executive with participation of both parties (1918–33 and 1952–67) to giving some ministries or positions in state enterprises' executive boards to the minority party, Uruguayan history is full of pacts of coparticipation.<sup>3</sup>

Coparticipation was definitely useful for pacifying the country and establishing one of the stables democracies of the region. It also, however, had other consequences. The Uruguayan state was never a rational-legal abstraction in a Weberian sense (Panizza 1990); it was always under the influence of the two dominant parties and their multiple factions.<sup>4</sup> State bureaucracy was extremely politicized and connected to both parties. Public spending followed political cycles, systematically growing on the eve of the electoral year (Moraes et al. 2005).

Entering and ascending in the bureaucratic career depended greatly on a person's party affiliation and friendships (Filgueira et al. 2003). Receiving one's pension or any other state benefit often also depended on political networks.

It is no surprise, therefore, to find a long history of clientelism connecting the urban lower classes with party factions from both parties and the state. Germán Rama (1971), in one of the few studies of this topic in Uruguay, describes very vividly these networks from the point of view of neighborhood party brokers, who, by the end of the 1960s, were running political clubs in Montevideo. Rama found that although these clubs' explicit function was to socialize citizens into party politics—something they apparently used to do in the past—their real function at the moment was to exchange votes for favors. Their clientele was formed by those without resources such as economic power, union representation, or instrumental personal relationships; that is, by those whose only goods to exchange were their promise of votes and political support.

In a period of economic crisis (decreasing demand for Uruguayan goods; a crisis of inflation, unemployment, and falling living standards), the state had grown even more, and neighborhood political clubs had proliferated. In fact,

both major political parties reacted to the crisis by reinforcing their reliance on clientelism and patronage as a way to contain discontent and maintain their electoral share. . . . In spite of that, the electorate started to seek alternatives, shifting their electoral support between and within parties. (Luna 2006, 151)

Rama found that the economic recession after 1955 had several consequences for political clubs. The first reaction was an unprecedented multiplication in their number. While before there was one club per relevant political faction per electoral zone, in 1966 there were about 8,000 clubs for an electorate of 523,000 people in Montevideo (Rama 1971, 13). The second consequence, closer in time to the dictatorship in 1973, was the disappearance of political clubs as part of the overall destruction of the political system.

All the clubs Rama describes belonged to some faction of the Colorado or Blanco parties. Although there were various leftist parties or progressive factions within the traditional parties, they did not have clubs.<sup>5</sup> As Rama notes,

they have not been able to penetrate into those social sectors that were more marginalized by production, consumption, politics and culture. Even today for the Frente Amplio, which has a different situation [it had just been founded in 1971], they still have a communication problem with the sectors of the electoral forces that nurture political clubs. (Rama 1971, 35)

It took the Frente Amplio many years to win that electorate, but it eventually did. Only five years after the end of dictatorship, in 1989, it won the Montevideo city government, and has been in power in the city since then. In 2004 it won the national elections, bringing Tabaré Vázquez—the former city mayor—to the presidency. Many reasons underlay Frente Amplio's success in breaking with a long history of bipartidism in Uruguay.<sup>6</sup> One was an increasing discontent with traditional parties brought about by the enduring economic crisis and exacerbated by the 2002 banking crisis.

Another reason was precisely Frente Amplio's success in winning the increasing electoral competition for the urban poor, who traditionally were alienated from this party's constituency, composed mainly of the organized working class and the intellectual left. In Montevideo, where half of the electorate lives, this success implied winning geographical territories that were strongholds of the traditional parties, especially the most populist factions of the Colorado Party (Luna 2007; Mieres 1994). Although by 1989 the Frente Amplio was already strong in the western part of the city—home of traditionally working-class neighborhoods—it still had to win the most deprived eastern periphery.

Many of these peripheral areas changed a lot in the last decades of the twentieth century. Once-thriving industrial neighborhoods, such as El Cerro, La Teja, or Peñarol, were beaten up by deindustrialization and the consequent unemployment and impoverishment (Canel 2010). Squatter settlements mushroomed during the late 1980s and 1990s in a city with no population growth. These were not rural immigrants, as in many other Latin American cities, including Montevideo, during the 1960s. They were previous urban dwellers suffering directly from structural changes, such as state retrenchment and an increasing precarization of the labor market, facing high rent prices (Alvarez-Rivadulla 2007; INTEC 1995; Kaztman 1999, 2001; Kaztman et al. 2005).

According to Luna (2007), the greatest growth of Frente Amplio among lower-class areas of the capital occurred around the 1994 election; that is, during the first period of city government of this leftist coalition. Luna's hypothesis is that the decentralization process the Frente Amplio started in the city brought this party closer to the people, particularly people in need, and that this closeness brought electoral returns.

But what happened to the strong clientelistic networks of the traditional parties with the Frente Amplio in city office? They had started to erode long before, since the time Rama describes, due to increasing demands from constituents, many of which could not be met. We know little about clientelistic networks during the dictatorship; we just know that political clubs could not be active at the time. Democratization brought a peak in social mobilization (Canel 1992; Filgueira 1985); but

with the reappearance of political parties, participation was rechanneled through them. They recovered the central role. Yet the large state that had supported clientelistic networks had started to change.

