Blocking the road

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Introduction: Two Episodes and the Delineation of a Process

On 20 July 1996, the main radio stations in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul (Neuquén) informed the population about the suspension of the negotiations among the provincial government and a corporate firm. These negotiations were to establish in the area a fertilizer plant which would generate new jobs. That same day, the Patagonian cold did not prevent the villagers, in protest, from blocking several stretches of national Route 22, in addition to all the possible ways that connect the region to the rest of the province. Five days later, a federal court judge ordered about 400 gendarmes to evacuate Route 22 of protestors. The gendarmes went through the first picket, expelling tear gas and shooting rubber bullets. When they arrived at the second picket, 20,000 demonstrators were awaiting them. After claiming that this was an ‘insurrection held against the provincial government’ and ‘a crime’, the judge addressed the crowd and recognized that the demonstration ‘exceeded’ the measure she had taken and declared herself ‘publicly incompetent’. As she withdrew herself along with the repressive forces, the demonstrators shouted: ‘The people united will never be defeated’ (el pueblo unido, jamás será vencido).¹ The following day —June 26— governor Felipe Sapag met with a ‘committee of picket representatives’. After a week of roadblocks, he consented to one of the claims raised by the protestors: ‘We want Felipe here’. In the afternoon, after signing an agreement, the roadblocks were ceased.

Five years later, on 24 July 2001, the First National Assembly of Popular, Territorial and Unemployed Workers’ Organizations (I Asamblea Nacional de Organizaciones Populares, Territoriales y de Desocupados) took place in La Matanza, province of Buenos Aires). For supporters, opponents, and observers alike, this was the first congress of the picketers’ movement². The meeting had clear and precise purposes: to progress in the coordination of struggles on a national scale, to improve the

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¹ The description of this event has been taken from Auyero (2002).
² Defining the picketers’ movement is no easy task. For the time being, it will suffice to say that it groups together various social and unemployed workers’ organizations, which have a nationwide scope and have adopted national and provincial road blocking as their central form of collective action in carrying out confrontations. This does not mean, of course, that roadblocks are the only form of action nor the only strategy applied by the picketers’ movement to meet their goals.
organizational levels of the movement, and to design joint strategies in order to face
the government’s new adjustment plan. During the assembly, it was decided to carry
out progressive blocks on the main 50 roads of the country starting on Tuesday 31, as
well as 48- and 72-hour blocks on the following Tuesdays; to demand the release of
those picketers being prosecuted and the provision of new plans for unemployed family
heads; to reject the national government’s adjustment plan designed to achieve zero
deficit; and to keep the «Trabajar» plans (job plans for the unemployed). According
to government officials, this was a case of «subversive actions», organized by sectors
whose «vocation was nearer to violence than to peace» (journal Clarín [C], 25 July
2001). On Monday 30 July, the Parliament passed the adjustment decree sent by the
Executive. On Tuesday, picketers initiated the first national day of road blocking:
stoppages were initiated in Greater Buenos Aires, Federal Capital, Mar del Plata, La
Plata, Santa Fe, Cordoba, Entre Ríos, Tucumán, Chaco, Jujuy, Salta, Misiones, Río
Negro, Ushuaia, and Neuquén. One of the movement leaders said: “This has been a
historic and peaceful circumstance event. A new social movement is bursting to fight
the neo-liberal model and repression” (C, 1 August 2001).

Between 1996 and 2001, three related processes converged in the field of popular
contention with the State: a) the emergence of road blockings as a form of collective
action; b) the emergence of the picketers’ movement as a meaningful actor in
contentious politics; and c) the construction of a collective identity linked to the
exercise of these struggles and to the creation of the movement, namely the
“picketers’ identity”.

Considering these processes as a framework, this paper shall provide: a) an illustration
of the features characterising the roadblocks; b) an account of the transformation of
the strategy from 1996 and 2001; and c) a description of some of the elements playing
a role in the process of forming a “picketers’ identity”.

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I. Roadblocks: A Brief General Description

1. What are roadblocks? Roadblocks are a form of contentious politics\(^4\) – namely, publicly visible collective demonstrations that are carried out in making a claim on the authorities. They are aimed at solutions to sets of particular situations which the protagonists deem problematic or unfair. Blocking the road means drawing frontiers and setting the limits that will outline the space of and for contention. Blocking a road implies interrupting —at least obstructing— free circulation of people and goods, as well as blocking means of access, entries and exits. Blocks are conducted by burning tyres and obstructing the road with such things as branches, debris, sheets of metal, and even the body. In some cases, tents are set up by the side of the road along with “soup kitchens”\(^5\).

