Social Assistance As Seen By Buenos Aires Poor And New Poor During Convertibility

Patricia Aguirre
This paper aims to describe and explore the state of food assistance in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires over the past 15 years using a qualitative and quantitative approach. At the macro level, we begin by analyzing the increase in the different types of poverty along with the extent and distribution of social public expenditures on nutrition as well as the notions that justified the orientation adopted by distribution policies. At the micro level, we present the results yielded by the discourse analysis of the structurally poor and the new poor, two groups which received food assistance under the said policies. With noticeable differences, both groups speak of their views on the Assistential State and on the operational aspects of the ideological guidelines of the programs implemented.

The data included in this study are from a longitudinal research project about Household Strategies of Food Consumption. For the quantitative analysis, the variables were standardized to enable comparisons. Owing to the irregular frequencies of the statistical surveys, we have included only the charts for recorded years within the period.

The qualitative work is based on case studies of 114 families, selected by poverty status (structurally poor and pauperized population) and beneficiaries of one of the three nutrition assistance programs in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (food bags, purchase coupons, or soup kitchens). Information was gathered by means of in-depth interviews along guidelines that provided the basis for follow-up questions. Discourse analysis was carried out through the semiotics of statements. This involved a four-step plan: 1) discourse was normalized prior to its translation into text; 2) discourse was segmented into meaningful units around a noun lexeme; 3) ‘dictionaries’ were built for
each interviewee, recording individual semantic values and, 4) in the global corpus of the research, all the terms with equal meanings were compared in order to construct contextual definitions. A few of these illustrate our analysis.

Convertibility

For fifty years, Argentina had applied a method of accumulation of capital based on the development of national industry. This resulted in full employment, with poverty reaching 8% of the population. The military coup of 1976 put an end to this project and implemented a neo-liberal regime of open economy whose latest consequences were to be experienced between 1991 and 2001. Following the 1989 hyperinflation, the new administration imposed an economic plan called Convertibility, which kept the Argentinean peso equal to the dollar, opened the economy to the international market, involving deregulation, competition, privatization of State-run companies, financial speculation and foreign debt. As a result, 80% of the population became impoverished and 20% became richer (Table 1).

Still, Convertibility was not only an economic plan but also an attempt to change a culture. Supported by the disciplinary effects of the preceding hyperinflation, the economic plan also disseminated the ideals of a social sector that believed that their parameters were the only legitimate ones fit for life in society. These parameters involved denial of dissent, unquestionable prosperity of the market (viewed as the best distributor of assets and symbols), the search for economic success at any cost, and opening to the world, enhancing competition and aggressiveness as distinctive characteristics of youthfulness.

After five years of economic growth and concentration, another five years of recession started, during which poverty, added to the burden of domestic and foreign debt, brought about the sudden collapse of Convertibility and of the administration in 2001. Figures then proved to be worse than those of the hyperinflation that preceded convertibility.

From the middle-class to the “new poor”

During Argentina’s policy of economic development, small and medium enterprises were given the opportunity to grow. The positions they offered (entrepreneurs, skilled workers, bank clerks, shop assistants, white-collar workers, professionals, etc.) fostered the development of a large urban middle class that made up 47.4% of the population in 1980, 32% in 1991, and 21% in 2001 (Torrado, 2005).

The model for this middle class was constructed on the basis of representations of permanent upward mobility to be achieved through education or employment and to be manifested through consumption. This worked as a process of social status, a manner of self-image, and an expression of a lifestyle, none of which is independent from the ways in which families become involved in the production process, since consumption is a function of income generation (Feijoo, 1992).

Regarding food consumption, in 1965 the First Household Expenditure Survey (Encuesta de Gasto de los Hogares) showed a pattern that cut across the income structure. All the sectors, regardless of income, ate the same kind of food in similar quantities. This unified pattern is evidence of a society of commensality, without remarkable differences between the rich and the poor, whose distinctive features are found elsewhere. By 1995, this pattern had already changed: it was then that surveys warned about the phenomenon of food for the rich and food for the poor (Aguirre, 2001).
As for the Military Coup of 1976, with the changes introduced in the accumulation regime, the upward mobility that had persisted during the previous fifty years changed direction. The unrestrained opening of the market caused the fall of national industry and concomitant unemployment, to which privatization of State companies also contributed. In 1980, the first consequences of these events were felt by a sector of the middle-class whose income dropped, accelerating the pauperization process. Convertibility deepened this process and solidified a new social configuration: the new poor, defined by their low income in contrast to high levels of formal education and high job qualifications for sinking industries or services. At the same time, these sectors, victims of the situation, justified their exclusion through arguments that very much echoed social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest in the labor market (Minujin, 2004).