Although its restructuring was very gradual and moderate, following the regional trend of neoliberal reforms, in the last decades of the twentieth century Uruguay shifted toward a less regulated and more export-oriented economy and a smaller and more transparent state (Castiglioni 2005; Filgueira 2000; Filgueira et al. 2003). In particular, the number of state employees started to drop after 1990. Many technocrats replaced politicians in high positions of the bureaucracy, and many procedures, such as those related to pensions, became computerized, which made personalized favors more difficult.

As Filgueira et al. (2003) suggest and Luna (2006) empirically documents, state retrenchment and decentralization (giving more powers to municipal governments, according to the constitutional reform of 1996) have had an impact on clientelism in at least three ways. They have diminished its role, due both to a push toward political accountability and state reform and to fiscal crisis. They have moved it from the national to the municipal level, due to the mayors' greater power; and they have changed strategies and the nature of goods exchanged (e.g., while more durable goods, such as pensions or employment, were exchanged through clientelistic networks in the past, today more ephemeral goods, such as social services or information, are exchanged).

Although no quantitative longitudinal measure of clientelism is available in Uruguay, according to a recent comparative study in Latin America, levels of vote buying are very low or nonexistent there currently (Faughnan and Zechmeister 2011; Nickerson 2010). It is important to note, however, that vote buying before elections is just one particular form of clientelism.

Squatters are among those who still use political networks for particularistic exchanges that have clientelistic features, although, as this article argues, this will depend on our concept of clientelism. They do so, in the absence of a clear programmatic policy for squatters, as one of the strategies to get services and other goods for their neighborhood.

## **METHODS**

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Uruguay during 2006 and 2007, as well as on a follow-up during the last national elections in November 2009. This article zooms in on the story of one particular squatter neighborhood, New Rock, and its leader. But the analysis is always comparative; more than 400 other settlements were investigated through a multimethod study that included 25 miniethnographies and statistical analysis of the cycle of land invasions in Montevideo from



1947 (date of the first land invasion that could be tracked) to 2004. The broader study wanted to understand the conditions under which squatter settlements were more likely to emerge and, from a perspective focused on mechanisms, to understand how squatters had interacted with these conditions to produce (different types of) squatter settlements. This article focuses on one important mechanism: the strategic use of political networks.

Fieldwork in New Rock included gathering a multiplicity of data. To get started, oral histories were conducted with current and founding neighborhood leaders, as well as with ordinary early residents. To do this, I walked through the neighborhood taking fieldnotes and filling a neighborhood observation template, and I took pictures. I had previously identified one of the leaders, Manuel, through other interviews. His name turned up in some of the interviews with politicians and officials. So did the neighborhood he founded, which some people mentioned as a fraudulent sale and some as an example of planning and organization. So I decided to look for him.

To find Manuel, I randomly called people in the phonebook with his name and asked if they lived in New Rock until I eventually found him and arranged an interview. The day of the interview another founder, Miriam, was also there, so I had the chance to ask both of them about the story of the neighborhood. It was Manuel who introduced me to a family of early residents I also interviewed on that long afternoon.

Those oral histories were guides for me to find new interviewees and cross-check the stories or to see the same information from another point of view. Therefore, I interviewed former city councilors from different political parties, social workers, and local authorities at the local community center (*Centro Comunal Zonal*, CCZ); one of the main directors of the Ministry of Housing; two other local brokers who knew the main leader of New Rock; and a leader of the Cooperative Housing Movement, and asked all of them about New Rock and its main leader, Manuel. I also looked at newspaper articles. Finally, I gained access to the minutes of the City Council's Special Commission on Squatter Settlements for the day it received a group of neighbors from New Rock.

I have used the rich information obtained from these sources in several ways (e.g., the date of settlement for the statistical modeling). But for this article, I have focused on the strategies used to build the neighborhood, and in particular to contact the state. By carefully reconstructing the genealogy of the settlement and the main leader's political network, I try to get at the most common patterns or mechanisms involved in reaching the state.

## **BECOMING A NEIGHBORHOOD, BECOMING A BROKER: THE GENEALOGY OF A FLEXIBLE POLITICAL NETWORK**

From the very beginning, New Rock and its main leader, Manuel, our opening character, were embedded in political networks. They became a squatter settlement and a neighborhood leader, respectively, through political networks.<sup>7</sup> Manuel had always lived in the area next to the settlement called Rock. There, a few clustered poor houses were the only urban sign in the middle of an enormous green area of small family farms, in the northeast of Montevideo. They did not have streetlights, running water, or any other services. They were in the middle of nowhere. According to Manuel, he had “always thought that the way to progress was to bring people in.”

The opportunity came, Manuel and Miriam remember, when, in November 1995, “we occupied this plot because FUCVAM [the cooperative housing movement, related to the Socialist Party faction of the Frente Amplio] had a group of people evicted from a cooperative and did not know where to put them.” They were interested in the plot next to where Manuel and Miriam lived, a plot that had been empty for 30 years, whose owners were unknown. Manuel—who, in his words, had always been “just another neighbor”—started becoming the leader of what would be New Rock.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the slow reaction that some settlements on public land had experienced, this land invasion, which was on private land, attracted the police immediately, and they took everybody to the police station. As Manuel recalls it, “The owners appeared immediately. . . . But we agreed that they would sell and we would buy.” The invaders did not have any money to pay for the land, but Manuel had an idea. He opened a bank account, divided the plot into about 250 small parcels, and started receiving people who would pay 2,500 Uruguayan pesos each (at the time, about 200 to 250 U.S. dollars). People did not need to pay all up front. Most people paid in small installments, depositing directly at the bank and giving the receipt to the neighborhood association.

