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# The Pandemic at the Urban Margins: COVID-19 and Networks of Support in Buenos Aires

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HOW DO THE URBAN POOR SURVIVE? Roughly half a century ago, anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz conducted fieldwork in Cerrada del Condor, a shantytown of about 200 houses in Mexico City, to answer just that question. The outcome of that field research was the now-classic *¿Cómo sobreviven los marginados?* (published in Spanish in 1973, and in English, as *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown*, in 1977). Her answer, in a nutshell, was this: Networks of reciprocal exchange are central in the daily lives of the urban poor. Life among those who lack “any reasonable security features, such as job security, social security, or a reasonably safe monthly level of income” (2) evolves like a “complex design for survival.” Lomnitz’s detailed, still fundamental study shows that “the insecurity of marginal existence can be compensated in only one way: by generating mechanisms of economic solidarity” (91). Those at the margins survive thanks to the continual “flow of reciprocal exchange of goods, services, and economically valuable information” (91).

Lomnitz’s book launched a research agenda on the role of reciprocity networks in the survival strategies of the urban poor in Latin America that is still quite vigorous in the region (Hintze 1989, 2004; González de la Rocha 2020, 2001; Camargo Sierra 2020; Eguía and Ortale 2007). Alongside networks of reciprocal exchange, sociological and anthropological research has examined patronage or clientelistic networks and contentious collective action as prominent ways of obtaining basic needs such as housing, food, and medicine among

those of the bottom of the social structure (Perez 2018; Rossi 2017; Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017; Fahlberg et al. 2020).



La Madera community center in Buenos Aires (photo: Sofia Servian)

Since early 2019, we have been conducting research on strategies of survival—collective and individual ways of making ends meet—among residents of La Madera, a squatter settlement in the southeastern suburbs of Buenos Aires, Argentina. This informal barrio is the product of a massive land occupation that took place in 2000. Living conditions are extremely precarious: a third of the households have no access to water inside their homes, a third of them are overcrowded (more than three persons per room), and most homes have neither sewer nor gas connections.

As with almost everything during 2020 and early 2021, our work took an unexpected turn with the pandemic. The very thing we were investigating rapidly began to transform before our eyes.

One of us lives a few blocks away from La Madera and has long-standing friendships and family relationships with many residents there. They confided details about their daily juggling to feed their families before and during the ongoing pandemic. Although particular

in some respects, the story we present below summarizes what is happening in many a poor neighborhood in Argentina and, we venture, throughout Latin America a year into the pandemic: With their informal means of subsistence quickly drying up, those at the margins are relying not only on one another (as they did when Lomnitz conducted her study) but more and more on always-insufficient state aid. Much of the strategizing for survival—reaching out to family members, visiting soup kitchens or food pantries—falls upon women. The pandemic has made poor people's already precarious lives even more insecure, and poor women's daily predicament even more burdensome.

### **Struggling to Make Ends Meet**

Vanesa, 30, lives with her husband Cristian, 32, and their three small children in a modest brick house in La Madera. In April 2020, as Argentina went into a massive lockdown, she lost her job as a maid. Cristian's hours at a food-processing plant were cut, and his salary decreased by 40 percent. One-third of their household income comes from the state in the form of monthly payments from a cash-transfer program known as Asignación Universal por Hijo and a food-supplement program known as Plan Más Vida. As their income from work decreased, Vanesa and Cristian started to count on local soup kitchens (also funded by the government) to feed themselves and their kids. Every week, Vanesa lines up around noon outside a *comedor* to pick up a bag of *mercadería*. Foodstuffs vary but they usually include grains, noodles, eggs, and a few vegetables.

Customers wait in line at a *comedor*, or soup kitchen, which has functioned as a food pantry during the pandemic (photo: Sofia Servian).

Resources in cash and in kind provided by the state are never enough. Like most of the people we have talked to over the last two years, Vanesa has to hustle endlessly to get to the end of the month. Every two weeks, she cleans her grandmother's home, for which she receives between US\$4 and \$5 for two hours of work. Twice a month, Elena, Cristian's aunt, provides them with milk, noodles, polenta, rice, and corn oil. Elena works at another state-funded local soup kitchen where she receives food, which she then passes on to Vanesa and Cristian. Elena "has a lot of stuff and she shares," Vanesa noted.

Elena is not the only one who helps them make ends meet. Like most of the families we interviewed, Vanesa and Cristian's household is part of an extensive network of intensive exchange. Twice a week, Vanesa helps her brother Fernando with the sale of clothing that he buys in bulk in the city. Fernando often loans her money to buy clothes for the children, and also helps her with food: "I only buy oranges because they are always on sale. That's why I only buy oranges. If you come over and see apples or bananas it's because Fernando came by. I ask him to buy me some potatoes, but he also buys fruit for us," said Vanesa. Once or twice a week, Vanesa also helps her mother, Rosana, who owns a small bakery in a nearby neighborhood, in exchange for which she receives pizza dough and cookies for the kids. Rosana also reciprocates with clothes and sneakers for Vanesa's children.

During the pandemic, Vanesa has not only relied on the state and family members to obtain food. With a portion of the cash Cristian brings home every two weeks, she opened up a little store in front of her house where she sold toiletries and cleaning products. Early on, she made an average of US\$2 a day, which she spent on meals for the family: “What I earn I spend on food,” she told us. “We don’t eat too much meat. We eat mainly chicken and noodles . . . every now and then I make a little more and I buy *milanesas*.”<sup>1</sup> A few months later, Vanesa closed the store because she wasn’t making enough.

### ***Milanesa Dreams***

Our field research took us to Chela’s soup kitchen. It has been more than five years since she opened her *comedor* in La Madera. Before the pandemic, approximately 100 residents—adults and children—ate there from Monday to Friday. A 45-year-old woman with seemingly everlasting energy, Chela told us that she obtained resources for her soup kitchen from “everywhere . . . 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.”

*Mercadería* available to *comedor* patrons (photo: Sofía Servian)

When we first spoke to Chela, she was cooking a *guiso de mondongo* with peas. Amid the clatter of pots and pans, she told us that she really wanted to offer *milanesas con puré*.<sup>2</sup> “That’s my dream.” She was hardly the only one in La Matera with those visions. Phrases such as “a good meal,” a “good *asado*,” a couple of “*buenas milanesas*” were repeated often during our 24 months of fieldwork in response to our questions about hopes for the future. Susana told us she was awaiting the payment from her cash-transfer program to “buy myself some good *milanesas*.” Right before the 2019 presidential elections, Ana said she was hoping that with a new government she would be able to “eat *milanesas* more often.” Then the pandemic hit, and those dreams became more modest, and more dependent on what the state is able to provide.

### ***Los Marginados and the State***

The COVID-19 pandemic is having devastating effects in Latin America and the Caribbean. At the time of this writing, more than half a million COVID-related deaths have been recorded in the region. Most countries are experiencing deep economic crises (an average 8 percent contraction in GDP), crumbling labor markets, shrinking middle classes, and exponential growth of poverty and marginality (Benza and Kessler 2020).

As their informal sources of income vanish or shrink, poor people like Vanesa, Chela, Susana, and Cristian are—much like Lomnitz’s *marginados*—casting wider webs of connection with kin and friends in order to make ends meet. They are also reaching out to their governments for help with sheer survival and to keep their hopes—their “*sueños de milanesas*”—somewhat alive.

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### **Notes**

1. <sup><#\_ednref1></sup> *Milanesas* = traditional breaded beef cutlets

2. <sup><#\_ednref1></sup> *Puré* = mashed potatoes

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