Poverty in Argentina and in Buenos Aires

Poverty and food made a late entrance into the political agenda. Food indicators showed a surplus of availability (3,180 kcal per day), which was mistaken for access. Under the assumption that everybody had access to food, the issue was regarded as a private problem and was not included in the political agenda; thus, no data about the nutritional status of the population were recorded until the 1990s.

The same way, the first attempts to analyze the extent of poverty did not occur until the 1980s. Currently, it is measured in two ways. As shown in Graph 1, these ways may yield different results, for they are not based on the same indicators.

Every ten years there is a survey of Basic Unsatisfied Needs (NBI), based on 5 indicators, 3 of which are related to housing: crowding, a flushing lavatory, substandard lodgings, schooling, and support capacity provided by more than one employed family member for every four unemployed members. The survey measures ‘structural poverty’.

Graph 1

![Percentage of the population Under Poverty Line and Basic Unsatisfied Needs 1974-2006](source: Aguirre, 2005)

The second method of measurement is the Poverty Line, which measures the percentage of homes whose income is insufficient to purchase a basic food and services basket. This type of measurement is highly dependent on income and prices - very dynamic indicators - since it is updated quarterly. The population under Poverty Line without Unsatisfied Basic Needs constitutes what we call ‘the new poor’ or ‘the pauperized poor’.
Table 1 offers an alternative way to record the increase in all manners of poverty. It shows that the concentration of income in the richer sectors (whose income level has risen from 25.9% to 30.6%) results in the gradual pauperization of the rest of the distribution, with the consequent growth of both forms of poverty. While in 1980 5% of the households were structurally poor, the 50% of the first decile that absorbed 3.6% of the income had reached 26.7% by 2004 (the 1st, 2nd, and a part of the 3rd deciles which, taken together, hardly gathered 6% of the total income). While in 1980 only 3% of the households in the 2nd decile were new poor, by 2004 their number had risen to 30% (deciles 5, 6, and 7 of the distribution, which obtained 2 percent points less than 20 years before).

Table 1: Evolution of the family per capita income distribution. Greater Buenos Aires 1980-2004 (in %)

| Deciles | 1980 | 1985 | 1991 | 1995 | 2001 | 2005 |
|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1       | 3.6  | 3.3  | 3.2  | 2.7  | 2.1  | 2.3  |
| 2       | 4.5  | 4.7  | 4.4  | 4.3  | 3.7  | 4.1  |
| 3       | 5.4  | 6.1  | 6    | 4.5  | 4.9  | 5.4  |
| 4       | 6.2  | 5.3  | 5.3  | 5.9  | 5.4  | 6.1  |
| 5       | 7.2  | 6.9  | 6    | 7.2  | 6.3  | 6.6  |
| 6       | 8.7  | 9.1  | 9.5  | 7.8  | 7.9  | 8.4  |
| 7       | 10.5 | 10.9 | 9.9  | 9.6  | 10.1 | 9.6  |
| 8       | 12.5 | 12.2 | 11.8 | 11.7 | 11.6 | 11.1 |
| 9       | 15.4 | 16.6 | 14.1 | 16   | 16.3 | 15.9 |
| 10      | 25.9 | 25   | 29.9 | 30.3 | 31.8 | 30.6 |

Source: Author, on the basis of EPH - INDEC 1980-2004. Selected years

Public Social Expenditure

In an urban area like the one under consideration here, the drop in income determines the drop in purchasing capacity. However, the State can develop compensatory strategies by resorting to the Public Social Expenditure (PSE).