As was true for many other owners of private land in what the municipality considered a rural area, this was probably a good deal for the owners of the unproductive land on which New Rock was located. Since protected rural areas cannot be subdivided, the owners could have sold only the whole plot, for much less than the amount they received from New Rock’s neighborhood association. How much money was exactly involved in the transaction between the neighborhood association and the owners remains obscure. Different sources have different numbers, and some accuse Manuel and the others of having kept some money for themselves. Manuel and Miriam deny any gain from the transaction.<sup>9</sup>

The early days of the neighborhood were busy ones. A lot of knowledge from the cooperative housing movement was transmitted into the planning of this neighborhood through Manuel's alliance with the FUCVAM leaders. Yet when New Rock was founded, Manuel still belonged to the Colorado Party, which held national office at the time. He had been a Colorado since he was young, although he had switched factions within the party because once "they came and got me a job at the municipality." After invading and squatting, he started using his political contacts in the Colorado Party to get things for the neighborhood, such as money to fund a children's soccer team and help with the roads from the Ministry of Public Works. During those years, Manuel founded a workers' cooperative for himself and some other men in the neighborhood, which secured contracts with the Colorado administration to bring water to his and other squatter settlements.

Yet Manuel's loyalty slowly started leaning toward those who had helped him create the neighborhood. He voted for the Socialists in the 1999 election. However, he eventually left the Socialists because of fundamental discrepancies. He considered them too sectarian for his needs.

What happened? If you said to the Socialists that someone from the Colorado Party was coming to bring water [to the neighborhood], they said no, no, no. If you told them someone from the Blanco Party was coming to solve the electricity problem, they said no, no, no. That's how it started. We can be your friends but we need to do the public works. If we don't do them, people are going to start revolutionizing and we need to get the things. If we don't ...

Other Frente Amplio factions also showed early interest in the neighborhood. Manuel remembers the president of the City Council at the time, Jorge Zabalza, a member of the most radical faction of the coalition, the MPP, helping them, defending them at the City Council. Speaking about this later, Zabalza told me that at the time, the left was divided about this settlement. Some thought they should not help because it was built in a forbidden place, there was money involved, and moreover, Manuel was building his political career in the Colorado Party through it. "And what we thought was that there were more than four hundred families solving their housing needs." For Zabalza and others on the radical left, squatter settlements were a sort of *sui generis* land reform that they should support and help to organize. Although grateful to Zabalza, Manuel never voted for or promoted his faction in the neighborhood; and the faction, in turn, never offered him anything tangible for the neighborhood.

In 2004, two years before this fieldwork, the national government switched from the Colorado Party to the Frente Amplio. Just before that election, Manuel switched parties accordingly, which he proudly

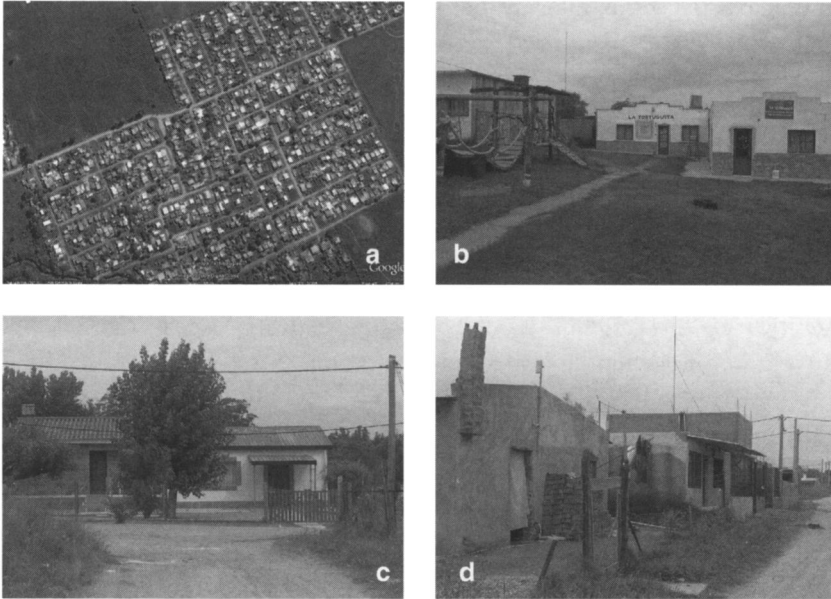
showed with a huge sign from one of the Frente Amplio faction's candidates in the entryway of his house. He was actually on that faction's municipal ballot "as filler in the 30th place." According to Manuel, "all types of politicians came here," and he mentions several from the whole political spectrum.

That faction did well in the primary, national, and municipal elections, winning not only the vice presidency but also the Ministry of Public Works. At the moment I conducted fieldwork, Manuel's working cooperative had a contract with the Ministry of Public Works: it was building bus stops along some main roads around Montevideo's periphery and nearby areas. Manuel recalls the story of this contract as part of a negotiation to promote his new faction in the neighborhood. In his words, "we work politically with a sector, with the vice president's. So I went and told him, 'if you want me to work for you politically, there are two things: first the neighborhood and second, jobs. I can give you credit, but I am not going to work for free.'"

