

SQUATTER LIFE

Javier Auyero and Sofía Servián



PERSISTENCE AT
THE URBAN MARGINS
OF BUENOS AIRES

SQUATTER LIFE

BUY

SQUATT LIFE

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ER

PERSISTENCE AT
THE URBAN MARGINS
OF BUENOS AIRES

Javier Auyero
and Sofía Servián

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London 2025

© 2025 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Michael Trudeau
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Warnock Pro and Helvetica Inserat LT
by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Auyero, Javier, author. | Servián, Sofía, [date] author.
Title: Squatter life : persistence at the urban margins of Buenos Aires / Javier Auyero and Sofía Servián.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024025097 (print)

LCCN 2024025098 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478031505 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478028291 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060482 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Squatters—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Urban poor—Housing—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Victims of violent crimes—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Marginality, Social—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Poor women—Political activity—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Women in community development—Argentina—Buenos Aires.

Classification: LCC HD7287.96.A72 B8425 2025 (print) |

LCC HD7287.96.A72 (ebook) | DDC 307.3/364098212—DC23/
ENG/20241217

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024025097>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024025098>

Cover art: Scavenger in a squatter settlement, Barrio La Paz, Buenos Aires, November 2022. Photograph courtesy of Sofía Servián.

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

TO OUR MOMS, SUSANA AND ANNIE

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

No matter how much one trains one's attention on the supposedly hard facts of social existence, who owns the means of production, who has the guns, the dossiers, the newspapers, the supposedly soft facts of that existence, what do people imagine human life to be all about, how do they think one ought to live, what grounds belief, legitimizes punishment, sustains hope, or accounts for loss, crowd in to disturb simple pictures of might, desire, calculation, and interest. —CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (1996)

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

CONTENTS

PREFACE — ix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS — xiii

INTRODUCTION — 1

1. **EXPLICATING SUBSISTENCE AT THE MARGINS — 13**

2. **COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PARTY POLITICS IN THE MAKINGS
OF A SQUATTER SETTLEMENT — 23**

3. **PERSISTENCE STRATEGIES — 41**

4. **BROKERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS — 57**

5. **LIVES AT RISK:** How Do Residents Experience, Explain, and Deal
with Interpersonal Violence? — 79

6. **VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS — 89**

7. **THE STATE OF VIOLENCE, THE VIOLENCE OF THE STATE — 103**

8. **WOMEN AT WORK:** The Social Life of a Community Center — 117

9. **HOW DOES MARGINALITY FEEL? — 141**

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

CONCLUSIONS — 151

NOTES — 161

REFERENCES — 169

INDEX — 185

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

PREFACE

It is when they stringently sublimate their social passions into rigorous theory building, robust methodological designs, and scrupulous empirical observation that sociologists best serve the historical interests of the dominated by producing cogent explications of the complex structures that keep them down. —LOÏC WACQUANT, *The Invention of the “Underclass”* (2022)

We first met in June 2018. Sofia was twenty years old and living in La Paz, a low-income neighborhood in Quilmes, a district in the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. She was about to start her degree in anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), a ninety-minute bus ride from home. Javier was fifty-two and living in Austin, Texas. He had been in the United States since he was twenty-seven. He was a professor in the sociology department at the University of Texas (UT). We began to write this preface together in August 2022, and we finished it in November 2023: Sofia in La Paz, now in her last year at the UBA; Javier in Austin, still at UT.

Our first meeting was Sofia's mother's idea. At the time, Susana worked as a domestic worker in Javier's brother's home and, worried as she had always been about Sofia's education and future prospects, she thought Javier could provide some guidance for her daughter during her first year in college. A few months after our first meeting at a coffee shop in Lomas de Zamora, the suburb where Javier was born and where his family still lives, the seeds of the research project that would lead to this book were planted. We began with a very general question: How and why do those with scarce material and symbolic resources put up with, adapt to, or fight against the conditions of social marginalization (low-paying jobs, lack of basic infrastructure, meager social

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

services, etc.), interpersonal violence, and bureaucratic manipulation that produce their suffering? It was, we knew at the time, a very broad question with various ways of approaching it and a multiplicity of possible answers. Over the course of a few more meetings in person and over WhatsApp, we began to narrow it down to something that resembled a “researchable” problem, something that could be scrutinized with the methodological tools of our disciplines.

What “keeps those at the bottom down?” we asked ourselves; why is it that most of the time *los de abajo*, the most marginalized, the utterly destitute, comply with their marginalization? And when and how are they able to “stand up,” even if momentarily, to confront the “complex structures” of domination? We had an initial hunch: Those at the bottom rarely explode, seldom rebel against those complex structures and against the individuals or groups that incarnate them, because they are too busy with the task of making ends meet. The urgent demands of a social order that deprives them of their means of sustenance have done the work of symbolic domination. Thus, our initial expansive interrogation began to focus on the ways in which those at the margins seek to acquire their means of subsistence—asking how they manage, individually or collectively, to make ends meet, to acquire land and housing, to get food on the table, to cope with surrounding violence. This was our approach to the general question about the ways in which the wretched of the city experience structural and political determinants.