Still, if we compare, on a 100-base index, the evolution of poverty and the per capita evolution Public Social Expenditure on Food (GRAPH 2), we will notice that social investment decreases as poverty increases, as a consequence of the double pressure exerted by lower income and higher demand.

The explanation for this pro-cyclical behavior lies in the fact that Public Expenditure was used as a key variable in the macroeconomic policy. It was believed that higher
public expenditure, unless it was supported by greater fiscal pressure or a reduction in other areas of public expenditure, would eventually lead to a budget deficit that would end up in inflation. However, during some years of the convertibility period, PSE grew, as did deficit, but was not solved through monetary issues but with an inflow of foreign capital and increased foreign debt (Flood, 1994).

Graph 2

Source: Our own, consolidated PSE 1993-2002 and INDEC

Distributional Impact of Social Public Expenditure

19 The only existing source to analyze the distributional effects of Public Social Expenditure, above all regarding food items, is a 1995 World Bank Report. At the height of convertibility we find that the State’s investment is regressive (i.e. it is proportionally higher for high and middle income sectors) in items such as water, housing, labor, culture, science, retirement, and social security. On the other hand, expenditure on health, education, and food is clearly progressive. While expenditure on food mostly reaches the poor by way of assistance, it also reaches high and middle income sectors by way of nutritional education and bromatological controls.

20 In order to calculate the redistributive effect of Social Expenditure on food, we have to consider, as the average medium income for each sector, assistance provided by the State in addition to taxes paid back to the State. According to Bocco (1997), fiscal pressure is heavier on the poorer sectors (28%) while it decreases as income increases (22%).

21 Such regressiveness results from the fact that fiscal policies have focused on collection rather than on equity. This is clear from the tax burden on consumption as compared to taxes on income revenue and on wealth. In order to show how unjust taxes on consumption are, we need to point out that VAT accounts for 36.14% of the total taxes paid by the poorer sectors, but for only 28.72% of taxes paid by the rich.

22 By comparing PSE’s contribution in terms of food with the fiscal pressure exerted on food, and basing our calculation on the average medium income per sector, we can obtain a figure for the net subsidy. The following table shows that the subsidy is regressive, since what the poor pay in taxes is more than what they obtain from the State in the form of food assistance.
Table 2: Net subsidy

|                | Quintile 1 | Quintile 2 | Quintile 3 | Quintile 4 | Quintile 5 |
|----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Food PSE       | 6.7        | 1.5        | 1.0        | 0.4        | 0.041      |
| Gross Fiscal Pressure | 10.4      | 8.5        | 8.3        | 7.2        | 6.57       |
| Food net subsidy | -3.7      | -7         | -7.4       | -6.8       | -6.53      |

Source: Aguirre 2005

Prevailing actions and notions in PSE implementation

23 Once the problem was acknowledged as such in Argentina, ALL actions were carried out, as recommended by the Rome International Conference on Nutrition promoted by FAO-WHO, including indirect subsidies and direct assistance. We shall only explore the latter, for it monopolized investments.

24 Although the prevailing opinion during the convertibility period was that the market was the best redistributor, the State became the main source of assistance funding, but privatized its role by subsidizing NGOs, which in turn performed the distribution.

25 The policies implemented during the decade were governed by three guiding principles: efficiency, focalization, and participation.

26 Efficiency adopted two forms: one resided in focalization, concentrating expenditure on the most needy (and, in so doing, meeting the demand for equity), and the other modified management aspects so that every Peso invested yielded the highest possible benefit. To this purpose, program staff were asked to behave as managers and beneficiaries were expected to take an active part in the process.

27 Starting in 1991, focalization became the star of all programs, hand in glove with the Reform of the State and international funding, which conditioned its contribution to full compliance with focalization objectives. While it cannot be denied that it served the purpose of engaging technicians and reducing unemployment among professionals, it did not succeed in reducing expenditure (the expected outcome) or aiding equity, precisely because highly qualified staff was chosen for the new positions.

28 The justification for abandoning universal schemes was found in the subsidies granted to keep food prices at bay. Insofar as the poor consume less, the subsidy may have proved unjust, since it benefited those who had more. In the five months of hyperinflation, Argentina only subsidized one product - flour - but owing to some manner of reductionism, the regressiveness that affected this single product was extrapolated to the remaining universal schemes, a decision that ended up in their cancellation.