Manuel was not the only one in the neighborhood switching from the Colorado Party to the Frente Amplio. At least some people from his inner circle also did so after him.<sup>10</sup> In a long interview, Luis and Betty, a middle-aged couple who have lived in the neighborhood almost since its founding and who used to be Colorado voters, said they also had voted for that Frente Amplio faction in the last election, following Manuel. They are both skeptical about politics. As Luis puts it, "I don't identify with any party, because politicians are all the same." They have had a life of hardship, and they do not feel that politicians have helped them a lot. Yet the one who has helped them—even more than their own families—is Manuel. He was the one who took their disabled child to the hospital the day a car knocked him down. He did so using a truck from the water company for which he was doing some work—again, through his political contacts. Manuel also lent them money to pay for Luis's mother's funeral, since her death found them broke. Once, on Easter, when they could not buy any chocolates for their children, Manuel came and brought some. He also gave Luis a job in the workers' cooperative he founded. They feel indebted to him. As Betty puts it, "he is always there when you are not OK. . . . We matter as people to someone. He cares that something happens to us. That's enough. So in appreciation we . . . if he asks me for help in a soup kitchen, even if he cannot pay me, I'm there." And when he asked them to vote for his new Frente Amplio faction, they did.

Today New Rock houses about 3,500 people, not counting New Rock II, a second nearby neighborhood, also created by Manuel. As the photographs in figure 1 show, it is fairly well consolidated. Although still waiting for complete legalization, paved streets, and other improvements, the neighborhood has achieved much in a period of about 15

Figure 1 . New Rock Squatter Settlement, Montevideo, 2007



Clockwise from upper left: a. View of New Rock from the air, January 13, 2008, by Google Earth. The settlement appears as a dense urban island in rural surroundings. The block and street design are typical of planned neighborhoods or of those, like this one, that started by subdivision and sale. b. Neighborhood kindergarten, product of an association between the municipal government and the neighborhood association. c. Two of the best neighborhood houses. All houses are made of solid materials (condition to stay in the neighborhood) but vary greatly in the quality and completion of construction. d. Very typical image of a squatter settlement street: houses in construction with a pile of bricks or other construction materials outside. For many squatters, houses are always slow, ongoing projects they return to every time they can save some money or there is a family need, such as the marriage of a child who will stay there. Photos b, c, and d by the author.

years. Residents have been able to stay on the plot and build in a rural area; they have a bus line that connects them to the city; they have a neighborhood kindergarten, the product of an alliance of the neighborhood association with the municipal government.

To achieve all these improvements, Manuel and others in the neighborhood have used different strategies. They have, for example, representatives in the local government. Manuel himself, but also other neighbors, have been elected local councilors at the *Centro Comunal Zonal*, one of the 18 local governments into which the city has been

divided since the Frente Amplio promoted city decentralization (Canel 2010; Chávez and Goldfrank 2004; Goldfrank 2002; Veneziano Esperón 2005). But the most used and most effective strategy has been, undoubtedly, pulling the strings of Manuel's political networks.

This new neighborhood was part of a wave of relatively planned land invasions that took place in Montevideo during the late 1980s and 1990s (Alvarez-Rivadulla 2009). Despite their differences, they all started with some planning beforehand. A small group would find out, normally through contacts in state offices, about "safe" plots from which eviction was less likely because they were public or because, though they were private, the owner had died or had not paid taxes in a while for other reasons. These settlements tend to be urbanistically planned, with streets, blocks, sidewalks, and sometimes public spaces, such as a community center or a square. Residents build their own houses, using solid materials, such as bricks or some sort of cement.

Some of these neighborhoods are, to an outsider, indistinguishable from a poor but formal neighborhood. The main difference is land tenure, which they do not have. They stand in contrast to accretion invasions, which are the majority in the city. (According to my estimates, 67 percent of the squatter settlements in Montevideo started by accretion, 32 percent were planned, and 11 percent started by subdivision and sale by some fraudulent entrepreneurs.) Accretion invasions start much more gradually, as individual or family action, without collective organization. Spatially, they are very different from planned invasions, much more crowded, with very precarious houses, and without streets or any other sign of urban planning.

Origin often determines more than just the spatial appearance of the neighborhood. Accretion invasions often remain invisible to the state.<sup>11</sup> Neighborhood associations in planned invasions, by contrast, use different strategies to bring the state to the neighborhood. Once on the plot, one of their main tasks is to reach out, especially to the state, to get the things the neighborhood needs. As in the case of New Rock, they do so using different strategies.

Directly demanding something from the authorities, bypassing regular bureaucratic procedures, is a very common strategy among squatters of planned invasions. They know insisting is key. And when some pressure is needed, they use the power of multitude; that is, they go all together to a public office and camp there until they get the water pipe or the electricity service they are looking for. Hardly ever do they use more disruptive strategies, such as street blockades. Many have representatives on the local council. Using political brokers to reach authorities or to accelerate the fulfillment of their demands has been perhaps their most successful strategy. Face-to-face relations with politicians are still an important way to reach the state.

