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**THE PIQUETERO MOVEMENT: A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE TO THE ARGENTINE
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS**

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"I carry this struggle in my blood. It is part of me and I fight because I like to be with my compañeros who are suffering the same injustices of unemployment and poverty as me."

- Marta, a piquetera¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The piquetero movement occupies a unique place in Argentine society. Partly driven by social ideals and partly by economic necessity, the piquetero movement is tied to the fate of the Argentine working class. It is a social and economic movement initiated by urban and suburban unemployed workers in the mid-1990s during the presidency of Carlos Menem. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact event that triggered the movement's creation. However, the movement is generally linked to the sharp rise of unemployment and poverty during Menem's rule, which led to a national recession in 1998 and the subsequent pauperization of the working class. The movement peaked with the height of the economic crisis in December of 2001, when national outrage over the state of Argentina's economy erupted into violent riots and protests in and around Buenos Aires, leading to the resignation of then-president Fernando De la Rúa.

¹ Marie Trigona, *Straight from the Barrios: Argentina's TV Piquetera is Transforming Broadcast Media into an Instrument of the Poor*, COLORLINES MAG. (Fall 2004).

Since the 1990s, the piqueteros have used a variety of legal and illegal means to protest the state of the Argentine economy and social welfare system. The piqueteros sought out unique means of protest, such as road blockades. During the key years of the economic crisis, piqueteros frequently occupied key trade routes, lining up with signs and banners and even rolling tires and barrels into the middle of the roads, to prevent merchandise from arriving in the markets that day, and hampering the operations of companies and factories.²

The term “*piquetero*” is a neologism in the Spanish language, which some believe was coined by the media.³ It stems from “*piquete*” or picket, a demonstration, such as the road blockade, designed to make a stand against some authoritative power. Piqueteros have alternately been denounced as aggressive, counterproductive, and parasitic by their critics. Conversely, their supporters perceive them as activists defending social justice. One thing is clear: they have gained public attention in Argentina and internationally.

First, this paper examines the piqueteros’ identity and their origins. Second, we will explore the various social, economic, political and historical factors that contributed to the movement’s development. Third, we analyze the piqueteros’ use of illegal roadblocks and various arguments and counter-arguments regarding the constitutional legitimacy of this means of protest in Argentine law. Fourth, we examine how successive governments during the economic crisis responded to the disruptive blockades, ranging from repression to tolerance. Fifth, we analyze the growing politicization of the piquetero movement, especially addressing the complex relationship between the

² *Id.*

³ Interview with Astor Mazetti, Researcher and Ph.D. candidate, Instituto de Investigaciones Grino Germani, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Arg. (Mar. 13, 2006).



piqueteros and the government of Néstor Kirchner, who assumed the presidency in 2003 after the economic crisis had abated. Sixth, we assess how the piquetero movement has evolved from focusing essentially on blockading roads into concentrating on public service efforts through community-based organizations and the administration of government welfare programs; as well as how public opinion has failed to realize this shift in the piqueteros' role in Argentine society.