For Javier, these questions had both academic and political interest and, simultaneously, brought him back to the ethnographic inquiry he carried out for his first book, *Poor People's Politics*. For Sofía, subsistence was not only an (in her case, new) academic or political question. It was a concern that had defined her entire life. For her, “making it to the end of the month” had always been a practical problem—it still is at the time of this writing. This collaborative book meshes academic, political, and vital preoccupations.

In the social sciences there is vast scholarship on what Matthew Desmond (2012) calls “the survival question.” For the most part, the emphasis is placed on issues of cooperation and mutual aid that the poor exercise to confront material scarcity. When the state is absent (or the aid it delivers insufficient) and the labor market fails to provide good-enough jobs, most social science research shows that, in order to make ends meet, the poor rely on networks of exchange between relatives and friends. To a great extent, this is still the case in the places where we conducted our research. But the emphasis on collaboration within families and communities tends to obscure relationships of domination and conflict that occur within both. It also tends to overlook

the political relationships that the most marginalized establish, often contentiously, with the state.

This book inspects the practices (both licit and illicit) of subsistence. Although we present the voices and actions of individual actors, our units of analysis are the relationships in which these practices are embedded—within families, between people and institutions, and between individuals and the state.

We carried out our research on practices of subsistence for more than a year until, in March 2020, our work took an unexpected turn with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The very empirical object of our investigation began to rapidly change right before our eyes. Although by then we had some preliminary conclusions regarding the bricolage that the poor assemble to survive, we decided to postpone the writing and to continue the field research.

To research and write about ways of acquiring means of subsistence and managing interpersonal violence means to extricate them of their urgency. It is as if we could stop a movie and then slowly and systematically scrutinize each and every frame. Doing so, that is, attempting to examine and narrate in a careful and attentive way the urgencies of subsistence, runs the risk of destroying the very object under consideration, as plagued as it is by necessities and tensions. To have a dinner of only bread and tea (because there is nothing else to eat) is not the same thing, needless to say, as writing about having a dinner of only bread and tea. We are not sure we have solved this dilemma, but we hope to have inspected and represented to the best of our abilities the difficulties, the conflicts, and the joint ways of subsisting at the urban margins.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, we want to thank all the people in La Matera, El Tala, and La Paz who opened their homes and their hearts so that we could conduct our research. In particular, we want to thank “las chicas del comedor” who taught Sofia to cook, to clean, to draw, and to care. Above all, they taught us what a big difference a small gesture of affection can make.

A number of people made sure we never walked alone during these years of research and writing. When this book was a series of scattered notes, we exchanged ideas about the project with Loïc Wacquant, Matthew Desmond, Mario Small, and Jennifer Scott. They recommended plenty of reading and made insightful suggestions on the basic outline of the project. As the writing advanced, Loïc became an informal advisor of sorts—guiding us, with his characteristic brilliance, in many of the decisions (from big to small) that we had to make. *Gracias, Loïc.*

The chapter on neighborhood politics received instructive comments from a group of scholars with whom Javier worked for over three years. As this book goes into production, that collective project, under the title *Portraits of Persistence: Inequality and Hope in Latin America*, is also seeing light. Thanks to Dennis Rodgers, Maricarmen Hernandez, Jennifer Scott, Katherine Sobering, Katherine Jensen, Marcos Perez, Jorge Derpic, Cinthya Ammerman, Alex Diamond, Eldad Levy, and Alison Coffey. You all made the ideal of collective intellectual work come alive—and we are extremely thankful for that.

Many years ago, Dennis Rodgers strongly encouraged Javier to revisit the arguments and empirics of *Poor People's Politics*. This book is not, we are pretty sure, what he had in mind, but that suggestion started the project—so, in a way, *Dennis es el culpable.*

D
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Thanks to Alison Coffey—brilliant scholarly mind and editor extraordinaire. She proofread every single line of this book and made excellent suggestions on both form and content.

An article that Javier published with Faith Deckard in the *Annual Review of Sociology* helped us systematically examine the vast literature on poor people's strategies and then amend the way in which we were constructing our object. Thanks to Faith for pushing us to read literature we didn't know well, and to Douglas Massey and Patrick Sharkey for their suggestions on that piece. Another article published with Maricarmen Hernandez and Sam Law in *Qualitative Sociology* alerted us to other forms of subsistence and collective struggle. Immense thanks to both, and to Claudio Benzecry, editor of *Qualitative Sociology*, for comments and criticisms.

We are also grateful to Mariana Heredia, Alicia Torres, Gabriel Kessler, Luisina Perelmiter, and Gabriel Vommaro. They read parts of the Spanish version of this book and made incredibly useful comments—both about form and content. When we needed to dig deeper into the history of popular housing in Argentina, we were lucky enough to count on the expert knowledge and kind advice of Adriana Massidda. Thank you! And thanks to Claudio Benzecry (again), Daniel Fridman, and Pablo Lapegna not only for being there, in that space of ours, but also for your support and criticism.