Although the purpose of this article is to highlight and understand this latter strategy in light of a new political context in Uruguay, it is important to note that the everyday life of squatter neighborhood associations and squatters in general is patterned by waiting for the state to come. Getting services is a hard and slow process that sometimes requires years of illusions and failed attempts. A good example of this is the demand of a public school for Freedom Village, another planned invasion. When I first started conducting fieldwork there in 1998, one of the leaders' main goals was to get a public school for their children to attend. They eventually got the school they had fought so long for, but ten years later, when most of those leaders' children had grown.

## **RESULTS**

Undoubtedly, New Rock, like other planned invasions in Montevideo, has been deeply embedded in political networks in which, on one side, politicians are trying to help and searching for political support, and on the other side, squatters greatly need that help in order to satisfy some of their basic needs. Those settlements with political networks and politicians holding office at some state level or agency have been more successful than the rest. Those with several contacts across factions and parties are generally even more successful.

The story of New Rock shows that face-to-face contacts and particularistic exchanges continue to be important for modern Uruguayan politics, as the literature has now pointed out repeatedly for other examples (Piattoni 2001). These contacts have three important characteristics: uncertainty, continuity, and agency on the part of brokers and clients.

### **Enduring Importance of Face-to-Face Relations with Politicians**

Particularistic face-to-face contacts and exchanges were not just something tied to traditional politics and destined to disappear with the modernization of political parties and the use of the media to spread political messages and attract voters. People still like politicians who come to them. Politicians, in turn, need to get more votes, and in so doing, face-to-face interactions and exchanges still seem to be effective. Political brokerage is crucial in these relationships. Squatter leaders often play that role, connecting the neighborhood with politicians and ultimately the state. These face-to-face relations are sustained in squatter settlements not only by exchanges of vote promises for neighborhood goods, and occasionally personal goods for the leaders, but also by their strong symbolic content.

The construction of New Rock relied heavily on Manuel's political networks. Those networks, at the same time, were created and recre-

ated through the building of the new neighborhood. Through them, Manuel got an implicit permit to build a neighborhood in a rural area, roads, water, light, and other services for the neighborhood. He has also used them to get jobs for himself and for some of his neighbors.

Yet not only goods circulate through these ties. As the literature has pointed out repeatedly, clientelistic exchanges rest on a balance of affective and instrumental ties (Auyero 2000; Scott 1972). The physical presence of the politician in the neighborhood enhances and gives status to the leader who brings him or her in. It also serves the image of the politician, whom people see as one of them, at least for a little while. Manuel is very grateful, for example, to one politician from the Colorado Party who worked at the state water company. He remembers him as someone who helped many squatter settlements by bringing them water and, essentially, as a very modest man, who would come and “eat chorizos with us.” During fieldwork, I repeatedly found this idea of the good politician being the one who comes to the neighborhood, is unpretentious, speaks people’s language, walks around the neighborhood and “steps in the gutter,” listens, shares food or *mates* with the neighbors. In a nutshell, the good politician is the one who shows understanding and closeness. Politicians know this is important. As a current city councilor of the same political faction as Manuel told me once, “he feels important if he is side by side with someone who is important.”

This is why politicians keep spending a great part of their campaigns visiting small towns and, in this case, squatter settlements. As another example, before the 2009 presidential elections, New Rock received Victor Rossi, the minister of public works and one of Manuel’s patrons, and María Julia Muñoz, the health minister, also from Manuel’s faction. “We invited them to a stew, and we put her to cook!” Manuel proudly says, showing how important it is to reduce the inequality in the relationship, at least for an illusory moment. But they were not the only ones visiting before the election. José Mujica (current president of the Frente Amplio), Oscar Magurno (a traditional Colorado politician known by squatters for sometimes bringing blankets and some food), and others visited as well.

It took some effort and time for the Frente Amplio to learn to communicate with leaders like Manuel, coming from the more traditional Colorado and Blanco parties. These parties were much more involved in clientelistic networks with the urban poor, which were under threat because of state retrenchment. But in a context of electoral competition for the urban poor’s votes, some Frente Amplio factions eventually did reach out to squatter settlers. As one of the leftist politicians involved in the foundation of New Rock told me,

I used to work with these people. They are very peculiar comrades  
. . . they have many codes that I think were never really understood



by the left. It takes a lot to understand these codes. But these leaders have served the people in an unconditional manner, being bandits at the same time, of course.

*Interviewer: I've heard Manuel switched parties.*

Yes, they were all from the right. This has to do with another debate we had in the left. I always thought being a leftist militant was sectarian. And even more in my generation. You had to smoke a particular brand of cigarettes, wear boots, long hair, jeans, listen to folk music. . . . The Beatles were bourgeois....

[Bringing these leaders to the left] was a great job. They were all from the right, but from the right right, anticommunists. And now, they are all leftist militants. This is a great achievement. And it's a product of not just giving them a book to read but of really going and getting into the mud with the people. We were in the land seizure, we worked, we saw, we learned.

In sum, in Uruguay, as in many other places, at least for the urban poor, nonprogrammatic politics continue to be relevant in winning electoral competitions (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). Specifically, as Auyero points out, "the personalized distribution of goods and favors is still crucial to obtain support, loyalty and—ultimately—votes" (1997, 20).