29 Focalization was but the corollary to a notion of the role of the State, which was shrinking from a lack of both funding and ideology. According to neo-liberal thought, the State was supposed to serve only those who were unable to access public services directly from the market.

30 The logic behind focalization lies in the “spillover theory”. It was believed that structural adjustment would foster economic growth, which would in turn spill over
into other sectors, finally reaching the poorest. In this light, poverty was a temporary situation destined to change eventually. Thus, the role of the State consisted in taking care of the most vulnerable groups until the expected growth brought them back to the market via income earned.

31 This belief shows a marked ideological displacement of the role of the State and of the characteristics of citizenship that had prevailed up to the early 1990s. Universal benefits were grounded on “law” criteria, while the justification for “selectiveness” was based on the notion of “negative merit”: those who cannot achieve, the vulnerable, the excluded “deserve” concentration of State resources until the time comes for them to “repair their capacity” to operate in the market. The concept of focalization is currently being revised (Sojo, 1997), as it fails to attack the roots of poverty, has not reduced expenditure, does not establish connections among programs and, most importantly, focalization is significant when there is concentration of poverty and the State has sufficient capacity to act on it. But when poverty is overwhelming or scattered throughout society and the State’s capacity to act is weak, universal schemes are by far more effective (Lo Vuolo, 1994).

32 The last guiding principle for program design is communal participation, furthered by international organizations as a way to reduce costs, and encouraged by the administration as a tool for legitimization. Such participation, very much insisted upon in the planning stage of the programs, was never given an opportunity (through committees, assemblies, meetings, etc.) that might enable the community to channel its rightful activity. Rather, the form that was in fact adopted was quite similar to the old “community development” concept, introduced by the British Colonial Administration, in which the government sets the guidelines and the community supplies the labor force.

33 Of the three basic factors entailed in participation - contribution, organization, and power - only the first was put into practice. The managers of social programs (whether soup kitchens, food bags delivery, or tickets) systematically boycotted all forms of participatory organization so as to prevent potential participants from gaining power. Despite affirmations to the contrary, the State’s food assistance has aided only political, partisan, clientelistic, verticalistic, dependent, and authoritarian organizations. This is a long way from the most crucial element involved in participation; namely, the possibility of making decisions about the participants’ priorities and the development of abilities to negotiate with institutions.

34 The boycotts were carried out by urging the population to join the programs that had already been designed and planned; programs whose materials had been bought and whose budgets had been approved. Under such circumstances, the only possible participation was total acceptance, for nothing could be. In these cases, participation meant that the government was seeking consensus so as to legitimize the programs and secure the users’ activity in order to reduce costs by passing on to them a number of unpaid tasks.

How the poor and the new poor experience food assistance

35 The first difference in both groups’ perception of assistance can be found in the role of the State. To the structurally poor, whose parents and grandparents have also been poor and who define themselves as poor in need of assistance, the State, no matter at what level, is an “other”. It is a distant “they” that “helps or gives” for reasons that are not very clear, depending on their will to do so, under their own rules, without there
being any possibility of influencing their choices. Assistance programs “come” or “descend” from some “high place” (Municipal Government, the Province, or the Nation) that belongs to “them”. It is a far-off bureaucracy that decides what needs to be done and whose turn it is to receive, without the recipients’ intervention.

The binary classification involving a “they” and a “we” necessarily increases social distances and legitimizes exclusion, cutting deep into social polarization. The passivity generated by this representation is concomitant with the passivity induced by the effecters, who use information about objectives, means, and terms as vehicles of power. The powerful “they” give, help, or stand for the opposite of daily life in the neighborhoods, characterized by violence and mistrust of the people next door. Previous experiences of attempts at organization have strengthened the dominant idea that peers lack the capacity to improve the situation through collective undertakings, and that no organization will succeed unless “an outsider” takes the reins.

