State Assistance, Poverty and Social Sensitivities in Argentina in the 21st Century

Ana Lucía Cervio

Abstract

Social programs might be defined as institutional and normative designs to “administer” the social fallouts of the “flaws” of the capitalist system. Simultaneously, these programs operate as different means of building and strengthening specific forms of making/sensing/perceiving which perform the social and, from this point, structure sensitivities of the “target” subjects of the abovementioned interventions. The present article aims at outlining some analytic clues regarding the links between social structuring processes and public policies aimed at “tackling” poverty in an urban environment of the Global South. In order to do so, in the first place, some notions of Georg Simmel are outlined in relation to the “poor person” and “assistance”. Following are some keys to understanding public policies as “creators” of social sensitivities. Finally, quantitative data is presented on poverty levels and social programs in Argentina in the present, and analytical thoughts are laid out which emerge from a sociology of bodies/emotions.

Keywords: poverty, public policies, “social question”, social sensitivities, Georg Simmel.

1. Introduction

Since their origins the several stages and transformations of capitalism have been accompanied by the so called “social question”, which has been defined and raised by state interventions. Public policies attempt to regulate the gap between politics and economy, reconciling civil rights with the economic base. In order to do so, States have created a “social question” necessary to answer with the normative and institutional designs that enable the “administration” of the social fallouts that the “flaws” the capitalist system entail (and impose). In this way, Robert Castel refers to the “social question” as a “fundamental aporia through which a society experiences the enigma of its own cohesion and tries to forestall the dangers of its disintegration” (2003: 9-10).

Social politics is “the political shape of the social question” (Grassi, 2003: 26)*. Faced with the issues and the pressure entailed by judicial equality and socio-economic inequalities on which the capitalist regime of accumulation rests (Offe, 1990), the State becomes a key player to tackle the multiple shapes inequality adopts. In order to do so, the State administers and manages interventions aimed at easing conflicts and at ensuring the reproduction of the social order. From this viewpoint, the intervention of the State fulfills the systemic need to alleviate and/or neutralize class conflicts, which are part of the development of capitalism. Therefore, anything that cannot be “solved” by the interplay of supply and demand in the market is projected on a new sphere: “the social”.

Processes of social inequality and expulsion present in a society structured by the commodification of life bring about (and are brought about by) structural “hiatus”/“breaches” which, intertwined in the day-to-day life of subjects, must be “sutured” to guarantee social reproduction, and it is in this point that the State plays a predominant role. In this framework, social programs, in particular those targeting the various shapes

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*P.hD, Assistant Researcher of the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (National Scientific and Technical Research Council) at CICLOP (Centro de Investigaciones sobre Comunidad Local, Participación y Política Social, Universidad de Buenos Aires).
poverty adopts in an urban environment, might be defined as institutional and normative designs to “administer” the social fallouts of the “flaws” of the capitalist system. Simultaneously, these programs operate as different means of building and strengthening specific forms of making/sensing/perceiving which perform the social and, from this point, structure sensitivities of the “target” subjects of the abovementioned interventions.

The present article aims at outlining some analytic clues regarding the links between social structuring processes and public policies aimed at “tackling” poverty in an urban environment of the Global South. In order to do so, in the first place, some notions of Georg Simmel are outlined in relation to the “poor person” and “assistance”. Following are some keys to understanding public policies as “creators” of social sensitivities. Finally, quantitative data is presented on poverty levels and social programs in Argentina in the present, and analytical thoughts are laid out which emerge from a sociology of bodies/emotions.

2. The Poor Person and Assistance, from Georg Simmel’s Viewpoint

In his essay “The Poor Person” [(1908) 2009], Georg Simmel lays the theoretical and analytical foundations of what may be considered as the starting point for a “Sociology of Poverty”. The interaction between the poor person and society—along with the foreigner, the adventurer, fashion, love, music, conflict, among others—is one of the empirical objects chosen by the German author to study the types of socialization in which the various dimensions that shape the social fabric intersect. Conceptually, the forms of socialization (vergesellschaftung) are defined by Simmel as various types of reciprocal action between individuals. Through their—conflicting and contradictory—flow these reciprocal actions are the content of the social. Therefore Simmel’s Formalist Sociology focuses on the study of the “forms of socialization” by which society becomes a “unit”, among them, the poor person.