## Uncertainty

Most of the exchanges I was able to observe were uncertain rather than contingent on squatters' votes. This uncertainty was associated with monitoring problems. While squatters maintained relations with different politicians at the same time, some politicians complained about their help not being compensated. Meanwhile, brokers experienced high tension in choosing whom to work with, since they did not need promises but actual goods or services in order to safeguard their legitimacy as leaders in their communities. In Manuel's words:

You have to choose very carefully whom you are going to work with in order to get things. Otherwise they [politicians] disappear and then . . . [you are left alone]. Currently, you can't work for nothing. [You have to ask] what do you have? What can you get me? You can be a good person, but if you don't get something for the neighborhood, you are useless. You are a neighborhood leader depending on what you achieve for your neighborhood. . . . Otherwise you don't exist.

In his study of patronage politics in nineteenth-century Brazil, Graham (1990) describes what Manuel expresses in this quotation as anxiety. Graham contends that patron, clients, and brokers experience great anxiety because their social status is at risk around the fulfillment of the patronage exchange.

Many planned settlements I visited mentioned receiving help from more than one party and then voting whatever they wanted. In fact, most of them practiced a strategy I call apolitical performance; that is, pretending no interest in political affairs. One of the early founders of a settlement explained that even though invaders were from the left, after they squatted, "there were no political parties." During the early times, the neighborhood association did not let people put political signs in their houses.

"We are apolitical here" was a common phrase among leaders of squatter settlements, especially the most organized ones. Given the many stories of contacts with politicians to get this or that, this latter phrase sounded a bit paradoxical. In fact, one could substitute "hyper-political" for "apolitical" and it would make perfect sense. But what squatters really mean when they say they are apolitical is not that they are politically neutral, since most of them have their clear preferences, but that they behave or perform as if they were apolitical. Part of that performance is "opening doors to everybody," as they claim they do. If they show a preference for one party publicly, they would probably not get many things they want that are not under the control of that single party. They might even get less from that party.<sup>12</sup>

Viewing this behavior from the other side of the network, a current city councilor with a lot of experience working with squatter settlements told me:

It is like a market. Politicians offer. . . . We offer (I'm not going to play the raped girl here) services, and people pay with votes. Just like in a market. . . . Among these squatter leaders there is great variation. There are some who let anybody enter and then promote the one who helps, no matter which party he belongs to. They make his help public. . . . But there are also those who let anybody who wants to help in, they let him help, they get stuff, but then they promote him or not depending on his political affiliation. This is more common among leftist squatters who let others [from traditional parties] get the things, but then they make a lot of effort so it goes unnoticed.

To what extent these statements are true remains an enigma, precisely because it is difficult to monitor how squatters vote. Although clientelistic ties rely on trust, most of the literature on clientelism emphasizes some monitoring capacity on the part of the politicians giving away goods. Stokes, speaking of clientelistic ties in current Peronist Argentina, points to informal monitoring devices when the ballot is secret. There, "machines use their deep insertion into voters' social networks to try to circumvent secret ballot and infer individual votes" (Stokes 2005, 315). Moreover, no matter how difficult it is to infer individual voting behavior, counting votes in the district where the machine

is operating enables an evaluation of the machine's aggregate performance. This latter condition is not present for most squatters in Montevideo, since they have moved recently without changing their electoral registration and therefore tend to vote near their old residence, not close to their new squatter neighborhood.

Local leaders may, however, invent other instances to prove their strength to politicians, which provides a way of monitoring. Manuel mentioned election to local councils as one way to measure his power. If he got elected, as he did three times, he could show he had so many votes. He also mentioned the Frente Amplio internal elections of 2006 as an instance in which he could show strength. These were elections for party authorities, organized by the party, in which people could vote in any of the party-authorized places. There was one authorized precinct in New Rock, and Manuel was indeed able to show votes for his faction.

Nin Novoa [vice president at the time of the interview] and Victor Rossi [minister of public works] came and asked us for help in the party elections with the 738 [their list]. They wanted to know if we really had people or not. So I had a bet with Nin Novoa. I bet that here in the neighborhood the 738 was going to have more votes than the other lists altogether. . . . He said, "You are crazy, Manuel, I bet you two lambs."

Although Manuel won that bet by showing that his faction within the Frente Amplio was stronger in the neighborhood, there is no way to know this for the different parties. This is why I repeatedly found myself puzzled during fieldwork, trying to find out about monitoring. Yet the paradox is that despite that uncertainty, politicians continued making visits and doing favors. High competition for squatter votes stimulated them to do so.

### **Continuity**

Although inflamed around electoral times, political networks of squatters were active regularly. Planned invasions tended to be founded during electoral years, which raised their likelihood of not being evicted and of receiving political favors (Alvarez-Rivadulla 2009). Electoral campaigns increased politicians' visits to squatter settlements. Moreover, brokers perceived elections as good opportunities to ask for goods, not only because politicians were more likely to respond, but also so people in the neighborhood "remembered." Manuel puts this eloquently:

We have to repair the roads. But I don't want to do that until the next elections.

*Why?*

Because you do the streets now and they forget. When elections come, people forget. And for politicians to keep doing what you need, you need to show them strength. If you don't have strength, they don't do anything for you.

