The Political Makings of the 2001 Lootings in Argentina*

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Abstract. Based on archival research and on multi-sited fieldwork, this article offers the first available description of the food lootings that took place in Argentina in December 2001. The paper joins the current relational turn in the study of collective violence. It examines the existing continuities between everyday life, routine politics and extraordinary massive actions, and scrutinises the grey zone where the deeds and networks of looters, political entrepreneurs and law enforcement officials meet and mesh. The article reconstructs the looting dynamics at one specific site and highlights the existence of three mechanisms during the episodes: 1. the creation of opportunities by party brokers and police agents, 2. the validation of looting by state elites, and 3. the signalling spiral carried out by party brokers.

Introduction

‘We invite you to destroy the Kin supermarket this coming Wednesday at 11.30 a.m., the Valencia supermarket at 1.30 p.m., and the Chivo supermarket at 5 p.m.’ This and similar flyers circulated throughout poor neighbourhoods in Moreno, a district located in Greater Buenos Aires, inviting residents to join the crowds that looted several dozen supermarkets and grocery stores during the week of 14 December to 22 December 2001. Investigative journalists’ reports agree that the flyers were distributed by members of the Peronist Party, some of them local officials, others well-known grassroots leaders. The flyers betray a connection that analysts of the recent wave of violent contention in Argentina have consistently overlooked: the obscure (and obscured) links that looters maintain with established power-holders. The flyers, furthermore, point to a dimension to which

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scholars of collective violence throughout the world have only recently begun to give due attention: the role of political entrepreneurs in the promotion, inhibition and/or channelling of physical damage to objects and persons. By dissecting the specific actions of political brokers and the specific networks that they mobilised during the lootings of December 2001, this study seeks to shed light on the intersection and interaction between routine politics and popular violence.

Neither the Kin, Valencia or Chivo supermarkets, nor most of the approximately 300 stores looted throughout Argentina during the week-long wave of collective violence, are part of supermarket chains. The largest chain supermarkets (known in Argentina as hipermercados) is in fact, conspicuously absent from the list of stores ransacked by what leading newspapers described as ‘angry and hungry crowds’. Several reports concur that the state police and the National Guard took special care when it came to protecting stores like the French-owned Carrefour and Auchan or the American-owned Norte while creating what grassroots activists called a ‘liberated zone’ around small and medium-sized stores — allowing political brokers and crowds to move freely from one target to the next. The spatial distribution of repressive activities was indeed another key factor in the looting dynamics of December. Together with an examination of the role played by party activists, the second object of this article is to study the form and the impact that the geography of policing had on the actual viability and variability of looting activity as well as on the amount of physical damage inflicted on stores and persons during the December 2001 episodes.

At an empirical level, this paper is based on archival research and on multi-sited fieldwork and offers the first available description of the lootings of December 2001. At an analytical level, the paper joins the relational turn in the study of collective violence; it (a) examines the existing continuities between everyday life, routine politics and extraordinary massive actions, and (b) sheds light on the grey zone where the deeds and networks of looters, political entrepreneurs and law enforcement officials meet and mesh.

The call for sustained attention to the common mechanisms, processes and networks at the root of all sorts of contentious politics is now being heeded by scholars of social movements and other forms of insurgent popular struggle.1 Scholarship on various forms of collective violence

1 Sidney Tarrow, The New Transnational Activism (Cambridge, 2005); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, Dynamics of Contention (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), Social Movements and Networks. Relational Approaches to Collective Action (New York, 2003); Jeffrey Broadbent, ‘Movement in Context: Thick Networks and Japanese Environmental Protest,’ in Diani and McAdam (eds.), Social Movements and Networks, pp. 204–29; Ann Mische, ‘Cross-talk in Movements: Reconceiving the Culture-Network Link,’ in Diani and McAdam (eds.), Social Movements and Networks, pp. 258–80;
(from genocide and politicide to brawls) is also heading in a mechanism- and process-based direction.\(^2\) Yet this turn towards relational analysis has thus far eluded the study of a particular form of collective violence, that of food riots – still a widespread and recurrent phenomenon around Latin America.

Existing scholarship insists on the rootedness of collective violence in ‘normal’ social relations,\(^3\) on the multifarious ways in which violent contention takes place embedded, and often hidden, in the mundane structures of everyday life and routine politics.\(^4\) As Tilly writes: ‘Contentious gatherings obviously bear a coherent relationship to the social organisation and routine politics of their settings. But what relationship? That is the problem.’\(^5\) Drawing upon recent developments in the scholarship on collective violence,\(^6\) this paper addresses precisely this problem by focusing on party brokers and police agents (and their obscure relations) as key connectors between everyday politics and extra-ordinary collective action.

Once we focus empirical attention on the looting dynamics, on the mechanisms and networks that played a role in their making, we begin to detect the existence of a grey zone where the analytical distinctions that the literature on collective action takes for granted (government agents, repressive forces, challengers, polity members, etc.) collapse. Part of the problem I faced in reconstructing what actually happened during December 2001 (when repressive forces did not ‘repress’ but sometimes looted, when looters were aided in their damage-making actions by state actors, and when the relationships between looters and authorities were so seemingly intense that it was hard to analyse them as discrete actors) had to do with the fact that most of the categories that we, scholars of collective action,


James Rule, Theories of Civil Violence (Berkeley, 1988).

Beth Roy, Some Trouble with Cows (Berkeley, 1994).


routinely operate with (categories very much informed by empirical analyses carried out in the United States and Europe) proved misleading, if not useless. In part, the notion of the grey zone seeks to address this problem.