2. Why are roads blocked? We possibly would not understand the emergence and spread of this form of collective action without bearing in mind the effects that the adjustment policies and structural reforms launched by the state have bore on specific populations. Nevertheless, as pointed out by the most thoughtful analysts, we should, at the same time, be aware of the restrictions imposed by the equation: reforms of the state = (+) unemployment/poverty = (+) collective action. Nowadays we know that structural changes —that is, \textit{inter alia}, the privatisation of state companies, the reduction of the national public sector, the transfer of public health and education to provincial governments, or economic crises— do not directly affect the rhythm, direction, and meaning of protest (Auyero 2002; Farinetti 1999).

Certainly, between 1996 and 2001, job claiming and job plans (“Trabajar” plans) were one of the most frequent reasons for blocking roads. But this was not the sole reason. Roadblocks were also made to demand payment of withheld pay (e.g., San Jorge, Santa Fe, December 1997), reintegation of dismissed workers (e.g., Gral. Mosconi, Salta, 1999), release of picket leaders (e.g., Buenos Aires, 2001), and sanction for tax-exemptions. Moreover, further causes for the roadblocks were the unfulfilled promises that had led to the suspension of previous blocks, the allocation of funds for local

\(^4\) In Tilly’s own words, contentious politics can be defined as ‘episodic, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants’. (Tilly 2000: 137).

\(^5\) Others have adopted the term “barricade” to refer to roadblocks (Auyero 2002, 2003). A number of the actors also call them “pickets”. Exploring similarities and differences between roadblocks and traditional pickets carried out by unions and barricades would be highly interesting and useful for the understanding of this form of collective action.
productive enterprises in support of demands of particular sectors, or the request for food (e.g., La Matanza, Buenos Aires, 2000).

Nevertheless, grievances are not enough to explain why a group of individuals act collectively (McCarthy and Zald 1997); even less so can they account for the particular form that collective action takes—in this case, the roadblock. What does need to be explained is the path that leads from grievances to rebellion and the concrete forms adopted by the latter.⁶

3. Who blocks the roads? Generally speaking, the protagonists of roadblocks are "picketers". This is the most common name they are given by the media, and which the actors themselves often adopt.⁷ However, one must be aware of the fact that the nominal unit "picketer"—as well as the phrase "picketers’ movement"—is a precarious and unstable construction defined time and again by groups of people with different orientations and interests at different stages of the mobilization process (Melucci 1996; Kriesi 1998). Finding a correspondence between labelling strategies and the process of collective identity construction is by no means the best way to understand who the picketers are.⁸

Another risk that needs to be avoided is to delimit the picketers—and roadblocks—as the expression of a socio-economic category. Many roadblock protagonists and organizers are unemployed workers, but they are not the only ones who block roads. Job claims are not the only motive that triggers off collective action.⁹ Northern natives, lorry drivers, public employees, small farm producers and teachers also made use of road blockings—or joined them—to fight for their interests.¹⁰

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⁶ This is one of the most common topics proposed by researchers with regard to the discussion of collective action and social movements since the 1970s: grievances and frustrations (whether they be moral or economic), however urgent, are not enough to explain how collective action episodes are carried out. See McCarthy and Zald (1997), Tilly (1978, 1995), and Pérez Ledesma (1994) for an overview.

⁷ Concerning the origin of this word, see Sánchez Pilar, "El cutralcazo. La pueblada de Cutral Có y Plaza Huincul", Agora, 1997. In the road blockings taking place in Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul in 1997, a group of demonstrators called themselves "fogoneros". In any case, the word "picketer" is the most frequently used.

⁸ I owe this suggestion to Rafael Cruz.

⁹ Throughout this paper, however, I shall focus basically on blocks and organisations with the main demand being job matters and unemployed workers.