We presented chapters of this book at the Seminario del Grupo de Historia Popular at the Instituto Ravignani and at talks at Universidad del País Vasco, Universidad de Antioquía, Universidad de Campinas, University of Michigan, and at New York University's Institute for Public Knowledge. Thanks to Gabriel DiMeglio, Gabriel Gatti, Andrea Delfino, Catalina Tabares Ochoa, Luciana de Souza Leao, Eric Klinenberg, and Gianpaolo Baiocchi for the invitation and to the many participants for their insightful suggestions. We also want to thank the students at the seminar "Fundamentos de Etnografía" at FLACSO-Ecuador, who read the manuscript and provided insightful feedback, and Juan Manuel Solís, Eduard Ballesté, and Miguél Úbeda for their invitation to the seminar "La Trastienda de la Etnografía" at the Universidad de Lleida, where we discussed drafts of two chapters. When we were almost done, we presented the introduction at the Urban Ethnography Lab at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. Thanks to all the graduate students and faculty who attended and gave us valuable feedback. For the past ten years, the Lab has been a place of fruitful intellectual exchange and scholarly production. It was also a space where we were able to share and debate the emotional ups and downs involved in ethnographic fieldwork. At the Lab, various events, such as brown bags, updates from the field, lectures, and workshops,

fed and nurtured our sociological imagination. We are also grateful for the support provided by the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies and the Sociology Department at UT–Austin.

We are immensely grateful to Sean Manning, who carefully and brilliantly translated the two “crónicas” we presented in chapters 6 and 7. It was a treat, a privilege indeed, working with him.

In 2019, the theme of the annual conference at the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies was “Journalism under Siege.” A number of talented journalists came to Austin and shared their experiences in reporting and writing. That meeting, and the stimulus provided by a number of other nonfiction writers who came to UT at the invitation of the Spanish Creative Writing Initiative, served as a main inspiration for the narrative form of some of the chapters of this book. Thanks to Florencia Alcaraz, Patricia Nieto, Socorro Venegas, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, and Cristian Alarcón for (unbeknownst to you all) being the force behind our writing experiment. And thanks to Gabriela Polit for making all this happen, for your advice and support through all these years, and for your incisive writing, which we are trying to emulate here.

María Soledad Lopez also merits special thanks, not only for her unwavering effort on behalf of the wretched of the urban periphery but also for all that she taught us about the daily working of the judiciary in Buenos Aires.

Gisela Fosado and Michael Trudeau at Duke University Press: We are truly thankful for your encouragement and your superb editing. Last but hardly least, another informal advisor, the one and only Lucas Rubinich, merits special mention. It’s been many years since a chance encounter right outside the “Marcelo T” building changed Javier’s life forever. Since then, Lucas and Javier have been consulting about the content of each other’s books, the best way of communicating social science research, and the political intent behind their work. This book was no exception. As we were writing, we found energy and inspiration in his *Contra el Homo Resignatus*.

Gracias, Lucas.

Buenos Aires / Austin, April 2024



INTRODUCTION

The essence of poverty is not simply an economic condition but the linked ecology of social maladies and broken institutions. —MATTHEW DESMOND, “Severe Deprivation in America: An Introduction” (2015)

It is so difficult to talk about the dominated in an accurate or realistic way without seeming either to crush them or exalt them, especially in the eyes of all the do-gooders who will be led by a disappointment or a surprise proportionate to their ignorance to see condemnation or celebration in an informed attempt to describe things as they are. —PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Pascalian Meditations* (2000)

For more than five years, Chela has been coordinating one of the main soup kitchens in La Matera, a squatter settlement in the southern Conurbano Bonaerense.¹ From Monday to Friday, close to one hundred people have their breakfast, lunch, or early dinner in the small room covered with a metal roof right in front of Chela’s home. A forty-five-year-old woman, short, stout, and with a dark complexion, Chela seems to have endless energy when it comes to obtaining resources for her soup kitchen: “The federal government sends

us stuff, and so do the municipal government and the Catholic Church. I also receive private donations. The local bakery sends us pastries; some others give us [things] for the stew." In May 2019, Chela told us that early in the year only children attended the soup kitchen, but "now there were whole entire families." A year later, in April 2020, as the pandemic began and the Argentine federal government ordered a mandatory lockdown, Chela's soup kitchen started distributing food rations to dozens of families.

The neighborhood "is in really bad shape. Last year, it flooded more than ever. Maybe it's because they never finished the sewer system? You have no idea the number of rats that show up here after each flooding. Here, in the soup kitchen, we put poison and traps everywhere because they are huge!" But Chela does not like to dwell on the problems. She focuses on their possible solutions: "We are going to get ahead," she repeats like a mantra. "Getting ahead" involves the three neighbors who help out in the soup kitchen: "When there is a power outage, we know what to do; when the water is cut off, we know who to call." The four of them start their day early around 7 a.m. and end around 5 p.m. after they have cleaned the kitchen and the dining room.