“Here we are not on speaking terms, there’s a lot of envy, a lot of individualism around; somebody from outside should come and put order, organize things. Otherwise nothing will get done”

But the “outsider” is also suspected, either because of the position he holds in the bureaucratic structure or because of his political partisanship. Since he has no history to vouch for him, he will be trusted according to his deeds. It is interesting that what really matters is the agent himself rather than the institution he represents. Agents are held accountable for decisions, and are not viewed as intermediaries. Along these lines, organizations in which agents are changing all the time are looked down on, since they preclude the chance of establishing personal relationships with their agents.

These dominant perceptions have been questioned by Piqueteros (Picket movements) which, since 1996, by organizing neighbors to block roads, have not only succeeded in improving their access to assistance but also managed to handle distribution, replacing the State and the NGOs. The stories told by their members confirm their individualism from the start as well as their effort to reconstruct confidence in the operational capacity of collective practices, changing claims into vindications; in other words, building up a discourse of power.

“In the beginning, no one came to the assemblies; no one believed the roadblocks would do any good. Then, when the first plans arrived, they all put their names down. But this is not the way it works; it is necessary to take part, to attend the assemblies, to march in the pickets. We have what we have because we reach an agreement and we all go out into the streets”.

Assistance is given the generic name of “aid”, and although all interviewees agree that the past decade has witnessed a drop in quantity and quality, they also agree that it is necessary, that every scrap is useful - what is not used circulates within the family through bartering or gifts and, less frequently, is sold or exchanged outside the family circle. It is a continuation of a generational experience, for it has been part of the consumption strategy for at least twenty years, constituting between 15% and 25% of family feeding.

Just as each program and institution develops its own inclusion criteria (and their criteria narrowed down as the crisis mounted), women from the poor sectors have developed comprehensive information and training networks regarding who, when, how, and where to ask for assistance. The most important thing they transmit is “what
you need to say or to have in order to become a beneficiary”. Even technical words are quickly learnt in order to show that you qualify for a program.

42 The new poor, who do not recognize themselves as poor but as ’members of the middle-class in dire circumstances,’ do not regard the State as a “distant other” but as a “we”. Aware that assistance stems from tax collection and that they - to the extent possible - are taxpayers, citizens, and voters, they declare that they are not “asking” but rather “exercising their rights”. Due to their material and symbolic heritage, the new poor have never needed assistance; thus, their present predicament has not been recorded in the history of the technical designs of the programs which, for decades, have been measuring poverty through Unsatisfied Basic Needs. In the case of the new poor, there is a lack of income, and should therefore be measured by the Poverty Line.

43 On the other hand, their perception, as subjects who have lived in a world where work is appreciated as a source of income, autonomy, and social insertion, makes them reluctant to accept food assistance even when they cannot do without it. Food assistance has not been contemplated in their consumption strategy; in addition, they believe their poverty is “transitory and reversible”, individual and specific - although it may have lasted for at least ten years.

44 They join assistance programs late and give them up before it is really time to do so. Their attitude toward these programs challenges the well-known “trap of poverty” theorized by neo-liberal economists; which could be called the “trap of well-being”. The trap of poverty maintains that the poor are not willing to improve their condition, because if they do, they will lose the right to the subsidies they receive. The “trap of well-being” makes them refuse assistance as soon as there is minimal improvement, even if it means less money than the help they received, because they are anxious to abandon their status of “beneficiaries”. The new poor do not wish to depend on subsidies; they would much rather take their lives into their own hands with the autonomy they used to enjoy when they earned their own living. They would also prefer to shake off the inquisitive stare of a State that intends to teach them what to eat and how to live.

Efficiency, focalization, and participation as seen by the poor and the new poor

45 As the scope and distribution of poverty increased, the design of programs encountered difficulties in determining the target population and devising the tools to attract them, since the task of focalization requires that no mistakes be made by including the wrong people or excluding the right addressees. Therefore, those who were in charge of implementation (and also the population) attempted universal expansion, for reasons that were both ethical and practical.