¹⁰ Rodríguez has appropriately pointed out that ‘General Motors workers who block the entrance to the factory by means of a picket on a one-day strike, or those who cut the road to demand the reincorporation of dismissed workers are not the same thing as suburban pickets cutting roads or streets in demand for job plans, or the ones carried out at supermarkets doors to ask for food, etc’, (2001:33).
4. Like other forms of contention, road blocking is a modular collective action. According to Tarrow, modularity refers to the general structural characteristic of the form of collective action being used —either by itself or in combination with other forms— by a variety of social agents against a range of objectives (1997:69). In other words, it is a form of collective action not limited to any particular complaint or social group and can unify people in the name of different claims. This might be one of the reasons (though, undoubtedly, it is neither the only one nor the most important) that made the roadblocks the most popular form of contention —at least from 1997 to 2001. From scattered, sporadic episodes of collective action relegated to the borders of the country, road blocks soon turned into a widespread routine of contention learnt all through the territory.

How can we explain the increase and diffusion of road blocks from 1996 to 2001? What are the differences between blocks at the beginning of the period and those at the end? In what way are those differences linked to the process of forming the picketers’ collective identity?

II. Transgression and Learning. RoadBlocks and the Repertoire of Collective Action


1. A repertoire of contention is, for any particular group, ‘the whole set of means it has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups’ (Tilly 1986: 4). These means are not unlimited; in fact, existing repertoires constrain collective action: ‘people tend to act within known limits’ (Tilly 1986: 390). As a result of political interaction between citizens and the state, repertoires are elaborated through confrontation arisen during previous contention (Tilly 1995: 61). Popular contention is not only political but also deeply cultural: it relies on and transforms shared understandings concerning what forms and ends of action are desirable, feasible, and efficacious; collective learning and memory strongly limit the claims that people make, and how they make them. In other words, a repertoire of contention is a set of routines learned, shared and practiced by populations or specific groups.

Even though they tend to be resistant to changes, repertoires evolve through history (Tilly 1998). When, how, and why are repertoires changed? There is a direct and an
indirect way. On the one hand, Tilly has shown how changes of repertoire depend *indirectly* on the transformations of larger structurations in so far as those changes affect the interests, opportunities, organizations, and identities of ordinary people (Auyero 2003). On the other hand, changes are made *directly* through the contenders’ own experience: in the course of confrontation, demonstrators and authorities introduce innovations while seeking tactical advantages over their opponents. Lasting innovations are those which show effective results and are associated to a significant advantage to one, or more than one social actors (Tilly 1992: 7).

2. Strictly speaking, those in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul in 1996 were not the first roadblocks: in 1991, workers from a state mining company (Hipasam) carried out the pioneer road blocking in Sierra Grande (Río Negro). That year, the same was done by the population of General Mosconi to oppose the privatisation of the oil company YPF. By the end of 1994, a roadblock was underway by construction workers in Senillosa (Neuquén). However, the Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul episodes represented a break from the point of view of protagonists, opponents, and observers. Since then, roadblocks have arisen as an innovation in the repertoire of popular contention.¹¹

As an innovative collective action, roadblocks during this period (1996-1999) are a kind of *transgressive contention*. According to Tilly, this is one of the two varieties of contentious politics. We are in the presence of transgressive contention when at least some parties in the conflict are newly self-identified political actors, and/or at least some parties employ innovative means of collective action (Tilly 2000: 138). Later, I shall indicate some elements concerning the process of identification among roadblock actors. For the time being, let us concentrate on the innovation concerning strictly the repertoire of collective action.

What did this innovation consist in? What were the tactical advantages associated to this form of *transgressive contention*?

¹¹ Roadblocks are not the only transformation taking place in the repertoire of popular contention. A thorough analysis of innovations in the repertoire should include “social uprisings” (attacks on public buildings, governmental offices, courts of justice, Legislatures, and politicians and officials’ homes in Santiago del Estero and Neuquén, 1997), camps on public gardens (Corrientes 1999, Buenos Aires City 2002), bridge blockings (Neuquén 1997, Corrientes 1999), and “escraches” (the noun “escrache” derives from the verb “escharchar” which means making public what somebody intends to hide. The “escrache” is a form of collective action used mainly by the association “HIJOS” [sons and daughters of disappeared persons] which consists of making public the past of ex-officials and repressive generals of the military dictatorship by staging demonstrations at their homes or workplaces). These forms of collective action, joined to demonstrations and strikes are part of the repertoire used during the cycle of protest initiated in 1993 (Auyero 2003).
i. Between 1996 and 1999, blocking —and remaining on— the road was an innovative form of establishing and “communicating” political conflicts, especially in the provinces (e.g., Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul, June 1996 and April 1997, in Neuquén; Tartagal and General Mosconi, May 1997, in Salta; Jujuy, May 1997). Its effectiveness lay partly in the fact that demands were made visible by “confining”, enclosing, and thus, delimiting the specific space where the conflict develops, namely the city, or the village. Roadblocks “create” the opportunity for dialogue —opportunities which did not exist before— between representatives and those they represent. The means and the meaning of the collective action are related to a situation of economical exclusion as well as to a situation defined as one of political “deafness”. When the road was blocked, authorities —politicians in general— had to listen to demonstrators: ‘We want Felipe here’ (the governor), was the claim during the roadblocks of 1996 in Cutral-Có and Huincul; on route 34, in Gral. Mosconi (Salta), in May 1997, the demand was that ‘the governor will have to come... we picketers will remain on the road’; or, a couple of years later in Buenos Aires, they expressed, ‘We know we are obstructing the traffic, but this is the only way to make them listen to us’ (LN 9/99). In the absence of a political dialogue channelled through institutions, road blocking becomes significant and politically effective as a contentious form of collective action.