Yet contacts with politicians are by no means constrained to electoral times. Squatters also approach incumbents once they are in power. They have many more needs than the ones they can solve around elections. An example of this is the meeting Manuel organized with then-president Tabaré Vázquez. According to Manuel, he and his colleagues sent Vázquez a letter before the 2004 election to talk about his policies on squatter settlements, but he never answered. Once he was elected, they sent another letter scolding him for not having answered. He gave them an appointment immediately. Manuel went to the meeting with some people he knew from squatter settlements in his area. In his words,

What we said to the president was that we disagreed with the Emergency Plan (basic income program).<sup>13</sup> Instead of it we want to solve our job problems. One of the arguments was that the people who work for state agencies as builders, maintenance staff, cleaners, and so on are people from squatter settlements. But the ones who get the contracts are big companies that pay low salaries. So it's better that they teach people from squatter settlements, who are the ones that need the most, how to organize themselves, create their own small company, their own cooperative, NGO, whatever.

This was the origin of the working cooperative Manuel founded and in which I found him working, with contracts from the Ministry of Public Works. Besides speaking of intertemporal, continuous exchanges, Manuel's statement here also describes the following and last characteristic of squatters' political networks: agency.

**Agency**

Brokers and clients of organized invasions had relative agency and strategizing capacity, associated with a context of high electoral competition for squatters' votes and no monopoly on public goods or hegemonic machines. Of course, most types of political relations, even the most unequal ones, have some level of agency. Deciding to support someone because it is convenient implies agency. Clientelistic exchanges, even under great inequality, can be combined with some forms of resistance to submission. But when the inequality in the relation decreases, the bargaining power of brokers and clients increases considerably.

Switching parties and factions himself was not Manuel's only strategy. In the neighborhood organization, they formed teams. One worked

with the Blanco Party, another with the Colorado Party, and the third, led by Manuel, with the Frente Amplio. As Manuel put it, “I worked with everybody and I didn’t work with anybody, you understand?” Or even clearer:

We had to flirt [*franelear*] a lot with politicians. If you don’t flirt, you don’t get anything. You have to use them as they use you. Politicians today don’t give you anything if they are not getting something from you. If here the Ministry of Public Works and the president gave us jobs, it is because of something. If they put the light here or the water, it is because of something.

High loyalty to just one party was especially inadequate during the years in which New Rock emerged. Not only were the municipal and national authorities in different political parties from 1990 to 2004, but the relevant ministries were divided, following the tradition of coparticipation of Blancos and Colorados. As an example, during the 1995–99 Colorado national government, the Housing Ministry was in the hands of the Blanco Party.

Political exchanges between politicians and the poor do not necessarily imply passiveness and submission. In a pluralist democratic context, clientelistic exchanges can be a part of the strategic repertoire of the urban poor to advance their own interests. This has been reported in other cases, such as in Burgwall’s 1995 study of the conscious use of clientelism as a strategy by Quito’s squatters even though they were critical of it. Very similar is Gay’s 1994 report from a Brazilian favela with a much-empowered leader very similar to Manuel, who was able to play the clientelistic game to his advantage. This also appears to be the case in other parts of today’s Brazil (Borges 2007; Nichter 2010) and in Colombia, where some authors talk about “market clientelism” to highlight the capacity of clients and brokers to choose from various patrons and not to be tied to pyramidal networks (Dávila León de Guevara 1999; Dávila León de Guevara and Delgado 2001; García 2003; Gutiérrez Sanín 1998). The impact of electoral competition on clientelistic ties, increasing the bargaining power of the client, was noticed early by scholars of clientelism when describing the effect of democracy on patronage ties (Scott 1972).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The evidence gathered from planned land invasions in Montevideo supports the enduring relevance of nonprogrammatic politics (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Piattoni 2001). Moreover, it shows that although clientelism appears to be receding in Uruguay, mainly because of state retrenchment and reform (Filgueira et al. 2003; Luna 2006)—which is

partly indicated by the extremely low level of vote buying in the country (Nickerson 2010)—on the ground, political networks are still active among poor voters, particularly those who live in squatter settlements. The kind of collective goods squatters need, such as connections to water or light, are still available, in contrast to the old goods that used to be exchanged through clientelistic networks, such as jobs and pensions (Rama 1971).

How do we understand these enduring political networks characterized by uncertainty, continuity, and agency? Are they clientelism? Are they “just regular politics”? The only sure thing is that they are not part of programmatic, universalistic politics. But agreements end there. Rather than solve the puzzle by choosing either the narrow or the broad definition of clientelism exposed at the beginning, I find it more interesting to use my evidence to tackle precisely the problems of choosing either definition.

If we define clientelism narrowly (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes n.d.), what we observe among Montevideo’s squatters is not clientelism. A straight “tit for tat” rationale is absent from both politicians and voters, since uncertainty reigns. Coercive mechanisms to monitor or enforce the clientelistic pact are not present. Favors are not conditional to votes.

The narrow definition better fits cases with a hegemonic machine party that both controls state goods (monopoly clientelism) and is relatively able to monitor voters’ electoral choices and reward or punish constituents depending on how they voted. This configuration of political factors is currently present in Peronist Argentina (Levitsky 2003; Stokes 2005) and undoubtedly has been present in other contexts—Mexico under PRI being one—but it is by no means generalizable. Some scholars have pointed precisely to the problems of this definition to understand other cases of political networks. Borges (2007), for example, denounces this definition because it does not describe the reality of Brazil, where competition between parties and government levels (central and subnational) promotes weaker and inherently unstable variants of clientelism.