In the reconstruction of the lootings, I relied on a thorough reading of national and local newspapers (printed and on-line editions) and fieldwork in the two sites of heaviest looting activity in Buenos Aires (the districts of Moreno and La Matanza). I read four national newspapers (Clarín, Crónica, La Nación and Página12) for the month before and the year after the lootings. I also read ten local newspapers (from the provinces where lootings occurred – El Ciudadano, La Voz del Interior, La Mañana del Sur, Río Negro, Cronica-Chubut, La Gaceta, El Litoral, El Liberal, Los Andes and El Sol) covering the months of December 2001 and January 2002, and the October, November, December 2001 and January 2002 issues of Para Ud!, a local newspaper printed in Moreno. The analysis also incorporates three reports on the lootings published by investigative journalists. I also consulted the video archives of Canal 11, a major national TV channel, and was able to watch the reports and the images (some of them never broadcast) produced at the time of the events. The fieldwork comprises in-depth interviews with twenty residents (two Peronist brokers among them) of the poor barrio Lomas Verde, located fifteen blocks from El Cruce (the main looting site in the district of Moreno). The interviews were conducted together with a research assistant who lives and works in a neighbouring district. While only a third of these residents participated in the lootings, the remaining two thirds were able to provide detailed descriptions of what went on during the week under investigation even though they did not take part of the events. In-depth interviews were also carried out with thirteen store owners, managers, and employees. Half of them worked in stores that were looted, while half of them worked in stores that were spared from the violence. The fieldwork in Moreno and in La Matanza is still in progress; this article reports findings from Moreno with occasional observations from other sites.

After briefly summarising the existing literature on what I term, following Primo Levi, ‘the grey zone’ of politics, this article provides a straightforward empirical description of the geographic distribution of the lootings and of their diversity. This description is mostly based on secondary resources (newspaper accounts and investigative journalists’ reports). The paper then reconstructs the looting dynamics at one specific site (El Cruce) and highlights the existence of three mechanisms during the episodes: the

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7 Miguel Bonasso, El palacio y la calle (Buenos Aires, 2002); Jorge Camarasa, Días de furia (Buenos Aires, 2002); Gerardo Young, ‘La trama política de los saqueos,’ Clarín digital, 19 December 2002.
creation of opportunities by party brokers and police agents, the validation of looting by state elites, and the signalling spiral carried out by party brokers.

The grey zone

The world into which new arrivals to the Lager concentration camp were thrown was far from simple, Primo Levi writes, because it was a grey zone, not reducible ‘to the two blocs of victims and persecutors’. The privilege enjoyed by certain prisoners and the collaboration they – the members of that ‘hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary’ – provided to the authorities of the camp constituted the Lager’s ‘armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature’. The grey zone, Levi writes, is ‘poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge’, it is a zone of ambiguity which challenges the pervasive we-they/friend-enemy bipartition; a Manichean tendency, ‘which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they …’ The grey zone is, in Levi’s mind, not simply an actual region in the social space of the concentration camp. It is also, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, a conceptual tool that warns us against too rigid – and misleading – dichotomies; in our case, looters, on the one side, authorities and looted, on the other.

Much like in the real life of the concentration camps described in painstaking detail by Primo Levi, before, during, and after the looting things are messier than they actually look. There is, indeed, a grey area where the activities of those perpetrating the violence and those who presumably seek to control them coalesce. Scrutinising this grey area will not only allow us better to understand the dynamics of these particular lootings, it will also, serve us to integrate ‘extraordinary’ collective violence into the study of ‘normal’ politics. Much like Levi then, I conceive of the grey zone as both an empirical object and an analytical lens that draws our attention towards a murky area where normative boundaries dissolve, where state actors and political elites promote and/or actively tolerate and/or participate in damage-making.

Although far from being a clearly delimited area of inquiry, the grey zone of politics has attracted some, still scattered, scholarly attention.

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9 Ibid., p. 27.
10 Ibid., p. 22.
11 In his remarkable study of social suffering of homeless addicts, Philippe Bourgois, *Righteous Dopefiend* (forthcoming) uses the notion of ‘grey zone’ to capture the abusive behaviour, personal betrayals and self-inflicted damage that predominate in that specific universe. As will become clear, in this essay I use the notion in a rather different way.
Research on the origins and forms of communal violence in Southeast Asia, for example, highlights the usually hidden links between partisan politics and violence. Writing about the new migrants who live on the margins of modern cities and their role in communal riots in the region, Veena Das asserts that the ‘inhabitants of these slums and “unauthorized colonies” … become a human resource for conducting the *underlife of political parties*. These are the people employed as strike-breakers; they make up crowds to demonstrate to the world the “popularity” of a particular leader; and they form instruments for the management of political opponents. It is not surprising then that in the organisation of riots they should play a pivotal role in the perpetration of violence’. Along these lines, Shaheed’s analysis of the Pathan-Mujahir conflicts during 1985–86 shows that the riots can be ‘traced directly to the actions of religious political parties’. More recently Larissa MacFarquhar charts the existing connections between the head of the Hindu-nationalist Shiv Sena party, Bal Thackeray, and anti-Muslim riots in contemporary India. Paul Brass’s notion of ‘institutionalized riot systems’ captures well these usually obscure connections. In these riot systems, Brass points out, ‘known actors specialise in the conversion of incidents between members of different communities into ethnic riots. The activities of these specialists [who operate under the loose control of party leaders] are usually required for a riot to spread from the initial incident of provocation’. Sudhir Kakar’s description of a *pehlwan* (wrestler/enforcer who works for a political boss) further illustrates the point: the genesis of many episodes of collective violence should be located in the area where the actions of political entrepreneurs and those of specialists in violence (people who control the means of inflicting damage on persons and objects) meet and mesh.

That party leaders and/or state officials (bureaucrats and/or police agents) might be ‘behind’ – rather than against – episodes of collective violence should hardly surprise students of Latin American politics. In a detailed study of ‘la violencia’ – as the wave of political violence that killed 200,000 people in Colombia in the 1940s and 1950s came to be known – historian Mary Roldán shows that in Antioquia ‘partisan conflict provided the initial catalyst to violence’. She asserts that not only did state bureaucrats ‘promote’ the violence that shocked the region but also that

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12 Das, *Mirrors of Violence*, p. 12; emphasis mine.
16 Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*. 
policemen and mayors actively participated in partisan attacks. As she asserts:

[V]iolence in peripheral areas (of Antioquia) was largely the product of concerted and systematic harassment waged by selected regional authorities rather than the ‘natural’ outgrowth of partisan conflicts among local residents … the regional state and its forces were the primary instigators of violence on the periphery …. Governors and their administrative subordinates played an extraordinarily important role in the promotion of partisan violence in Antioquia between 1946 and 1949.  

Political elites, she points out, did not simply tolerate or instigate the violence; they were its perpetrators. While party members organised attacks on places and peoples, police acted as partisan shock troops. In a statement that would ring bells for those studying political violence in other parts of the world, Roldán points out that: ‘while many citizens attributed the escalation of violence to the absence of official forces, these forces were so often the perpetrators of violence between 1946 and 1949 that one wonders why anyone bothered to suggest that the presence of the authorities could have been of much help’.  