ii. The emergence of roadblocks implied an innovation in the spatial configuration of contention. Once factories were empty, roads became a major space of and for contention. Some militants and leaders of the movement organization provided an account of their own experience, which clarifies this aspect:

‘When we started in 1995, there was nothing... It was only land devastated by Menemism... political organizations were practically dissolved. Meanwhile, many of us became unemployed, and we could see that unemployment would not be solved within this system. We thought the best way was, if workers are no longer in the factory, let’s go and find them ourselves where they are, in the suburbs. It was then that we started the first social works, from the suburb, and for the suburb. In this way, there began to appear the first social institutions, from regrouping people, and a very strong break is produced, at least in the popular field, due to the cases of Río Negro, Cutral-Có, which meant a break in what later would be the unemployed workers’ movement. It designated the struggle tool, the picket’.

I think the ways that our comrades from the provinces were gradually opening were leaving their marks on us, and they also allowed us to see the possibility of a struggle tool. This was for two reasons: first, because we knew there was no solution for unemployment within this system. And the tool worked because factories could no longer be occupied, for they were empty. So we had the street, the street had to be ours and the question was to hit the system where it hurt most. And what hurt the most was goods circulation. This is the reason for doing pickets and roadblocks, rather than bothering the guy who goes to work.12

12 These two testimonies and a few others referred to later in this paper are part of a series of interviews and focus groups I held with militants of an unemployed workers’ organization, in Avellaneda (Province of Buenos Aires), in September and October 2002.
Today the new factory is the territory. There, social organizations thrive, and deal with different matters: they may be linked to problems about childhood, feeding, health, education. All of them are joined by a common denominator, the problem of employment, or more exactly, unemployment. 13

These accounts illustrate the convergence of direct and indirect ways through which repertoires of popular contention change: the innovation is linked to a) the transformation of the space of contentions as a consequence of changes on a structural level—from factories to suburbs, from strikes to road blocks because factories were empty—, b) the redefinition of opportunities and organizations which lie on the mobilization processes—today social organizations thrive along the territory—, and c) the tactical advantages of a specific form of collective action, which is revealed in the heat of the conflict—an effective struggle tool to hit the system where it hurt most.14

iii. There is a third decisive element that made roadblocks an effective innovation in the field of popular contentions: the obtainment and administration of job plans. Ever since unemployed workers’ organizations began to administer those plans, created by governments to mitigate the effects of unemployment and “social uprisings”, they provided themselves with important resources (money) and incentives (further plans) to mobilize collective action. Below, the account of militants of one of these organizations proves this fact:

So, when pickets and roadblocks start showing results, the enemy, or the system, as a way of pouring oil on troubled waters, gives out the plans. But, very quickly, the people use this as a tool. First, as a building tool and then, to go out into the streets.

b. 1999-2001: Education in the field of popular contentious politics

1. As authorities and opponents usually do, in May 1997 the governor of Salta—Carlos Romero— debunked the demonstrators who had blocked the national Route 34 in a claim for jobs by saying that ‘unemployment won’t be solved by cutting off roads but by working’ (C, 9/5). By then, Romero was already noticing that road blocking was a ‘method of political action spreading all through the country’.15 The newspaper La Nación, another opponent of roadblocks, repeatedly assigned numbers to Romero’s