As a form of social interaction, poverty is socially built when a specific “social reaction” occurs before individuals described as “in need” of assistance/aid in accordance to current criteria in a society in a specific moment. According to Simmel, the poor person is not the one who suffers from certain deprivations but the one who receives or should receive assistance, as defined by social rules. In this way “poverty in itself and for itself is not to be defined as a fixed quantitative condition but only in terms of a social reaction that appears after a certain condition” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 439).

In this way, the sociological category of poverty (and the poor person, as characterization of the subject deserving assistance) emerges when it is an object socially acknowledged. That is to say, poverty exists as such when some kind of widespread “visibility” or “assertion” occurs in relation to the presence of individuals requiring aid practices for the reproduction of their minimum conditions of life; situation that, according to Simmel, imposes at the same time the moral and social dictum of assistance, acquiring the modern State a centralizing function in that sense.

In the path from private charity to the nationalization of assistance, Simmel detects a long history entailing, in parallel, transformations in both of them regarding the types of socialization between the poor person and society. In fact, it is no longer the sensitive-immediate impression given by the deprived individual, but the abstract concept of “poverty” that gives rise to the imperative of aid.

The State is in charge of the “most urgent” needs of “all the poor people”. This means that material deprivation is constructed/defined/named in objective terms, designing a minimum threshold of assistance necessary to guarantee the reproduction of life. Consequently, “[e]very grant of more than this, every improvement toward a positive increase requires much less unambiguous criteria and is left to more subjective estimates in quantity and kind” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 429). This contrasts with the rationale of private assistance in charge of aiding only those who are considered “worthy” of being helped. Private practices aim at “[…] curing the need for which the state has an only temporary relief. What is decisive is not need as such, although it is the terminus a quo, but the idea of creating independent and economically valuable individuals; the state proceeds with a causal intent, private charity with a teleological one. Or put
differently: The state comes to help poverty; private charity comes to help the poor person” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 431).

Considering the objective notions that govern the practices of state assistance, and reflecting upon the fact that in modern societies being included in the category of “poor person” occurs when individuals in a condition of deprivation –socially defined as “extreme”– are considered targets deserving aid, Simmel clearly identifies the links between social reaction and the process of homogenization of the universe of the poor people by way of the abstract concept of poverty. “This has always lent a specifically local character to the duty toward the poor person, instead of centralizing it in so great a circle, instead of functioning through immediate perception only through the general concept of poverty—which is one of the longest roads sociological forms have had to cover between perception and abstraction” [the italics appear in the original] (Simmel, [1908] 2009:423).

The entity of the “poor person” is built from the outside, from a social reaction that ends up assigning a particular role in society to the subjects that are included in that term. In this way, individually considering the subject suffering deprivations does not make the poor person a kind of “unitary class” in society, instead, the reactions that their presence triggers in the social “witnesses” of that situation explain that process. Therefore, social signification comes to play the game of the poor person’s belonging to a special circle. Nonetheless, as stated above, being included in that circle directly depends on either actually receiving assistance, or on the fact that individuals find themselves in an objective situation which, as such, makes them a “legitimate” target of assistance.

Consequently, as a type of socialization, poverty does not reproduce its ties through the reciprocal relations between the individuals included in that social circle, but due to the actions and reactions “sparked” in the community. So, following Simmell’s ideas, this type of socialization does not spin around the axis of the reciprocal relations established among the poor people but, in fact, among those who are “outside” (the collectivity that provides aid through public and/or private means), and the subjects who, included in the socially built and accepted definition, are designated “worthy” of assistance.

3. The Assistance to the Poor Person as the Logic of Reproduction of the Social, Notes from a Sociology of Bodies/Emotions Viewpoint

Now, if the poor person is poor insofar as they trigger a social reaction, what are the sociological implications and scope of those reactions in terms of change and/or reproduction of the order? Simmel’s observations intertwine in, at least, three dimensions considered relevant from a sociology of bodies/emotions, namely:

- The Right to Assistance

According to Simmel, society is a unit in which reciprocal relations between individuals entitled to rights and duties take place, to the point that the rights of some of them become the duties of others. Specially, the author highlights that the right of the deprived person is the starting point of assistance given that “[o]nly when one assumes such a right, at least as a socio-legal fiction, the conduct of poor relief appears to be removed from what is arbitrary, from the dependence on chance financial conditions and other insecurities” (Simmel, [1908] 2009:410).

However, when actions to provide aid do not target, as their ultimate aim, the individual but a social goal expected to be attained (such as cohesion and order), as stated by the author, the right of the poor person to make a demand is lost. This is how assistance becomes a means for the defense of social interest, the poor person emerging as the object of assistance to which they do not have the right.