Soledad is twenty-eight, and she's been working alongside Chela for six months. Soledad's husband works as a butcher an hour away from La Madera. He leaves the neighborhood at 5 a.m. — "he has to wait until there are people in the streets; there are a lot of thieves around," Soledad tells us. They have two children, and the youngest one hopes to become a soccer player. Three times a week, Soledad takes him to practice at two different clubs, a one-hour bus ride from home each way. Twice a week, she takes another thirty-minute ride with her daughter so that she can attend a beautician course. A lot of time and money go into those bus rides: "I spend tons in the *SUBE*, and the soccer uniform is super expensive."²

Soledad tells us, "When I moved to La Madera, my children had to undergo a treatment because the house we moved into had dogs and fleas. It was disgusting. I took them to the hospital and the doctor asked me: 'Mom, where are you living?' Here, you have to burn the trash, because it's infested with rats. My neighbor throws out the garbage and doesn't burn it. When we do burn it, they complain about the smoke." When we ask Soledad if there is any local politician who helps neighbors with their daily problems, she refers to Pocho, a local Peronist broker: "A *puntero*? There was one who is now in prison."

When we speak to Chela, she is cooking a *guiso de mondongo* with peas. Amid the clatter of pots and pans, and the voices and laughs of her *compa*ñeras, she tells us that she really wants to offer breaded beef cutlets with

mashed potatoes. “Milanesas con puré . . . that’s my dream.”³ Chela is not the only one who longs for milanesas. During thirty months of fieldwork in La Matera and in El Tala and La Paz, two adjacent low-income neighborhoods, we repeatedly heard, in formal interviews and informal conversations, expressions such as “a good meal,” “a good barbecue,” “some good milanesas.” Susana, an old-time resident of La Matera, tells us that the minute she receives her AUH payment, she goes and buys “some good, thick beef cutlets.”⁴ Ana, another resident, hopes that with a new government “we will be able to eat cutlets more often.” Dozens of interviewees gave us detailed accounts about the increasing prices of chicken, eggs, butter, milk, and of the “many things that we used to buy with 100 pesos and now you can’t buy nothing with that amount of money.” “At home,” Pedro says, “we drink maté cocido [maté infusion] with milk instead of milk chocolate so that the milk lasts longer.” José, in turn, tells us that he gave his daughter “every peso I got collecting metal scraps so that she can treat herself with some milanesas.”

Their “milanesa dreams” encapsulate the threefold focus of this book: the material dimension of destitution, poor people’s relational ways of dealing with scarcity, and their individual and collective hopes—the relentless hardship, the mutual succor, and the joint persistence at the urban margins. This book examines the subsistence strategies of the urban poor: What do they do to obtain land, housing, and food? How do they deal with the surrounding interpersonal violence—a literal threat to their survival? How and when do the strategies of subsistence and those devoted to protection from physical danger complement each other? When do they conflict with one another? How do those strategies interact with relationships of cooperation, conflict, manipulation, or control between neighbors, parents and children, citizens, local political actors, and the police?

For us ethnographers, the question about the workings of poor people’s strategies has to go hand in hand with an interrogation about the ways in which the marginalized think and feel about their own livelihood—the “supposedly soft facts of that existence,” as Clifford Geertz puts it in *After the Fact* (1996). Residents of La Matera, El Tala, and La Paz are overwhelmed with the heavy burden of managing daily subsistence, but everyday precarity and insecurity do not paralyze them or make them feel impotent. Their own practices (from taking over land, to building a house, digging a trench for the sewer, paving a sidewalk, sending their children to school, coordinating schedules for a safe passage through the dark streets at night, or working as a volunteer at a soup kitchen) attest not only to the existence of hope in individual and collective improvement but also to something that they can teach those who

do not inhabit those relegated territories: persistence in the face of presumably immutable and insurmountable circumstances.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to persist means to “continue firmly or obstinately in a state, opinion, purpose, or course of action, esp. despite opposition, setback, or failure.” Persistence is one of the threads that connects the individual stories and ethnographic reconstructions that we present in this book. As we will discuss in chapter 1, it is now common in poverty research to speak about poor people’s “strategies of survival” or “subsistence strategies.” Following Loïc Wacquant in *The Zone* (forthcoming), this book shifts to “persistence strategies.” This is not merely a semantic move. Studying ways to persist expands the focus beyond material subsistence and *alerts us to the endeavors of the most dispossessed to cultivate or maintain a sense of themselves, of their community, of the meanings of their lives and those of their loved ones, and of their collective purpose in the world.* Examining the forms of persistence enables us to account for the struggle to cling to what it means to be a social being, encompassing its “manifold facets rather than just material sustenance” (Wacquant forthcoming).⁵ “Persistence” is thus a more precise and, at the same time, all-encompassing analytic category. It allows us to shed light on the individual and collective efforts made by the residents of the urban margins without losing sight of the objective circumstances beyond their control. This will help us to construct an “accurate and realistic” representation, as Bourdieu advises, without degrading or glorifying those at the bottom of the social and geographical hierarchy.