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14 According to Farinetti, by cutting off the roads, ‘the unemployed workers found the way to intervene in the circle from which they are excluded, i.e. the market and the movement of goods and labour force’ (1999). As argued by Lucita, ‘picketers know (...) that in the present power relationship there are serious difficulties to act in the centres of production and capital accumulation. They carry, thus, the contention to the grounds where distribution and circulation of people and goods develop, in this way affecting the generation of profits.’
15 Quoted by Auyero (2002b).
appreciation. When the number of road blocks in 1997 came to light —a total of 140, according to some estimates — that newspaper maintained that this form of protest was ‘the most important since the summer of 1990, when hyperinflation reigned and there were outbreaks of supermarket lootings’ (LN, 3/1/1998)\(^\text{16}\); in the middle of 1998, an editorial assured that ‘during the past years, road blocks have turned into a frequently used resource’; by the third trimester of 2000, with an annual average of one block per day, road blockings had ceased to be ‘an exceptional incident to become an effective method to demand labour and social improvements’ (LN, 30/10) which spreads ‘nationwide’ (LN, 11/11); finally, in July 2001, four days before the first picketers’ congress, a columnist would write, ‘with an average of four road or street blocks per day in all the country, the danger is that this form of demonstration may become an ordinary happening to everyone.’

2. Gradually, from 1998 on, roadblocks stopped being a form of transgressive contention and became another type of contentious politics: contained contention. This category refers to those cases where all parties are previously established actors employing well established means of making claims (Tilly 2000: 138). I believe that the First National Assembly of Picketers (La Matanza, Province of Buenos Aires, 24 July 2001) marks the turning point in this transition. Road blocking as the means to make claims had spread through the national territory and the picketers’ movement was, by then, an established actor in contentious politics.

For this transformation to be possible, two processes took place.

i. The first one is the diffusion of contentions. Here, diffusion means both spreading the contention (in terms of amount and spatial scope) and learning a struggle routine applied by others:

Our struggle started (1998) when we saw the struggle that had begun in Jujuy. We saw that it was possible to make that struggle, and that it was necessary.\(^\text{17}\)

This is one of the ways which activate the education of a new contention routine. A five-year struggle was the school where people learned what is to be done when the road is cut off. Learning through struggle (Auyero 2003) proved that blocking the road

\(^{16}\) The estimates are from the Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría (www.nuevamayoria.com).
\(^{17}\) Interview given by Emilio Ali, one of the picketers’ leaders from Mar del Plata (in www.nodo.50.org).
was an effective form of making claims and getting results. It was a confrontational tactic whose advantages were quickly exploited:

The thing is that when pickets began to be made in the province of Buenos Aires, by using the methodology our comrades use in practice, they [the government] soon try to patch the holes. So, the majority of the people started to realize that if they went out into the street and planted themselves there, the guys would give them answers. When we went to La Plata, we went there looking for 100 and came back with 10, and I use those 10 to keep on working with the people. And so when our comrades go out into the streets to make pickets, asking for a thousand jobs, you come back with 100. Next month we are going to ask again for a thousand, and come back with 300. That was how the thing became massive, especially in the province of Buenos Aires. People began to become aware that by coming out into the streets, they could get something (Interview in Avellaneda, October 2002).

Obtaining resources is a motivation for —and a result of— collective action. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that this is not the only motivation. It is not just an instrumental logic what comes into play in roadblocks. Adopting this conception would be like diminishing their signification as a social experience (Dubet and Martuccelli 2000). This can be shown, for example, when describing —and recalling— the meaning of pickets:

Pickets are a large self-help group. In the suburbs, we are penniless, there’s no food, we have no money to bury the dead... dead as a result of a planned genocide. Besides, in the suburbs our comrades are very lonely; for this reason pickets are useful to interact, to share food and joy. In pickets, people come back to life and that’s why it is sometimes difficult to break them and go back home, for it means going back to loneliness.

Pickets are not just an organization to achieve a goal; they are also the construction of a different and unified way of living.19

ii. The second possible condition accounting for the transformation from transgressive to contained contention was the creation, strengthening, and articulation of the organizations which converged in the picketers’ movement, and which made roadblocks the privileged tool for contentious politics.20 Mobilization of resources and coordination of organizational structures strengthened the efficacy of collective action.

18 The notion of social experience designates individual or collective behaviours ruled by the heterogeneity of its constituent principles and by the activity of those individuals who are to construe their methods in the heart of such heterogeneity (Morán 2002; Dubet and Martuccelli 2000).