“[…] as soon as the welfare of the social whole necessitates the care of the poor. That happens, willingly or required by law, in order to not allow the poor person to become an active, dangerous enemy of society, in order to make the diminished power of the poor person once again productive for it, and in order to prevent the degeneration of the poor person’s descendents. Therefore the poor person as a person, the
reflection of the situation of the poor in the person’s feelings, is just as indifferent as it is for those who give alms for the sake of the salvation of their own soul” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 412).

In other words, the State has the duty of assisting the poor person to guarantee their minimum conditions of existence, yet this duty does not translate into the right of the poor person to receive assistance and to claim for it if assistance is denied to them. According to Simmel, this right goes past the “deprived/needy” individual to be found as its reverse, the right of the taxpayer, who, in one way or the other, would be affected by the consequences that could be derived from an insufficient state assistance for poverty.

“In some ways the entire relationship of duties and rights transcends them [the poor people]. The right that corresponds to every duty of the state is not theirs but that of every individual citizen for the taxes levied for the poor to be raised to such a high level and be used in such a way that the public purposes of caring for the poor are actually served as well” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 414).

**The Poor Citizen**

In a comparable position to that of the foreigner, the poor person is outside of the social. However, the poor person is part of the whole due to the fact that they belong to the society living in them and which transcends them historically, as “poor citizen”\(^2\). Therefore, as target of assistance to which they have no right, and by contributing only through their presence to strengthen the rights of (other) citizens to have their taxes efficiently directed to practices of the control of poverty, the poor person is placed outside. Nonetheless, “this being outside is only a particular kind of interaction with it [the group] that weaves one into a union with the whole in this widest sense” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 417).

Following Scribano’s arguments, the “policies of bodies” are defined as “the strategies a society accepts to attend to the social availability of individuals [becoming] a chapter, and not an insignificant one, of the structuring of power. Those strategies are tied and ‘strengthened’ by the policies of emotions that tend to regulate the development of the social sensitivity” (2009:146)*.

If this concept is connected to the logic of the outside that Simmel mentions to define the presence and position of the poor people in modern societies, one can state that being outside is the (only) way of being present for the bodies signaled as “unnecessary”, “expendable”, and “sterile” for capitalism (Scriban y Cervio, 2010). In this way, these policies of bodies created by and on which the capital operates not only do they structure the “legitimate” and/or “abject” sensitivities linked to the types of sensing/doing/perceiving but they also, in that same act, instantiate the logic of the “apartheid” as foundation of the experience of subjects who reproduce their day-to-day lives in contexts determined by various deprivations. And it is in this aspect that social policies aimed at “lessening”/ “suppressing”/ “administering” the different expressions of poverty weave (are woven) and connect (are connected by) the experiencing and sensitivities that these same policies create and recreate in the context of the dialectic between state practice and social practice.

**The Poor Person as Target and Final Action of Assistance**

According to Simmel, the aid to the poor person constitutes the final action of assistance, however, as above mentioned, its ultimate goal is the cohesion and reproduction of the order. From this viewpoint, one can state that the control and disciplining of the poor person is the object of a state action aimed at suppressing/lessening the social fallouts of an unfair and unequal system. Now, the fact that the body, the practices, the emotions and the (possible/impossible) sociabilities of the poor person are the privileged “targets” of state interventions makes it extremely relevant (theoretically and politically wise) to connect their study to the social structuring processes and to the current regimes of sensitivities in today’s system of accumulation.

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\(^2\) Taking into account the contradiction that established the modern State, apart from being poor, the individual is also a citizen and, as such, they “have their share in the entitlement that the law accords all citizens as a correlate of the duty of the state to support the poor” (Simmel, [1908] 2009: 416).
From the abovementioned viewpoint, referring to the dimension of sensations and their connections with processes of social structuring adverts to the inevitable link between corporeality/sensitivity. Having as a starting point the assumption that the world is known by and through the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1985), impressions of objects, of processes and of the others structure the web of perceptions, emotions and sensations that subjects accumulate and reproduce from their exchanges with the social-environmental context. From this analytical perspective, emotions, defined as states of sensing oneself and sensing the world, conduct the perceptions associated to the socially created types of sensations (Scribano, 2009). Therefore, the (indissoluble) pair body/sensation becomes the material support of/ for the in-corporation of social domination that becomes emotion and experience of one’s own body, of the world, of things, and of the others.