In the contemporary Americas, we have several ethnographic accounts of the grey zone of politics. Gunst’s taxing exploration of Jamaican gangs shows the links that posses have with political parties during the 1980s and the outcomes, usually violent, of what she calls ‘mafia-style links’. The origins of Jamaican drug gangs in New York can be found, Gunst argues, in the posses which were, in fact, political groupings armed by party leaders linked to Seaga or Manley. Goldstein’s recent ethnography of Felicidade Eterna, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, provides further evidence of the collusion between state actors (in her case, the police) and violent entrepreneurs (gang members associated with drug trafficking). In point of fact, one of the actors in the favela’s everyday life, the ‘police-bandit’, points to the heart of the intimate relations that exist between local cops and local gangs of small-scale drug traffickers – so ‘intimate’ that the limits become confused and confusing. As Goldstein writes when describing the residents’ opinions about the possible perpetrator of the recent murder of the brother of a dono (boss):

When asked, nobody was sure whether the executioners were bandits, police, or ‘police-bandits’. The term ‘police-bandits’, as used by the residents of Felicidade

17 Roldán, Blood and Fire, p. 22.
18 For further evidence on the Colombian case, see also Herbert Braun’s study of the violence during the 1948 Bogotazo that followed the assassination of liberal leader Gaitán: The Assassination of Gaitán. Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia (Madison, 1986).
19 Roldán, Blood and Fire, p. 82.
Eterna, referred to their own sense of the inescapability of violence in their world. They were aware of the violence of the gangs and the normalized and routine corruption of the police, but police-bandit seemed to mean something more. It seemed to refer to the possibility that both of these entities inevitably played by the rules of revenge and personal reputation, and their blurring signalled the recognition by residents of the dysfunctionality of the justice system. [...] In the local vernacular, the term ‘police-bandit’ captures the sense of the breakdown of the rule of law in the poorest neighbourhoods, making clear the corrupt nature of the police ...21

Finally, the ethnographic work recently carried out by Arias in three Rio’s favelas draws attention to the overlaps between collective violence (in his case, associated with drug trafficking) and party politics (in his case, a modern version of patronage).22 The ongoing violence in Rio’s favelas, famously portrayed in Fernando Meirelles’ film City of God, is the outcome of the consolidation of the political power of drug gangs. This process, in turn, would not be possible to understand without examining, as Arias does, the connections between different levels of the state, drug traffickers and favelas’ residents. In his detailed and varied descriptions of violence in the favelas and of the individual and collective efforts to confront it, one message comes times and again: ‘Many bureaucrats, police, and politicians take kickbacks or otherwise work with traffickers to accomplish personal objectives [...] Corrupt state officials work with locally empowered delinquents to enrich themselves and win votes.23 The overlaps and interweavings between the actions of traffickers, members of neighbourhood associations, and state officials prevent us from talking about ‘parallel politics’ (as Leeds did when examining the constraints that drug lords posed to democratic authorities and community leaders at the local level during the late 1980s and early 1990s)24 and lead us to explore the illegal networks linking different actors and creating an area where it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish clear-cut boundaries.

Argentine lootings

On the morning of 14 December 2001 the city of Rosario (in the central province of Santa Fe, Argentina) witnessed the first groups of poor...
people gathering in front of supermarkets demanding food. When denied, they began breaking into the premises and taking away merchandise while store owners, managers and employees, looked on in bewildered disbelief, and policemen, if they reached the stores in time, attempted to prevent further looting. During the next few days, the sacking of grocery stores and supermarkets extended unevenly throughout the country, and by the end of the week of 14–22 December a series of such episodes occurred in eleven Argentine states. Map 1 shows the geographic distribution of the total amount of lootings from 14 to 22 December.

By the week’s end, eighteen people (all of them under 35 years old) had been killed, either by the police or by store owners. Hundreds more were seriously injured and thousands were arrested. The states of Santa Fe, Entre Ríos and Mendoza and the district of Avellaneda and Quilmes in the state of Buenos Aires were the first to experience the uprisings – hundreds of people blockading roads, publicly demanding food, and eventually looting stores and markets. Yet the violence soon extended unevenly to the south, centre and north of the country, reaching the highly populated and urbanised state of Córdoba and spreading rapidly though unevenly throughout Buenos Aires. Interestingly, the poorest and most unequal states in the northeast
and the northwest had no reported looting activity. Similarly, some of the poorest districts in Buenos Aires (Florencio Varela, for example) suffered no lootings.

Although spectacular in their intensity and extent, the lootings were hardly isolated moments of collective violence in Argentina. They were part of what social movement scholarship would call a ‘cycle of collective action’.25 During the past two decades new and unconventional forms of popular contention transformed Argentina into a veritable landscape of violent protest.26 Sieges of (and attacks on) public buildings (government houses, legislatures, courthouses), barricades on national and provincial roads, and sit-ins in central plazas became widespread in the south (the provinces of Neuquén, Río Negro, Santa Cruz, Tierra del Fuego), centre (Córdoba and Santa Fe), and north (Jujuy, Salta, Santiago del Estero, Corrientes, Chaco, amongst others) of the country. Though lower in number of episodes, participants and amount of material and human damage than those of December 2001, lootings of markets and food stores also took place from May to July 1989 and in March and June 1990 throughout the country.27

The events of December 2001 – which included the wave of food riots that occurred alongside thousands of people blockading roads and bridges throughout the country, and the banging pots and pans in the main plaza of Buenos Aires in a collective mobilisation that, together with heightened elite factionalism, provoked the ousting of two presidents in less than a month – indicate that this historical shift in claims-making is still under way. The peak of collective action during 2001 has been the subject of many scholarly, journalistic and insiders’ accounts.28 Central as they were in