19 The first phrase is D’Elía’s (“El verdadero presidente es Eduardo Escasany” in www.contracultural.com.ar, September 2002); the second one belongs to Víctor De Gennaro, leader of the CTA (quoted in Rauber 2002). Despite this remark, it should not be necessary to clarify that a) not every road cut is solved by giving demonstrators what they are claiming: very often, roadblocks finish when the police or the gendarmerie force people to leave by repressive procedures; and b) signing agreements by which particular claims are granted does not imply, evidently, that such agreements be fulfilled. Many road blockings are the consequence of unfulfilled former agreements.

20 Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez (MTR – 1998); Polo Obrero (2000); Movimiento Territorial de Liberación (MTL – 2001); Barrios de a Pie (2001); Movimiento Sin Trabajo “Teresa Vive” (2001); the MTDs (Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados), many of which are new, while the older ones (Solano) are from the middle 90s; FTV (Federación Tierra y Vivienda), created in 1998. All these organizations converge in the picketers’ movement of 2001.
In June 2000, a roadblock which was to last, in the beginning, for an indefinite period (until ‘the stated problems’ were solved), barely lasted a few hours:

That was a historic block, because all the organizations ourselves made it. Besides, an unprecedented event took place: five thousand people came outside and cut off the road. The government, after 24 hours, came here, assumed compromises, and decided to agree to all our demands; it wanted to end everything fast. That was something sudden and unexpected because, up to then, the government had had chaotic uprisings in Cutral-Có and Tartagal. The great difference between those uprisings and the one in La Matanza was that in this one, thousands of well-organized people came out; the roadblock was massively organized. Right from the start, there were thousands of us on the road saying, “We want this and that”.

Organizations provided the link that made a mobilization chain out of sporadic “discontent”.

III. Note on the Process of Collective Identity Construction

1. Let us ask again: Who blocks the roads? Who are the picketers? I still do not have enough empirical evidence for a thorough analysis of the process of picketers’ identity construction. Yet I would like to suggest a number of interpretative clues relying on some of the accounts and testimonies provided by roadblock protagonists.

a. Collective-identity construction on the road. Let us go back to the roadblocks of 1997 in Salta. ‘The governor will have to come; we picketers will remain on the road,’ had said, on that opportunity, a spokesman for the group (LN 11/5/97). This phrase defines the roadblock protagonists’ identity (“the picketers”) from the point of their own identification with the form of collective action. Picketers are the ones who stay on the road; they are those who make of the road a space of and for contention, and from that position they build a defiant “we”. However, constructing collective identity in the space where contention is carried out does not always result in the noun “picketer”. Let us consider these three testimonies: 1) According to one of the conflict’s mediators in Salta —the bishop of Orán—, ‘those people who consider they’re not represented by their municipal authorities’ were on the road (C 12/5/97); 2) as said by a participant in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul road blockings of 1996, “In the Torre [one of the blocking sites] there were all the people… people who had jobs, shopkeepers, labourers…”; 3) in 1999, in Corrientes, “there’s no government in Corrientes and today, it is the people who governs on the bridge” (LN 15/12/99). Roadblocks are episodes of collective

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21 Interview given by Luis D’Elía to Isabel Rauber (2002). The government committed itself to things it never fulfilled. For this reason, the road was cut off again in November 2000.

22 Testimony taken by Auyero (2002).
action in which their participants create the meaning of their action. Defining the collective identity (of the picketers or the people) is established through—and in interaction with—the delineation of the opponent to the contention, namely the government, the politicians, or the authorities.

b. Collective-identity construction beyond the road. In December 2000, one of the leaders of the picketers’ movement answered the question ‘What do these picketers stand for and who are they?’ in saying that, ‘They are basically workers who are gradually discovering new kinds of organizations. They are workers whom the system has expelled from its share in trade and industry, and who are in the territories’. Here, the definition of the picketers’ identity does not lie in the space of contention. The axes through which the identity is defined are: a) the unemployed worker’s, b) expelled by the system, and c) territorially organized. Throughout the interviews I made in Avellaneda, this aspect regarding the collective identity of those who carry out road blockings appeared once and again: ‘We don’t see ourselves as picketers; in fact, we’re unemployed workers’; ‘For us, pickets are a tool for struggle and that’s all, in the same way that a soup kitchen or an occupation might be. What may give us an identity is belonging to a group, and struggling. We don’t think of further things happening, such as building our identity from a tool’. Because road blockings are just one among other contention tactics, the process of collective-identity definition goes beyond the space of collective action episodes: it is situated at a point where belonging to an organization and taking part in a struggle cross each other. From this perspective, “picketers” are unemployed workers organized in the struggle.

c. Collective-identity construction on and beyond the road. As every collective identity, the identity of those who block roads implies a) an interactive and shared (negotiated) process in which several individuals (or groups, at an aggregated level) define the orientation (goals, means, and environment) and scope (opportunities and restrictions) of their action, and b) that such definition arises through the repeated activation of relationships which connect with each other. If we assume all this, we shall be in a better position to analyse the complexity of the process of “picketers’ identity” construction on and beyond roadblocks.