This book is based on observations and interviews carried out over thirty months of fieldwork, mainly in La Matera (an informal squatter settlement founded in 2001). We also conducted interviews and participant observation in two adjacent low-income neighborhoods, El Tala and La Paz. Both of them were originally squatter settlements (dating back to the early 1980s).⁶ Many of La Matera’s residents have relatives, attend school, or frequent soup kitchens in one of these two neighborhoods.⁷

Observations and interviews (and dozens of informal conversations) serve to document the depth, intensity, and durable character of urban poverty, as well as the diversity of strategies. Focusing on how residents procure land, build their homes, construct basic infrastructure, and obtain food, our book centers the material dimension of marginality. Concentrating on the way in which these very same residents navigate surrounding violence, we also shed light on their (insecure) physical survival. Examining what they say, think, and feel as they persist in the midst of misery and danger, we draw attention to the symbolic dimension of urban marginality.

We inspect these strategies both synchronically (How do they deal with scarcity and violence in the present?) and diachronically (How have they worked to solve their most urgent problems over the last two decades?). By focusing on the past and present simultaneously, we will see that the *question of subsistence* (How do they provide for themselves and their families in a context of material deprivation and public unsafety?) should not be disentangled from the *question of progress* (How do they try to improve their lives?). As in many other poor neighborhoods (Anderson 2007), “to stay afloat” and “to get ahead” are profoundly intertwined vital issues.

During the past four decades or so, in the Conurbano Bonaerense and particularly in the area where we conducted our fieldwork, transgressive collective action has been a quite successful way of addressing joint problems. Through massive and organized mobilizations, the urban poor have obtained land, shelter, and basic infrastructure in their neighborhoods. Rather than keeping their “heads down,” those in need have challenged the political structures producing their suffering. Our first task will be to dissect the form and effects of grassroots mobilization in our field sites. We will see that collective action has been impactful notwithstanding the difficulties in achieving it—complexities that the vast literature on social movements and other forms of episodic contention dissect in detail. We will also see that collective action interacts with ordinary politics. It competes for attention with other (more personalized and, sometimes, morally ambivalent, less disruptive, and physically costly) forms of solving pressing problems.

Road Map

This book is a collaborative product between a student of anthropology who was born, raised, and still lives in La Paz, and a sociologist who has not lived in the Conurbano since 1992 but visits it frequently.⁸

Each chapter presents a story of two or more individuals, a personal testimony, or an ethnographic reconstruction. Although they all center particular individuals or families, they reflect practices and processes that appeared regularly throughout our fieldwork. They all encapsulate the manifold ways in which political, economic, and social forces mold experiences of social marginality, the ways in which exclusion intertwines with individual and collective strategies of persistence.

Chapter 1 briefly summarizes existing literature on “survival strategies.” Among several other works on subsistence at the margins, this first chapter returns to classic works by anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz and sociologists

Carol Stack and Cecilia Menjívar. Those who are not interested in the socio-anthropological debates that serve to guide our inquiry and the theories, concepts, and ideas on which we draw (and refine and extend) to order particular circumstances and build our object of study can skip this chapter and go straight to chapter 2. The second chapter begins with a general description of poverty and inequality in Argentina and then briefly describes the history of La Matera and the individual and collective actions that neighbors undertook to build their homes and common infrastructure. We will see that its residents, as well as the urban poor in general, have long known how to cooperate with each other and how to capture resources from the state. This chapter demonstrates that persistence strategies weave horizontal and vertical connections between a diverse set of actors. Obtaining resources from the state is achieved sometimes by collective action (more or less disruptive), other times facilitated by political-partisan intermediation, and in many other instances by a combination of protest and brokerage.

Chapter 3 gets granular while examining the current practices through which poor residents procure their livelihoods. We locate our inquiry at an almost microscopic level, the closest we can get to the rough ground of daily life at society's margins, paying sustained and respectful attention to what Bourdieu (1996, 33) calls "ordinary accounts of ordinary adventures." We focus on a few families to scrutinize the manifold ways in which they obtain essential material resources. If the previous chapter highlights collective action, this one spotlights informal networks of mutual aid. In both, however, we see that political brokerage plays a key role—and that's the reason why chapter 4 focuses on the actions of a neighborhood broker. Here we analyze the functioning and meanings of political practice at the margins. Politics, we will see, operates both as a way to solve pressing everyday problems and as a form of extortion. The chapter empirically tackles this (often-neglected) ambivalence.

Illicit activities are part and parcel of people's strategies at the urban margins. Some of these activities produce violent interactions. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the scholarship on poor people's strategies to navigate everyday violence and presents fresh empirical evidence on the subject. Drawing on deeply personal and intimate encounters with victims and perpetrators of violence, chapters 6 and 7 present two crónicas that focus on the various forms of physical harm that shake the inhabitants of the settlement and surrounding neighborhoods. We also describe an unexpected "use" of one of our crónicas and our intervention in a judicial case.

The indefatigable activity carried out by a group of women in a local community center could only be understood in the context of economic depri-

vation and insecurity described in the previous chapters. Chapter 8 is based on Sofia's observant participation in this center, where a soup kitchen and a day-care center operate throughout the year. Here we describe a collective livelihood strategy based on community work. This community center not only offers food sustenance to residents in need but also seeks to shelter the youngest inhabitants of the neighborhood—young people whom the women working at the center consider the most vulnerable. The main concerns of this book (food subsistence, physical security, and poor people's search for meaning) converge in this chapter, where we highlight themes such as recognition, community care, and the production of sociability. The last chapter revisits the empirical material presented throughout the book to examine the affective dimension of life at the margins.