46 Among the structural poor, beneficiaries of UBN [Unsatisfied Basic Needs] assume that the assistance they receive should be extended to all those who share their circumstances. Thus, when a poor family is granted a given benefit, they let their friends and acquaintances know about it so that they may seek inclusion in the program. This leads to clashes with technical criteria that do not always respond to this view. From the agents’ standpoint, the division imposed by focalization is not only ethically questionable but also risky, for these agents depend on the beneficiaries as much as the beneficiaries depend on them. In actual practice, no matter how clearly the criteria have been laid out, focalization is a source of problems. When it comes to food, it is quite difficult to inform someone that a technician, miles away, has decided that a certain child is not entitled to receive food. If the agent sticks to the rules, he
runs the risk of excluding actors that may be influential in the community, but if he includes them, he is breaking the rules. Agents are often tempted to break norms of inclusion: we should not disregard the fact the clientelistic component of food assistance, a component that will work in favor of the agent if a beneficiary is in his debt because he has overlooked the established criteria in order to include this person/family in the program.

Solidarity -some might say complicity- between the population and the agents contributed to the extension of benefits not only to those who were entitled to them but also to those who needed them, a fact that, in practice, universalized focalization. Had this mechanism not been applied, with the consequent reductions in the allocations, focalization would have proved disastrous to the population, setting the poor against the destitute, the underemployed against the unemployed, etc. Still, as the assistance allotted per person decreased, the pressures to cut down on the number of people who received it grew stronger. In order to protect themselves, families chose to strengthen clientelism. Families perceive focalization as perverse because it manages exclusion by following criteria that they either are ignorant of or do not share. This is why they do not hesitate to alter their personal details, “borrow” children, forge certificates, etc. in order to meet the requirements for inclusion. Mothers have no qualms about promising to vote for the party in power, become members of the party, befriend one another and owe favors to third parties in order to help others obtain the benefit.

Such behavior highlights an acknowledgement of needs, solidarity among families, and the complex mechanisms that lead to it. At the same time, there is rejection of the labels of “poor”, “needy”, “destitute”, “ill nourished” with which institutions label them. If it is necessary to forge data in order to fall into the categories that deserve inclusion in a program, the conclusion is that they are not what they say they are, and their identity remains safe. Since universal programs reach everyone concerned, they allow for dignity to be preserved. Conversely, focalized programs boast “negative merit”: the selected target is found among those who fare the worst. If we agree that identity is constructed in relation to another, focalized programs have made little contribution to it insofar as they have pointed their finger at “the worst”.

Since no focalization criteria included income, because it cannot be easily measured as compared to housing conditions, which give better evidence of structural poverty, the new poor not only find it difficult to be admitted into the food programs, but also to stay there. As the benefits decreased or more time was needed to access the programs, they abandoned them as soon as their income grew a little (often the improvement amounted to less than the benefit; we call this ‘the welfare trap’). A few months later, when circumstances force them to return, program managers make sure that they feel duly guilty. The fact is that managers feel that these families are “swallows” that boycott the State’s promotional work, act against the community, and stall the group, since there is always a new member to be trained or an old member who defects, leaving tasks undone. Beneficiaries perceive this as confirmation that there is no way out, and that the “other” - the State - is right in labeling them as “the worst”.

The second alteration to the programs affects modes of participation, which the structural poor experience when they exchange food for work. They do not feel that they are participating as they build the soup kitchen, cook, do the washing up, pick up the food, etc. They find this is what they are being forced to do so that their children...
can eat. Should participation be real, it would appear in their discourse as a contribution “for our sake”; instead, what is heard is that families work for them for free, for the other - the State - in exchange for food.

NGOs, whose survival also depends on participation, exclude the population not only from the design of their programs but also - and particularly - from assessment functions. The fact is that those in charge of implementation view all interventions coming from the people as a threat to their authority and, accordingly, do everything in their power to discourage them. The structural poor have learnt this from experience and “help” managers.

When the benefits begin to be distributed, they succeed in appealing to the recipients. But with the loss of quality, and as the program becomes deficient for political, budgetary, or administrative reasons, families begin to wonder whether it is advisable to work in exchange for the benefits. The barter they have accepted is part of the system of transactions established between social groups and institutions, and it is not a minor detail that the gateway to communal participation should be the conscious acceptance of the labels we have already mentioned (poor, needy, etc.) While it is true that these labels are merely technical definitions in the institutional language (children under percentile 10 are ill-nourished), in a family’s life the notion of having an ill-nourished child may be stigmatizing and hard to accept. Given that Argentina has a prevalence of chronic malnutrition marked by short stature and overweight, mothers’ daily experience is at odds with the diagnosis of malnutrition, associated to cases of acute malnutrition amply disseminated by the media.