28 Scholarly accounts include Emilio Cafassì, *Olla a presión. Cacerolazos, piquetes y asambleas, sobre fuego argentino* (Buenos Aires, 2002); Raúl Fradkin, *Cosechera’s tu siembra* (Buenos Aires, 2002);
generating a terminal political crisis, the lootings, however, remain virtually uncharted terrain for social scientists.\footnote{The few existing studies and journalistic reports on the food riots in particular are single-actor accounts dominated by what Tilly, \textit{Politics of Collective Action}, calls the ‘steam boiler’ analogy or what historian E.P. Thompson (\textit{Customs in Common}, New York, 1994) labels a ‘spasmodic view’ of popular revolt. In other words, the main actors in the lootings are said to be the poor and unemployed who, responding to a rapid reduction in the standard of living by visible government (in)action (e.g., the suspension of many food distribution programmes) and the high level of joblessness (in December unemployment rates were at 21\% of the economically active population), suddenly exploded in anger and plundered stores and supermarkets (as in Fradkin, \textit{Cosechera’s tu siembra}). As prevailing analysts in Argentina portray the events, poverty and unemployment, together with state inaction, created an insurmountable pressure that built up during 2001 until everything exploded, as reflected in the title of Cafassi’s widely read \textit{Olla a presión} (pressure cooker).}

Lootings varied in terms of their location, number of participants, type of store attacked, and the presence of police and party brokers among the crowds. As the maps clearly show, lootings were unevenly distributed in broad geographical terms. A third of the 289 episodes reported in newspapers (a combination of lootings and attempted lootings repressed by the police and/or store owners) occurred in Buenos Aires (96), the most populated province, mainly in the area known as the Conurbano (the metropolitan area surrounding the Federal Capital). Another 20 per cent occurred in Santa Fe (61), the third most populated province. Around ten per cent each occurred in the two southern states of Neuquén (29) and Río Negro (27), and the northern state of Tucumán (27), and the remaining 49 episodes were scattered over seven other provinces. Eleven provinces had no reported episodes during the week.

The number of actors involved also varied. The number of participants ranged from thousands in episodes occurring in Concordia (Entre Ríos), Banda del Río Salí (Tucumán) and Centenario (Neuquén), to dozens in many smaller episodes in Rosario (Santa Fe), Guaymallén (Mendoza) and Paraná (Entre Ríos). Of the episodes with count information, the modal category of estimated participants was between 100 and 400 (close to 70 per cent).

Locally, the crowds attacked different types of targets as well. Nearly 60 per cent of the episodes reported by newspapers took place in small local markets and grocery stores, close to a third occurred in big, chain-owned supermarkets, and eight per cent occurred at non-food sites (shoe stores, clothing stores, appliance stores, etc.). Police presence was reported in 106
of the 289 episodes (37 per cent), sometimes outnumbered by the looters, other times not, sometimes deterring the crowds with rubber bullets and tear gas (and in a few reported cases real bullets), other times dissuading potential looters simply by their presence, as detailed below. The number of arrests also varied widely from province to province, from dozens in Entre Ríos, to approximately 200 in Rosario, to close to 600 in Tucumán. Successful lootings and those effectively stopped by restraint were evenly distributed when the targets were big, chain-owned supermarkets. When incidents occurred in small, local markets and grocery stores, successful lootings outnumbered rebuffed attempts by nearly three to one. Based on a statistical analysis of newspaper reports, it can be asserted that the odds of police presence at a looting site are 268 per cent higher when the site is large chain supermarket. The fact that police response was uneven across market types concurs with reports that the state police and the National Guard took special care when it came to protecting stores like the French-owned Carrefour or the American-owned Norte, while at the same time creating the ‘liberated zone’ about which grassroots activists and, as we will later see, shopkeepers spoke. ‘The police acted very well’, said an owner of one of the largest supermarket chains in Rosario, ‘police action was impeccable.’ A divergent evaluation came from Juan Milito, the head of Rosario’s Shopkeepers Union (Unión de Almaceneros or ‘Small Stores’) who said: ‘As always, the small stores were the most damaged — the big chains were protected.’ And in Neuquén, a city far from Rosario, Ramón Fernandez, the Secretario Gremial del Centro de Empleados de Comercio also confirmed that ‘the police concentrated their efforts on hipermercados’. In Buenos Aires, the state police incurred most of their injuries, and used most of their rubber bullets and tear gas bombs, in confrontations occurring in front of the hipermercados. A case in point is the brutal police repression of a looting that took place in front of a Carrefour supermarket, while at the same time dozens of small, unguarded stores were being sacked nearby and all over Buenos Aires. A highly perceptive observer of police behaviour (and former undersecretary of security in the state of Buenos Aires), speaks of ‘evident police passivity’ during the lootings, and adds that it is quite common for the Bonaerense, as the provincial police is known, to ‘liberate’ or


32 Rio Negro, 23 December 2001. The main Argentine newspaper reported that the French-owned supermarkets Auchan and Carrefour were protected by the state police and the National Guard because the French ambassador, Paul Dijoud, called the then secretary of the presidency, Nicolás Gallo, asking him to do so (Clarín, 19 May 2002).

33 Clarín, 19 May 2002.
free certain zones so that criminal activity can proceed without police presence.  

The geography of policing came to reinforce an already existing physical environment in the protection of foreign-owned chain supermarkets. Image 1 shows the spatial location of one of these markets; it can be taken to represent the typical site of an *hipermercado*. Characteristically, markets such as Auchans, Carrefours, Discos and Jumbos are surrounded by highways, railways and/or large avenues, accessible mostly by car or public transportation. Co-presence, the essential ingredient in the making of a looting (and of any other kind of contentious collective action), is thus constrained by sheer physical location. Most *hipermercados* are also fenced off by huge walls and/or surrounded by parking lots and/or empty spaces. Compared to the typical small store (guarded solely by a roll-up metal blind and easily accessible from the sidewalk) the *hipermercado* is thus more easily defended by the police and more resistant to attack by looters.

Detailed newspaper reports exist for less than half of the recorded 289 episodes. Newspapers and investigative journalists’ accounts provide some sort of meticulous descriptions of the composition and actions of  

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the looting crowds in approximately 130 episodes. In half of these reports, reporters noted the presence of Peronist party brokers among the crowds, particularly in the two sites of heaviest looting activity: La Matanza and Moreno, and particularly in the lootings occurring in small stores with little police presence. In small stores lootings, together with the lower likelihood of police presence there is a higher visibility of party brokers.\footnote{For a statistical analysis of brokers’ presence and police action based on newspaper accounts, see Auyero and Moran, ‘Violence and Collective Action’.