In the concluding chapter, we weave together the different chronicles, stories, and ethnographic vignettes, not so much to give them a single meaning but to investigate what they tell us about the central enigma of the book: the complex relationship between persistence strategies and forms of cooperation, conflict, and control among relatives, neighbors, and state actors. The book ends up showing, by way of empirical demonstration, that there should not be a rigid dividing line between works that emphasize economic hardship, suffering, extortion, and violence and others that accentuate hope, collective action, care for others, and dignity. On the contrary, we believe, as anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2016, 61) once said, that it is necessary to integrate these two perspectives, trying to "be realistic about the ugly realities of the world today and hopeful about the possibilities of changing them."

Research, Reflexivity, Writing

Seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity. Above all, they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away. —NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES, *Death without Weeping* (1993)

The point is not *just* to empathize. Empathy alone has too many limits. The point is to walk alongside the people you spend time with and to do your best to learn from and communicate something about their lives with all the tools that you have. —REUBEN JONATHAN MILLER, *Halfway Home* (2021)

This book attempts to carry out a type of public social science that is localized, rooted in a particular time and place (Collins, Jensen, and Auyero 2017; Burawoy 2016). We do so through the reconstruction of individual and collec-

tive stories that are accessible, empirically rooted, and theoretically informed and informing—all written in a way that the general reading public could find both understandable and relevant.

Before writing about the lives of others, it is imperative to spend time with them to figure out, as Clifford Geertz (1973) once said, what they think they are doing. This, time spent, is what defines ethnographic fieldwork (Wolcott 2008; Lareau 2021; Wacquant 2002; Hoang 2015; Desmond 2009). In this sense, the research on which this book is based (long-term engagement and a combination of participant observation and informal and in-depth interviews) emulates what other ethnographers have done before us (more below). However, our fieldwork is different from most social science and investigative research on the topic in one crucial sense. Many of the individuals whom we portray here are Sofia's neighbors or relatives. She was born, raised, and lives in a barrio that borders La Matera. Many of her relatives still live in the squatter settlement. The conversations, in-depth interviews, and life stories that inform the narratives we present were carried out as chats between friends, neighbors, or relatives of very similar social positions. Sofia did not have to "enter the field" and gain the trust and rapport that are often quite elusive, even to the most experienced ethnographer. The challenging task for her was not to "get in" but to "gain distance" from daily life, in order to objectify it, analyze it, and then write about it. The fieldwork for this book thus replicates the methodological strategy one of us deployed in a prior project on environmental suffering (Auyero and Swistun 2009).⁹

"To fully know that game," Matthew Desmond (2009, 294) writes in his detailed and inspiring ethnography of wildland firefighters, "we must play the game. We must eat their food, speak their language, walk on their sidewalks, work in their jobs, fight in their struggles, teach in their schools, live in their houses; and we must do all this until their things, their life—its smell and taste and temperature, its way of reasoning and psychology, its rhythm and tempo and feel—become our things, our life." The fieldwork on which this book is based was carried out by Sofia Servián. To make our arguments, we draw on more than two years of observations and on dozens of interviews and conversations. Sofia did not decide, from one day to the next, to "play the game" in order to understand what subsistence at the urban margins is all about. She shares with residents their food, their sidewalks, their school. It was in La Matera where she flew a kite for the first time (when she was eight); it was there where she had her first pajama party with her cousins; it is there where many of her uncles and aunts live. She never had to "submit [her]self to the fire of action *in situ* . . . [or] put [her] own organism, sensibility, and incar-

nate intelligence at the epicenter of the array of material and symbolic forces” (Wacquant 2006, viii) that shape strategies of persistence, because she and her family have forever been involved in that task. She did not have to intentionally subject herself to a long line in order to receive a welfare check (a percentage of which has to be given to the local broker who facilitated access to such benefits). She didn’t have to, because she experienced it firsthand when Susana, her mother, lost her first job. She didn’t have to “immerse” herself in a daily life plagued by the risks of assault or robbery, because she has lived with that since birth. In other words, she never had to try to make the “things” that define urban marginality become “her things”—the smells of a putrid stream, the taste of a paltry dinner, the cold temperature in winter, the sound of gunshots, and so on—because, simply put, they have always been. The challenge, as said, was distancing herself from unquestioned ways of thinking and doing. These internalized dispositions, we came to realize, acted as obstacles to fully dig into (to see, to question, to objectify) subsistence strategies—her own, and those of others.