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24 From their protagonists’ point of view, the construction of the picketers’ collective-identity goes beyond the framework of roadblocks. Those who study these processes still have a series of unanswered questions: How does the formation of collective-identity vary according to the degree of commitment and involvement of those who take part in the picketers’ movement activities? This means asking about the impact of individuals’ positions —leaders, militants, and bases— in the collective-identity construction.
Yet we can differentiate two kinds of processes of collective identity construction: alternative and complementary. In the first one, the identity comes about through the identification with the form of collective action: “the picketers” are the ones who are on the road and, from the space of contention, they define their unity—or, this unity is defined by others. In the second one, the collective identity expands beyond the asphalt to go into the territory of belonging to an organization of unemployed workers. What accounts for these differences? Probably, they are attributed to more than one cause. I would like to point out two possibilities which will need to be examined thoroughly in future research.

In the first place, these differences may be related to the diverse viewpoints that movement leaders, militants, and bases, as well as the various organizations, have of collective identity—with regard to the goals, means and scope of the collective action (Melucci 1995). If we accepted that roadblocks work as spaces of self-understanding (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) which allow individuals to take part in the meaning—cognitive and emotional, instrumental, and expressive—of an individual and collective identity, we should examine the interactive and negotiated process in which these elements come into play.

In the second place, these differences may be linked to the diffusion and learning of a routine of contentious politics. In this case, differences would have to do less with the different viewpoints of the protagonists than with the transformation of transgressive contention into contained contention. If, at an early stage (transgressive contention) in the formation of collective identity, the process of identifying with road blocks was of crucial importance, later, through its diffusion and learning (contained contention), the collective identity was renegotiated and redefined through repeated activation of relationships which connect individuals within a framework of organizations—of unemployed workers, vicinal, or suburban organizations—. The creation and strengthening of these organizations would have involved, from this perspective, the multiplication of spaces for identifying with the collectivity: apart from road blockings—visible episodes—we should bare in mind assemblies and suburban commissions, productive enterprises (communal orchards, bread makers), informal and submerged networks which link militants and members of different organizations.
IV. Provisional Conclusions: Road Blocks and Picketers’ Movement

The chart below schematically summarizes the process I have described.

The horizontal axis moves from more “spontaneous” to more organized forms of contention. The vertical axis moves from contentions of a local scope to contentions of a national scope. In the areas bounded by these axes, it is possible to find different phases of the process of popular political mobilization and to compare different episodes of contention. Road blockings in Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul (1996 and 1997) were more “spontaneous” and had a more local scope compared to the 50 simultaneous roadblocks of July 2001. Between 1996 and 2001, roadblocks turned from a form of transgressive contention into a routine of contention (contained contention) spread throughout the territory. During the contentions of 1996 in Neuquén, 1997 in Salta, and 1999 in Corrientes, the language used by some of the protagonists does not denote a strong identity anchorage beyond the contention itself: the outlines of a new political actor are blurred. In July 2001, the celebration of the first picketers’ congress represents a significant stage in the creation of the identity of those performing roadblocks. The process undergirding the construction picketers’ movement is associated, on the one hand, with learning and employing tactical advantages related to the use of a form of collective action, and on the other, to the
articulation of set of organizations that delimited the use of roadblocks as a tool to engage in political battles. Neither the spreading of roadblocks nor the existence of the picketers’ movement implied, as resulting effect, a homogeneous we. Nowadays, the picketers’ movement is constituted by groups and organizations with considerably different political orientations (the «dialogist» sector —FTV and CCC—; the «hard» sector —Picketers’ Bloc—, and a intermediate sector —MTDs—). The “picketers’ identity” —if there exists anything of the kind— is one of the fields on which those disputes regarding meaning, methods, and goals of collective action are settled.

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