The broader definition of clientelism, in turn, fits much better the empirical evidence presented in this article. Some of the interactions observed here fall into Gay’s “thick clientelism” (1997, 2001), since he refers to the explicit exchange of votes for favors but recognizes uncertainty in the exchange. Other interactions of Manuel with the different factions and parties fall more into Gay’s thinner version of clientelism, which refers to a party offering (often low-quality) goods and services, seemingly universal, to vulnerable populations that later pay back electorally.

The narrow definition has, as already mentioned, the virtue of being very clear about its object. Yet it does not travel very well to contexts lacking monopoly of goods without falling into conceptual stretching.

And it lumps together as “nonclientelism” a group of practices and exchanges embedded in political networks that are clearly not nonprogrammatic politics either. Perhaps, as Luna (2006) suggests in passing, the relations of parties to squatters in Uruguay belong to the realm of constituency service, a form of nonprogrammatic politics about which we know little in less developed democracies (Stokes n.d.). Perhaps—and I lean more toward this interpretation—squatter politics lie somewhere in the middle of the narrow definition of clientelism and constituency service.

The broader definition travels much better to different contexts, recognizes local differences, adapts to different manifestations of particularistic exchanges through political networks. Yet it lumps together many different phenomena under the label of clientelism. It is vulnerable to people saying, “this is just regular politics, not clientelism” (although this, in turn, lumps different political practices in the “regular politics” box, therefore falling into the same conceptual mistake it tries to denounce). Moreover, it is difficult to falsify. According to the thick version, anything can be clientelism in an unequal context. How do we prove that a policy directed toward the poor was a right or a favor?

In sum, squatter politics in Montevideo and the story of New Rock and its flexible political network illustrate the conceptual difficulties that persist in characterizing on-the-ground particularistic politics.

Now that the Frente Amplio holds national and municipal power in Montevideo, it becomes relevant to ask what will happen to these networks. The party has always criticized traditional parties’ clientelistic practices. Yet as we have seen, some members and some factions learned to play the game. Many questions arise. Will clientelism end now, with less competition for the urban poor in Montevideo? Will the Frente Amplio develop a hegemonic machine similar to the Peronist one in order to stay in power? Or will, perhaps, the strong fight among factions reproduce the old fight among parties? What are the chances for a universal policy toward squatters that would not make help contingent on the existence of political networks? Undoubtedly, this is a very rich case both theoretically and empirically, which we should keep studying, together with others, to better understand the role of face-to-face politics in our changing societies.

## NOTES

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1. Fieldnotes from my fieldwork. Neighborhoods and people's names are fictitious to comply with confidentiality. Only public figures' names are real.

2. It is likely that without this statist tradition, squatters would not expect so much from the state and that they would not speak of their rights to housing, as many did in my interviews. According to Alsayyad (1993), making claims to the state and being politicized is part of the "squatting culture" in Latin America, not only in Uruguay. By contrast, in the Middle East, squatters tend to resort to strategies outside politics, such as depending on the particular context, complete political invisibility, tribal networks, or religious law to legalize land.

3. See Gros Espiel 1964 for an interesting history of the collegiate executive ideas and implementation in Uruguay.

4. High factionalization is one of the main features of the Uruguayan political system (Buquet 2001; González 1991; Piñeiro 2004). Voters are often more loyal to the factions than to the parties. All the factions compete for votes, have representation in some parts of the state, and play the clientelistic game.

5. The Socialist Party of Uruguay, for example, founded in 1910, was quite old by the time Rama conducted fieldwork in the late 1960s. In 1962 several leftist groups and some people and fractions that had broken up with the traditional parties formed the first leftist coalition, FIDEL (Frente Izquierda de Liberación).

6. See Lanzaro 2004 for a collection of studies describing and explaining the growth of Frente Amplio.

7. The process of becoming brokers, patrons, and clients has received little attention from the literature, which often concentrates on already working networks (Auyero 1997).

8. This expression is more a product of retrospective interviewing than of reality. Probably he was never just another neighbor. He had some political networks; he had some leadership features that the FUCVAM people noticed in order to choose him to organize the neighborhood.

9. Not only did other interviewees (such as a neighborhood leader of another area of the city) suggest that Manuel had kept some money, but also some of the neighbors in New Rock accused him at the City Council, according to the minutes of the City Council's Special Commission on Squatter Settlements.

10. According to Manuel and to the signs in people's houses by the time of the last election in 2009, the majority of the neighborhood voted for the Frente Amplio. Yet this cannot be attributed to Manuel's political network, whose patrons got very few votes in general. Neighbors voted like the majority of Uruguayans, supporting the faction of the current president, José Mujica.

11. This has changed lately with the redirection of the Program for the Integration of Squatter Settlements (PIAI), a neighborhood-upgrading government



program funded primarily by the Inter-American Development Bank, including some of the most deprived accretion invasions in the regularization plan.

12. Nichter (2010) describes a similar dilemma suffered by voters in the Brazilian Northeast, who wonder and calculate the benefits of declaring or not declaring their voting choices.

13. One of the Frente Amplio's main campaign plans, and one of the first measures the administration implemented once in office, was a new social welfare program for poor families, in response to the economic crisis that had hit the country in 2002–3. The plan, popularly known as the *Plan de Emergencia*, had two main objectives: immediate assistance (e.g., basic income of about 50 dollars per month, health care) and support to get out of poverty (e.g., educational programs, labor programs).

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