The joint work (between an anthropology student and a sociologist with almost three decades in the trade) was essential to construct subsistence strategies as a “sociological object” (Bourdieu, Chamboderon, and Passeron 1991; Jensen and Auyero 2019). In countless virtual and face-to-face dialogues, we turned the domestic into something “exotic”; we did so by breaking with the “initial relationship of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque . . . because they are too familiar” (Bourdieu 1990, xi). In the social sciences, reflexivity implies a mental process of directing the analysis not only to the empirical universe under consideration but also, and simultaneously, toward the subject that investigates. We do so in order to understand how our own positions and perspectives affect the evidence we produce and the arguments we construct. This process of looking back at our social selves (*reflection* comes, let’s remember, from the Latin *reflectus*, which means to bend backward) was very important while we were doing our fieldwork and while we were writing. The written presentation of this reflexivity will not be relegated (as in many an ethnographic monograph) to a methodological appendix but will be woven throughout the text—sometimes within ethnographic vignettes, other times in the form of slightly edited diary entries.

Throughout these years, our conversations prompted our own exercises in self-analysis. For the anthropology student, this book was an opportunity to reflect on her own trajectory with the help of a sociologist from a different position, both in the academic field and in the social space. For the sociologist, the collaboration with a student deeply embedded in the daily life of a poor

neighborhood also offered a reflexive opportunity, in his case, to go back to arguments he had made more than two decades ago in *Poor People's Politics* (2001). Parts of this book, mainly chapter 4, revisit arguments first formulated there. Readers familiar with that book will see that more emphasis is placed here on the manipulative character of “clientelist practices” without losing sight of their ambivalence. Part of this new emphasis might come from the changing reality of grassroots politics. But it also probably stems from the biases and silences that, already present in that study, were unearthed and made evident, thanks to Sofía's constant interrogations about the way of doing politics at the margins—questions that were simultaneously directed to the “field” and to the “expert” on the topic.

Fieldwork Nuts and Bolts

The fieldwork on which this book is based was conducted between March 2019 and December 2021. With the exception of the months of preventive and mandatory social isolation decreed by the Argentine government during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sofía visited La Madera between two and three times a week. Between May and December 2021, she conducted participant observation in Virginia's soup kitchen, working there at least twice a week. In La Madera, she conducted forty-eight in-depth, in-person interviews and another twenty-two telephone interviews during the months of the pandemic. She began the interviews with her former neighbors and family members, and they introduced her to other potential interviewees (further removed from her close circle) in what is known as a “snowball” recruitment method. Sofía also conducted 105 short interviews in two selected areas of La Madera.

At the beginning of our research, as Sofía was conducting preliminary fieldwork and having informal conversations with neighbors, friends and family members, we began to exchange ideas about ways to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, ways to construct socio-anthropological objects, and observation and interviewing techniques. In these months our collaboration was less horizontal, given the difference in training and knowledge. Sofía was at the beginning stages of her degree in anthropology—not yet having taken classes on research methodology. Javier had extensive experience in the field and as a teacher of ethnographic methods. A series of private tutoring classes of sorts unfolded more or less organically, dictated by the need to solve this or that problem, over email, WhatsApp, and then Zoom. We talked and read about the place of theory in ethnography (how the latter is used to extend or refine both substantive and formal sociological and anthropological theo-

ries); about La Matera as a possible “strategic research site” (in the words of Robert Merton); about the best way to analytically justify our ethnographic study; about positionality, reflexivity, and the need for constant epistemological vigilance; about possible enigmas we wanted to unravel; about the most effective ways to reconstruct local points of view; and about—and here was where the pedagogical relationship started to become more horizontal, given Sofia’s immersion—better ways to produce empirical evidence.

Discussions about the pros and cons of data production techniques (participant observation and interviews) revolved around the problems of inference as well as the limitations of the latter when it comes to addressing issues that the subjects cannot or do not want to talk about. They also addressed more practical issues, among which two stood out: how to take good field-notes and how to formulate good questions for the interviewees (questions that were understandable and at the same time produced the information we were looking for). Two classic texts were very useful to us (on ethnographic notes, Emerson 2011; on in-depth interviews, Weiss 1994) in our efforts to distinguish between descriptions of scenes, observed or reported actions, and overheard dialogue, or to move between general themes, particular lines of inquiry, and specific questions to interviewees.

The interviews and observations were conducted with various objectives in mind (to obtain detailed descriptions, to access different perspectives, to pinpoint processes, to understand how they are interpreted, etc.). We discussed how to emphasize some or several of these as Sofia observed and talked with neighbors, friends, and family members. Ethnographic fieldwork is an undertaking characterized by flexibility—we accompanied the subjects and paid attention to those things they paid attention to (such as the direction of a fan, the color of a piece of cardboard, or the price of bread pudding or soap). On more than one occasion we altered both focus and pointed questions. In other words, we were rigid neither about the research design nor about our role as researchers. This is a virtue, not a defect in ethnography (Katz 1982; Lareau 2021). Something analogous could be said of Sofia’s closeness with several of the interviewees. The familiarity she had with former neighbors, friends, and relatives was extremely useful in accessing a sphere of intimacy and a level of granularity in the information that is normally very difficult to access, even for the most experienced ethnographer.

All qualitative research work involves a tension between immersion and distancing—the latter was possible thanks to constant epistemological vigilance, which allowed us to break with the actors’ common sense and our own. Closeness to the actors, provided it becomes the object of permanent reflec-

tion (reflexivity in this case supported and encouraged by collaboration), is an advantage, not an obstacle, in the production of scientific knowledge.