\textit{Clarín}, 19 May 2002.} Investigative journalists’ reports and our own interviews point to some sort of connection between the presence of party brokers and the virtual absence (or inaction) of police in small store looting. This connection: (a) draws attention to the existence of the grey zone of politics, and (b) highlights the continuities between routine politics and collective violence. In the sections that follow, I will explore this connection in as detailed form as the available evidence allows focusing on the lootings that took place in small markets.

\textit{Small markets get sacked}

In December 2001 Josefa was living in a small shack located in a poor neighbourhood of Moreno. On 18 December she received a small flyer inviting her to ‘bust’ a group of markets. The next day, she showed up on time in front of \textit{Kin} and soon two hundred people were gathered in front of this small market demanding food. She recalls seeing a police car leaving the scene and a man who worked at the local municipality talking on his cellphone. Soon, a truck loaded with a \textit{grupo de pesados} (or group of thugs), known in the neighbourhood as \textit{Los Gurkas} arrived at the scene. ‘They broke the doors and called us in’, Josefa remembers, ‘a few days later, I met one of them, and he told me that people from the Peronist Party paid 100 pesos for the job.’ Far from Josefa, in another poor enclave in Buenos Aires, residents of the barrio Baires (located in the municipality of Tigre) seemed to have received similar news about the imminent looting through their children: ‘When my son arrived from school, he told me that a man from the local \textit{Unidad Básica} (Peronist Party grassroots office) came to inform the teachers about the sites of the lootings. The teacher told my son that she was going to go. And we went to see if we could get something.’\footnote{Clarin, 19 May 2002.}

Once the groups had gathered in front of neighbourhood supermarkets or grocery stores, owners occasionally distributed food and averted looting; in other cases owners barricaded themselves in their stores and shot at the crowds. These occasions proved to be fatal for looters: three people were killed and dozens were injured by store owners. In most cases, however,
nothing other than police repression (which tended to be absent in the majority of these cases), prevented the crowds from breaking into these stores and seizing whatever they could.

What seems to be common to most of these small market lootings is that ‘the crowd’ was, in fact, composed of small groups that would arrive together at the looting site giving plausibility to the theoretical arguments made about the existing linkages among participants in joint action, destructive or otherwise. Recent research on contentious politics and on collective violence highlights precisely this aspect of collective action episodes: ‘In practice’, writes Tilly, ‘constituents’ units of claim-making actors often consist not of living, breathing whole individuals but of groups, organisations, bundles of social relations, and social sites such as occupations and neighbourhoods’.\textsuperscript{38} Most scholarship on collective action highlights the existence of horizontal ties between protesting parties – so much so that formal or informal relations among individuals work as a sort of precondition for their joining in social movement activity.\textsuperscript{39} Vertical connections between insurgents and authorities, however, have received much less attention.\textsuperscript{40} Some of the looting crowds were also ‘connected’ in this second sense of the term as evidenced by the presence of party brokers among looters, sometimes seen directing the crowds to and from their targets.\textsuperscript{41} In order to figure out how exactly these two types of connection (between looters themselves, and between looters, cops and brokers) matter in the making of the looting, we need to look more microscopically at specific incidents.

\textit{Moreno lootings}

Thus far, most of the reconstruction has been based on secondary sources (newspaper accounts, police reports, video footage, investigative journalists’ descriptions). I now turn to my own on-going fieldwork which takes place in Moreno, more specifically in El Cruce de Castelar (site of dozens of small stores, many of them looted during the week under investigation) and in Lomas Verde, a poor barrio located 15 blocks from El Cruce from which many of the looters came. Moreno is a district located in the west of the Conurbano Bonaerense, 37 kilometres from the Federal Capital; it has one of the lowest values in the Human Development Index (third in Buenos

\textsuperscript{38} Tilly, \textit{Politics of Contentious Violence}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{39} See, for example, Doug McAdam, \textit{Freedom Summer} (New York, 1988) and Diani and McAdam, \textit{Social Movements and Networks}.
\textsuperscript{40} But see, for example, Cynthia Bouton, \textit{The Flour War. Gender, Class and Community in Late Ancien Régime French Society} (University Park, PA, 1993), and John Markoff, \textit{The Abolition of Feudalism. Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution} (University Park, PA, 1996).
\textsuperscript{41} Young, \textit{La trama politica}. 
Aires, only after the districts of Florencio Varela and Esteban Echeverría) with close to a third of its 380,000 inhabitants with ‘unsatisfied basic needs’. I will here draw upon in-depth interviews with owners, managers and employees of stores located in El Cruce, with brokers of the Peronist Party, and with residents of the barrio Lomas Verde who either themselves participated in the lootings or knew someone who did.

FIELDNOTES 17 July 2004

Delia lives with her brother and her three kids in Lomas Verde. She’s been involved in politics for 20 years, always as a member of the Peronist Party. She is now a manzanera – a block coordinator for the Plan Vida (a welfare programme that distributes milk, cereals and eggs for needy pregnant women and children) – and heads a small cooperative that is building housing units with funds provided by the local state. She is a Peronist broker, mediating between the major and his clients – she distributes resources that she obtains through her connections in the municipal building (‘I have a phone number I can call in case I need something’) and channels support from below, handing out ballots during election times (‘among my people’) and organising the now (in)famous pre- and post-election barbecues.

Asked about the December lootings, she smiles and replies: ‘What do you want to know? What did we take?’ Sensing she is sort of defending herself, I react ‘No, no … I’d like to know what was it like? How did you find out about it?’ Her response encapsulates one crucial dynamic during the looting: ‘We [the members of the party] knew about the lootings beforehand, around 1 a.m. [lootings began by noon] we knew that there was going to be looting [‘sabíamos que se iba a saquear’]. We were told about them and we passed the information along [among the members of the party].’ She recounts that she went back and forth between her home and El Cruce six times. I then asked her about police presence in the area.

J-Weren’t you afraid of the cops?
D-Not at all, they were worse than us. They were the ones who took most of the things … and, when we were inside [the supermarket] El Chivo, they even told us where to escape so that we didn’t get in trouble.

The end of 2001 found the inhabitants of Moreno, like those of many other poor areas throughout the country, struggling to make ends meet with record-high levels of unemployment and shrinking state assistance. Karina, a resident of one of the most destitute enclaves in the district, remembers that at the time she had an unemployment subsidy (then known as Plan Trabajar) but the monthly payments were delayed (something that was quite generalised throughout the district and throught the Conurbano):

‘They were supposed to be paying by the end of the month (November) and...