The new poor still believe that work is the chief mechanism of social insertion. This is why most interviewees deplored that assistance focused on the delivery of food rather than in the creation of employment. The claim for jobs was accompanied by the fear of being labeled as bums, beggars, or good-for-nothings.

Since all programs have been designed for the structurally poor, the new poor never meet the focalization criteria. In order to access the programs, they have to stand up for their rights and claim assistance, which goes directly against their wishes and their qualifications. For the above reasons, out of the 2 million new poor, only 500,000 are assisted. However, once they join the programs, they become either model beneficiaries or ruthless critics. They either compete with the role played by the institutional agent or they supplement it. While to the poor the agent of power stands for an obstacle to be dodged, the new poor, in their search for a differential subjective position, enter complex relations of complementariness. These are the active poor, the ones who know about the objectives of the programs and do what they are expected to.

Whereas the structural poor view participation as a forced manner of bartering, the pauperized or new poor regard it as voluntary payment. Regarding the modes of assistance (reception of food, subsidies to purchase it, or soup kitchens), both the poor and the new poor agree that subsidies are the most convenient mode because it allows them the freedom to structure their own consumption strategies. When food is given, they can still enjoy commensality, but they do not like others to decide what they should eat. Nevertheless, soup kitchens (the institutions’ favorites, as large scale purchases allow for savings, while helpings can be controlled) are criticized by both groups alike because they break up commensality, generate dependence, and go as far as defining stratification criteria within poverty: “You interview the nice guys; you don’t talk to liars, junkies, or the children of the soup kitchens” (Rodrigo, aged 19). The socializing
possibilities offered by soup kitchens are considered fit only for school children and lonely, elderly people. However, the poor and the new poor agree in their attempts not to lose the table as a meeting place for the family. Thus they resort to *maté* (*Ilex paraguayensis*), the traditional Argentinean beverage. They do their best to reconstruct family and social bonds and the sense of “*sharing the table*”, with its powerful capacity to construct identity, protecting commensality even when there is no food to serve.

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RÉSUMÉS

La perception de l’assistance sociale par les pauvres et les nouveaux pauvres de Buenos Aires à l’époque de la « convertibilité ».

Cet article traite de l’assistance alimentaire dans la région métropolitaine de Buenos Aires, entre 1991 et 2001, lors de l’application du programme économique « Convertibilité » et de ses effets sur les pauvres et les « nouveaux pauvres ». La Dépense Publique Sociale (en régression) et la subvention (négative) que reçoivent les familles sous forme d’assistance alimentaire, sont évaluées en comparaison avec, d’une part, leur apport en tant qu’impôt à la consommation et, d’autre part, les concepts recteurs de l’assistance : équité, efficacité, focalisation et participation.

L’étude de cas réalisée auprès de 144 familles montre des différences pour chacun des deux groupes quant à leurs perceptions : (i) sur l’État (eux-nous) ; (ii) l’assistance alimentaire (comprise par les pauvres comme un don et par les nouveaux pauvres comme un droit) ; (iii) les effets de la focalisation (perçue comme exclusion) et de la participation (troc de travail contre aliments).

This article deals with food assistance provided in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires between 1991 and 2001 during the economic program called “Convertibility” and its effects on the poor and the “new poor”. This study involves the highly regressive social public expenditure and a comparison between the negative subsidy provided as food assistance and contributions made by recipient families in the form of sales taxes, along with a view of the notions that rule assistance: equity, efficiency, focalization, and participation. The results of case studies comprehending 114 families point out varying perceptions of a) the State (them/us), b) food assistance (which the poor understood as a gift and the new poor as a right), and c) the effects of focalization (seen as exclusion) and participation (exchange work for food).

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Mots-clés : nouveaux pauvres, aide alimentaire, politique de distribution, Argentine

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AUTEUR

PATRICIA AGUIRRE

Ministerio de Salud-IDAES, Paraná 145, 5° piso, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, patriciaguirre@sinectis.com.ar