Scholarship on ethnographic fieldwork was, it is important to emphasize, of great use in carrying out this research. But it was the permanent “back and forth,” the round-the-clock exchanges (in which Sofía would write and send her notes or transcriptions to Javier, who, at the same time, almost simultaneously, would ask questions and suggest topics to investigate or elaborate on), that made it possible for both fieldnotes and interviews to improve notably during the course of the fieldwork. Between the two of us, we both adjusted our ethnographic “eyes and ears.”

As for millions of people, the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic were times of anguish and uncertainty. Sofía was isolated, not leaving her home between March and September 2020. Javier, with fewer mobility restrictions, continued to teach at the University of Texas by Zoom—except for the summer months. At Javier’s urging, Sofía kept a journal that was the basis for the “reflective interludes” that appear throughout this text. These were also months in which reading the voluminous literature on poverty and livelihood strategies served to regenerate our perspective—our point of view—on ways of subsisting at the margins. After the pandemic restrictions were lifted, Sofía completed the face-to-face interviews that had been pending and conducted the participant observation on which chapter 8 is based.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Conurbano Bonaerense is an area comprising thirty-three districts that surround the city of Buenos Aires. Roughly fourteen million people reside in the Conurbano. Although geographically small (just 0.5 percent of the national territory), 29 percent of the total population lives there and 40 percent of its residents fall below the national poverty line (Zarazaga and Ronconi 2017). Unless noted otherwise, all names of people and places are real.
- 2 SUBE is the Unique Electronic Ticket System, implemented in the country since 2011. The SUBE card allows each user to pay for state-subsidized trips on buses, subways, and trains.
- 3 In Argentina, beef symbolizes good (and longed-for) food not just for those at the bottom of the social scale. In an interview between the sociologist Mariana Heredia and a university student, the latter told her that she “thought of a barbecue and her eyes filled with tears.” Some of the material deprivations that affect the most dispossessed are becoming, according to Heredia, more transversal to social groups that are losing purchasing power or income (Mariana Heredia, personal communication).
- 4 The AUH (Asignación Universal por Hijo), a federal welfare program, provides families with USD \$30 per child per month as of 2019.
- 5 We thank Loïc Wacquant (personal communication) for making us aware of the multidimensionality of persistence.
- 6 Cravino and Vommaro (2018) describe the origins of these settlements.
- 7 We selected La Matera as a field site because of our interest in poor people’s strategies to make ends meet and their ways of dealing with violence. We conducted research in La Paz and El Tala because, as we will examine in the following chapters, the networks and organizations on which the inhabitants of

La Madera depend either originated there (as in the case of land squatting) or extend to those neighborhoods (as with the exchange of resources between relatives or the community kitchen that residents of the settlement attend). We selected our research sites for both theoretical reasons (in the case of La Madera) and empirical reasons (in the case of the two adjacent neighborhoods). This then is not a comparative study, but a case study that presents an analytically luminous example of the diversity of strategies, the role of the state, and the collective action and clientelism within them. The fact that La Madera is not a representative neighborhood of urban marginality does not detract from the sociological relevance of our work. The case we dissect in this book is important because what happens there exposes the complex workings of strategies in particularly clear form (see Zussman 2004 on the logic of the case study). In other words, this is not a study of La Madera, La Paz, or El Tala, but of the forms and experiences of everyday subsistence. It is not a study of the neighborhoods, but a study of persistence in the neighborhoods. See the classic text by Geertz (1973) on this important and often-ignored distinction.

- 8 We believe that the dichotomy between “insider” and “outsider” that is sometimes used as a criterion for evaluating urban ethnography is simplistic and misleading—no one is completely one or the other. The intellectual collaboration between an anthropology student who was born and lives in the place where the research is being carried out and a sociologist who lives outside the country seeks to demonstrate that, in order to carry out sound ethnographic research, what really matters is neither the social or geographical position of the researcher nor categorical attributes (age, gender, etc.) but rather the time invested in it, the constant epistemological vigilance, and the reflexivity applied during the research process (see Miller 2021).
- 9 We sought to minimize as much as the possible external intrusion (residents see Sofia as “the daughter of Susana,” “the cousin of . . .,” “the neighbor of . . .”), the distance, or the asymmetry that is typical in relationships between interviewers and interviewees, observers and observed. On more than one occasion, our fieldwork produced moments of “induced and accompanied self-analysis” (Bourdieu et al. 2000, 615) when people like Chela, Soledad, Luis, Eliana, and Sofia herself took the opportunity provided by an interview or a conversation to conduct a self-examination. They “took advantage of the permission or prompting afforded by our questions or suggestions . . . to carry out a task of clarification—simultaneously gratifying and painful—and to give vent, at times with extraordinary expressive intensity, to experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed” (615).

1. EXPLICATING SUBSISTENCE AT THE MARGINS

- 1 Following most of the recent literature on the subject, we here use *clientelist* and *patronage politics* as interchangeable terms (Kitschelt and Wilkinson