42 Griselda Alsina and Andrea Catenazzi, Diagnóstico preliminar ambiental de Moreno (Buenos Aires, 2002). The Human Development Index (Indice de Desarrollo Humano) as defined by the UNDP comprises three elements: health (life expectancy), education (combined index of literacy and school attendance) and living conditions (estimated through per capita income utility).
they didn’t. They would set a date, then another one, Christmas was right around the corner and ... well, then the lootings happened.’ Payments for the unemployment subsidies were not only delayed but dwindling. After describing the long lines of unemployed people waiting to receive their checks since very early in the morning, a reporter from a local newspaper writes: ‘a crowd of beneficiaries from the Plan Trabajar were waiting at the Banco Provincia to receive their 160 patacones [government bonds]. ... since July government charity had gone down from 200 pesos to 160 patacones. When the welfare programme began, beneficiaries used to receive their checks every other week; from then benefits began to be delayed for 30 to 35 days ...’

Lootings in El Cruce began late on 18 December, but the heaviest amount of looting activity (when most people participated and most stores were looted) took place on the afternoon of December 19. Days before, neighbours, looters and shopkeepers knew ‘something was coming’. Sandra, who stayed at home in Lomas Verde during the episodes, told us that a week or so in advance she had found out through a neighbour that lootings were going to take place. Mono, who did loot, told us: ‘I was in school, and my classmates and friends were talking about the lootings like two weeks before it all began ...’ Rumours were also running rampant among shopkeepers in El Cruce. As two of them told us: ‘There was a lot of gossip saying that the sackings were about to start’; ‘a week or so before, other shopkeepers and customers were rumouring that there was a group of people who was going to create disturbios.’

No rumour, however, could have prepared shopkeepers for what they witnessed: hundreds of children, women, men, ‘young, for the most part ... but old people too’, who were ‘our own customers’ broke into dozens of stores (food stores, but also clothing stores, bazaars, wholesale stores with no food products in them, and small kiosks) and took the merchandise away.

The fieldnote I included about Delia does not convey the hesitancy that people who looted still show when recollecting the episodes. Some use the third person to refer to their own actions, others say that they only went there to look, others that they only stayed outside the looted stores, and others that they took less merchandise than they actually did. The following exchange illustrates some of this caution (both in the looting scene and in the recollection). It takes place at María’s house between her, her brother Carlos and Carlos’ son.

Carlos: I was at home and was watching the looting on TV. And people would be in the streets coming back from El Cruce. And a friend of mine [Héctor] showed up

and we said ‘Let’s go and see what’s going on.’ I went to see what was happen-
ing … and maybe to ‘rescue’ something …

Maria: I had to push him [Carlos] because he was simply looking and he wouldn’t dare to go inside [the store]. But then he got at taste for it, and he went once, twice, six times total. Until recently I was using a broom he brought me …

Carlos’ son: Papi, do you remember that you and Héctor brought back like 40 pairs of trousers?

Maria: People would take anything. Some of the stores that you now see in this barrio began with the lootings. They took freezers, furniture, merchandise, and they opened their own business with that.

The dialogue points to an important aspect of looters’ actions. The looting crowd did not form at the site but was ‘connected’ beforehand. Looters went to the looting scene with trusted others, mostly family members:

‘Yes, I went to El Cruce, but I was scared … I went with my brother. In El Cruce I saw a lot of people I knew, classmates, friends …’ (Diana)

‘First I went with friends, then with my little sister …’ (Mono)

‘I was in El Cruce and I saw my classmates who were in groups, and they greeted me, and smiled at me, and I didn’t realise but they were there because they were about to loot’ (Tamara)

Claudia was watching TV that day and at first couldn’t believe what she saw: lootings were taking place a couple of blocks from her home where she did most of her shopping on a daily basis: ‘My aunt and my daughter wanted to go. My daughter wanted to know what a looting was all about. We went to El Cruce but we didn’t take shopping bags with us. I didn’t go before because my husband would have been very angry at me (me iba a cagar a pedos) but then I went anyways. We took this street because there were no cops, it was quieter there … we got to this supermarket but … I don’t know what is to take stuff from inside the store … I only took the stuff that other people would throw on the street.’ Given the goods she came with back from El Cruce, it’s hard to believe she was not inside a store. She lists: soft drinks, ice creams, olives, sugar, yerba, frankfurters, noodles. After the listing, she adds: ‘Before arriving home, I found a bag with school stuff for the kids …’. Once they realised looting was allowed, looters used the supermarket carts to make several trips to El Cruce. Delia went 5 to 6 times, Pelu many more. Claudia went once, but her sons went several times.

Antonio, another looter, told us: ‘We went to Caburé (a supermarket located five blocks from his home). The owner was there but then the cops advised him to leave. That’s when we got in and we took the stuff, even the cops put stuff in the police car.’ A neighbour, who witnessed looting scenes from her house, said: ‘When they were sacking the butchers [across the street], the cops would calm people down and then put all the meat inside
their patrol car!’ Tamara who went to El Cruce with two of her sisters, ‘but just to take a peek’ (as many who ended up with stuff from the lootings maintain), describes the crowd as a ‘herd. They would say: ‘cops coming’ and they would all run and hide. The cops would leave and they would return, like ants.’ ‘What can I tell you about the police?’ asks Claudia, who participated in the lootings: ‘They were the ones who took most of the stuff, the best things. They would get you and grab your bags. The computer they now have is from the lootings.’

These last statements complicate the story I have been telling in the previous sections based on secondary resources. It is not true, as an account of the lootings solely based on newspaper reports would have it, that the police were absent when lootings took place in small markets. The police were present in El Cruce: sometimes they would collaborate with the ransacking (as the above statements depict). At other times they would simply witness the looting from a distance. Almost every single shopkeeper also mentioned the passive police presence: ‘There were cops … but they had orders not to do anything’ (Antonio); ‘Cops were patrolling the area with two old patrol cars … they didn’t do anything’ (Daniel). And yet, the police were not totally passive in El Cruce. They did protect the gas station, for example, and some other specific stores with the zeal that the repressive forces reserved for big chain supermarkets.

Which stores in El Cruce were guarded? The evidence here is not conclusive, but several store owners and employees mentioned that some stores paid for protection. In a way, the same logic that governs the protection of big chain supermarkets and the underprotection of small markets operates at a smaller scale in El Cruce. Those who could afford it, bought safety. A storekeeper told me his uncle (the owner of a nearby butchers) paid for police protection. An employee of a medium-size appliance store put it this way:

There were cops right here, at the door, outside. At that moment, we asked the chief to please guard our store. We told him that we would later give him something. We gave him a TV set. And we gave a wristwatch to every cop. I guess that’s why we were not attacked (Augusto)

Shopkeepers, both those who were looted and those who were spared, see a logical connection between the passivity of the police and the political character of the lootings. Their statements describing police inaction blend with assertions regarding the organised, pre-planned character of the lootings: the police did nothing because it was all ‘coming from above’. Shopkeepers (and even some of the looters themselves) have little doubts about the political character of the lootings. Almost every single shopkeeper we interviewed mentioned specifically a rally organised by the mayor as
the trigger for the lootings, as the spark the started the fire. On 19 December, the mayor of Moreno, Mariano West, himself a strongman within the Peronist Party, declared an economic emergency in his district and organised a rally that would start in the main municipal building and head to the Plaza de Mayo to demand a change in economic policy. The mayor together with party members, local officials, union leaders and the Archbishop of Moreno led thousands of citizens through the streets of Moreno, until the rally was stopped at the border of the Capital Federal by the national police. But, before it was dissolved, it passed through El Cruce. The heavy looting, most shopkeepers point out, began on the margins of this procession: ‘And the worst thing I remember is the caravan. It was organised by the mayor. He was heading it, in a station wagon, and following him, there were three blocks of people, cars, trucks, everything ... and behind that ... they were all looting. He instigated them to loot. All of the looters were coming with the mayor, breaking everything up, looting ...’

The mayor came with a lot of people ... It was like a crazy thing but, that’s how it is, we all know it was all political. It was all orchestrated. That’s why this was a liberated zone (Daniel)

Everybody around here was saying that it was all organised. I don’t know anything about politics but people were saying that the mayor prepared everything ... there was a caravan, and he brought all the people here ... (Mirta)

The caravan acted, in the eyes of shopkeepers, as a sign of the validation that the authorities were giving to violent actions. Certification by public authorities, a key causal mechanism in the generation of violence, was at work.44 At the time, they saw the caravan as an indication that the local government was fomenting the looting and would do nothing to stop it. Logically, it was for them a moment of terror, a moment in which they felt abandoned, at the mercy of the looters. In very simple, candid terms, Mario, an old shopkeeper, puts it this way: ‘I don’t understand much about politics but it was all political. Because if the police don’t do anything, if the government doesn’t do anything ... That means it’s all organised, it’s all politics.’ Looted or not, shopkeepers have little doubts about what initiated the lootings.

Brokers in the grey zone of politics

Peronist brokers were indeed involved in the looting episodes occurring in El Cruce. Investigative journalists reporting from Moreno stated this and my own research has found evidence of their presence. Together with police passivity, the presence of brokers highlights the existence of a grey zone of

44 Tilly, Politics of Collective Violence; McAdam et al., Dynamics of Contention.
politics, central during the lootings, that illustrates the existing continuities between routine and contentious politics. We have no way of knowing if the grey zone of politics (where the obscure and obscured actions of local políticos, grassroots brokers and cops meet and mesh in seemingly coordinated ways) is the ultimate cause of the lootings. The massive violence that took place in December 2001, however, highlights the existence of an area of political activity in which the dichotomies set up in the literature on collective action do not apply well. What we find are: repressive forces that do not suppress violence and that give a hand to looters and/or turn a blind eye to their damage-making actions, state actors who foment violence while rallying for peace, and political brokers who regularly conduct patronage but who for once instigate their followers to express their anger by breaking into unguarded stores. Before concluding, let me elaborate further into what I see the role of brokers to be during the lootings. Who are they? What were they doing there?

Far from being outside organisers, political party brokers are deeply embedded in the everyday life of the poor. In poor and working-class neighbourhoods, shantytowns and squatter settlements throughout Buenos Aires, the poor and the unemployed solve the pressing problems of everyday life (mainly access to food and medicine) through patronage networks that rely on brokers of the Peronist party (locally known as punteros) as key actors. Depending to a great extent on the (not always legal, not always overt) support of the local, provincial and national administrations, these problem-solving networks work as webs of resource-distribution and of protection against the risks of everyday life. Punteros provide food in state-funded soup-kitchens, broker access to state subsidies for the unemployed or to public hospitals, and distribute food and/or food vouchers to mothers, children and the elderly. As Goldberg writes: ‘The main source for all these most basic necessities [food, clothes, and medicine] among impoverished Argentines is the Peronist neighbourhood broker, or puntero.’ Other basic


See also Steve Levitsky, Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Pablo Torres, Votos, chapas y fideos (Buenos Aires, 2002).

needs aside, according to my own ethnographic work and those of other analysts, the procurement of food is the main task of brokers of the Peronist party.\footnote{Torres, \textit{Votos, chapas y fideos}; Levitsky, \textit{Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America}; Goldberg, \textquote{Campaign Conscripts''}; Grimson, \textquote{La vida organizacional}.} Levitsky’s recent work on the transformation of the Peronist party provides an exhaustive examination of the PJ activities. Based on a survey of 112 UBs (Unidades Básicas – grassroots offices of the Peronist party) in La Matanza, Quilmes and the Federal Capital, Levitsky shows that more than two-thirds of them engage in direct distribution of food or medicine.\footnote{Levitsky, \textit{Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America}, p. 188.} Nearly a quarter of them regularly provide jobs for their constituents. Sixty per cent of the UBs of Greater Buenos Aires surveyed by this author participate in the implementation of at least one government social programme. Another recent study conducted in three Argentine provinces (Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Misiones), Brusco et al. found that 44 per cent of the 1,920 respondents ‘reported that parties gave things out to individuals in their neighbourhood during the campaign. The most common item respondents mentioned was food, but they also mentioned clothing, mattresses, medicine, milk, corrugated metal, construction materials, blankets, hangers, utility bill payments, money, eyeglasses, chickens, trees, and magnets’.\footnote{Brusco et al., ‘Vote Buying in Argentina,’ p. 69.} This recent survey shows in unambiguous terms the extent of clientelist practices among the poor: ‘more than one third of [the] full sample (and 45% of low-income respondents) would turn to a party operative [a puntero] for help if the head of his or her household lost their job … [M]ore than one in five low-income voters had turned to a political patron for help in the previous year … 12 percent of poor voters – 18 per cent of poor voters who sympathised with the Peronist Party – acknowledged having received a handout from a party operative in the 2001 campaign’.\footnote{Ibid.} In Lomas Verde, two of the most important brokers have housing cooperatives, distribute milk for a state sponsored programme, and managed the largest soup-kitchen in the area.

What happened during the lootings in Moreno? What did these problem-solvers do there? Even though, as mentioned before, flyers inviting people to attack supermarkets did indeed circulate before the lootings, and although there are reports that say that brokers ‘took’ prospective looters to the sites, it seems to me that the role of brokers was less straightforward. Through their networks, brokers publicised information (or simply rumours) concerning the upcoming opportunity (saying that food was going to be freely distributed or, more directly, that markets were going to be sacked). Peronist brokers did not take their followers to the stores nor could control their actions. However, they did something crucial: they passed the word about

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Torres, \textit{Votos, chapas y fidos}; Levitsky, \textit{Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America}; Goldberg, \textquote{Campaign Conscripts''}; Grimson, \textquote{La vida organizacional}.}
\item \footnote{Levitsky, \textit{Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America}, p. 188.}
\item \footnote{Brusco et al., ‘Vote Buying in Argentina,’ p. 69.}
\item \footnote{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
the location of the looting – simply by spreading rumours throughout the community that *saqueos* were ‘coming’ to El Cruce, a place populated not by large, chain supermarkets, but by small retail stores. These were ‘safe places’ to loot – police would not be present and, if present, would not act. How did brokers and people in general know about future police (in)-activity? In part, they assumed it because news about upcoming looting were coming from above, from well-connected state actors; in part, they experienced it on site when they saw that the infamous *Bonaerense* was, in the words of the broker-turned-looter, ‘worse than us’.

Given their own reputation as food-providers, residents of poverty enclaves acted on this information broadcast by brokers and began gathering in front of these stores. With hundreds and sometimes thousands of desperate people believing in the imminent distribution of food gathered in front of unguarded stores, minor contingencies then determined the unfolding (or lack thereof) of collective violence. Together with the validation that public authorities gave to violence (validation we saw at work during the rally organised by the mayor), we can then detect the working of another mechanism that is deemed central in episodes of collective violence, i.e. signaling spirals.52 Before and during the lootings, brokers communicated the location of targets, the presence or absence of police and thus the feasibility of risky practices. The interactions between the behaviour of the state police, the tacit approval that authorities gave to the first lootings, and the brokers’ continuing spread of information created the opportunity to loot. Given the critical situation in which residents were living, the past experience of lootings in the area (El Cruce was a site of heavy looting in 1989), the closeness of a busy commercial strip, and the simultaneous existence of lootings in other parts of the province and of the country (about which they were informed by radio and television) it did not take much for residents of poor enclaves such as Lomas Verde to take advantage of this opportunity.

**Conclusions**

The December 2001 lootings in Argentina can (and should) serve to open a broader inquiry into the relational underpinnings of collective violence. The massive damage visited upon people and property during December constitutes an extreme event that, as Marcel Mauss asserted a long time ago, is marked by ‘an excessiveness which allows us better to perceive the facts than in those places where, although no less essential, they still remain

52 McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*. 
small-scale and involuted’. It is precisely this excessiveness that acts as an invitation to scrutinise the grey zone where everyday life, routine politics and collective violence intersect and interact. This paper has done so by paying special attention to the role of ‘third parties’ (political brokers and police agents) who, as the American Sociological Association report on social causes of violence asserts, ‘are often involved or present during violent encounters; yet, our knowledge of their role is very limited’. The more attention we pay to these third parties and to their mutual relations, the more blurred the lines separating everyday life, routine politics and extraordinary collective violence appear – a trichotomy, I should add, that remains at the core of breakdown theories of collective behaviour.

Peronist brokers and police agents did not cause the lootings of December 2001 throughout Argentina; they were not the ultimate deus ex machina of the episodes. As much as journalists and many among the general public believe to be the case, the evidence is too thin and too contradictory to sustain such a proposition. Further research should focus on places in which (a) lootings did not occur (such as Florencio Varela, which shares with Moreno the same police, the same, if not worse, levels of collective suffering, and similar strength of Peronist networks); (b) lootings did take place but there is no evidence of brokers’ presence and/or police collaboration with looters (such as Rosario). What an in-depth look at a looting scene illustrates is not a strong causal argument but the existence of a grey zone of politics out of which some of the lootings emerged.

In one of his recent writings, Tilly asserts that throughout the world ‘specialists in violence figure importantly in the larger-scale versions of collective violence …. [I]n any of their many guises, they often initiate violent political interaction, sometimes cause non-violent political interaction to turn violent, and frequently determine the outcome of political interaction, whether violent or otherwise’. And, in a statement that seemed to have been written with the Argentine lootings in mind, he deduces one key implication from the foggy place occupied by violent specialists: ‘[A]lthough it will help to start with distinctions among agents of governments, polity members, challengers, and outside political actors, in closer looks at

actual ... episodes we will have to recognise mobile and intermediate actors, political entrepreneurs and violent specialists prominent among them. *No simple distinction between ‘insurgents’ and ‘forces’ of order can possibly capture the complex interactions that generate collective violence*.57 The statement succinctly captures my own journey into the lootings. I began, probably naively, with the clear-cut distinctions that figure prominently in political science studies and in collective action scholarship – state agents, political leaders and victims on the one side, perpetrators of violence on the other. The more I looked at what actually happened before and during that violent week, at the interactions between actors who were supposed to be doing one thing but were doing another, the more I realised how ill-equipped we, students of violent collective action, are to deal with a region of the political and social space that it is for too important to keep ignoring. The grey zone where boundaries between authorities and looters blur might not be the ultimate source of the lootings of December, but it is certainly an area worth studying if we are to understand part of what happened during that crucial week in Argentine history.