In turn, the regimes of social sensitivity are materialized in practices (doing, saying, and remembering) ruled by devices regulating feelings of the world (fear, foul mood, resignation, helplessness, happiness, hope, etc.) and by mechanisms which make them bearable (oblivion, habit-forming, waiting, patience, etc.). Following Scribano’s theory (2009), behind both of these procedures one finds the phantasmagoric rationale of the capital, blocking conflicts and limiting, in that way, the possibility to re-act before a world increasingly dehumanized, more painful.

Reweaving this analytic perspective with Simmel’s abovementioned contributions, one can observe the way the center of gravity of an assistance rationale, which makes the poor person the goal and final action of assistance, entwines the processes of social structuring through the determination of sensitivities.

In fact, acting on (and being the result of) the current model of accumulation, public policies aimed at tackling poverty are not merely restricted to material dimensions; they also operate on symbolic aspects of life, associated to cognitive-affective dimensions. Fulfilling this specific task of structuring, public policies establish and reproduce (provoking, imposing and/or making null, suppressing) certain social images and stereotypes of women, men, workers, the unemployed, the deprived, etc. (De Sena y Cena, 2014). These models accumulate sediments, while unnoticed, in emotions –for instance, suspicion arising in relation to the “use” by beneficiaries of resources obtained from a particular social program– giving way to the shaping of sensitivities that organize and define the forms of experiencing (oneself) of subjects intervened by the actions of the State (Scribano y De Sena, 2013).

In other words, it is assumed that social policies are “creators” of sensitivities. Operating as practices and mediations between sociabilities and experiences of subjects (“beneficiaries”/ “the deprived” / “the

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3 In this article, some distance is kept from certain approaches that, to conduct their analysis, break up the pair body-sensation as if they referred to different/distinguishable dimensions of the construction of subjectivity and of the action in/on the world. On the contrary, it is assumed in this paper that sensing oneself in body/ a body refers to a cognitive-affective dimension displayed by subjects to experience (themselves) in the context of materiality that embodied experiences of the social imply (and impose).

4 The notion of domination used here refers to the relations between the structure of regulation, subjection and distribution of capabilities and powers, as developed by Lefebvre (1978). Likewise, its complement is Scribano’s definition, for whom “the creation of the social forms of domination is characterized by the appropriation, predation, and recycling of bodily and social energies” (2009: 142). These energy extractions, summarized in the maxim of “to be and to be-present-for-others”, weave (themselves in) a group of experiences and sensitivities from which capitalism “operates” becoming a body, a memory and a narrative on the world.

5 The “devices for the regulation of sensitivities” and the “mechanisms of social bearability” regulate expectations and foster the avoidance of conflict; the former, by “embodying” the practices to avoid conflicts and antagonisms which contribute to life being experienced as an eternal “it will never change”; the latter, normalizing the tension between senses, perceptions, and sensations structuring the individual and collective forms of appreciation and self-appreciation in the world (Scribano, 2009).

6 “Sociability is a way to explain the forms in which agents live and co-exist when inter-acting. Experiencing is defined as a form of expressing senses acquired by being-in-body with others as a result, on the one hand, of “experiencing” the dialect between the individual, social and subjective dimensions of the body; and, on the other hand, of the rationales of appropriation of bodily and social energies” (Scribano, 2010: 174).
sensitized”), sensitivities act as a support net for conflict making those structural inequalities which gave way to (and will keep giving way to) State interventions become “bearable”.

4. Urban Poverty and Social Programs in Today’s Argentina

The courses of action determined and defined by the State under the generic form of public policies commence when the relevance of a “problem” needing the attention of the State is detected and established, the State implements a series of actions aimed at suppressing, lessening, or simply administering it. “Detecting” and appointing “priorities” implied in the operational definition of a social problem needing “to be solved” is the object and result of symbolic, theoretical, political, and economic struggles (sensu Bourdieu). In this way, both identifying the issue and choosing the strategies to settle it recurring to state programs are the object of disputes (Grassi, 2003). In fact, a specific social issue (unemployment, housing deficit, decline in the quality of education, etc.) is part of a framework of arguments and theoretical-political-economic explanations where struggles between groups with different interests linked to specific projects of a society intersect (Oszlak y O’Donnell, 1976; Medellín Torres, 2004; Adelantado, 2009; Halperin Weisburd, 2011). Therefore, disputes involved in the “definition” of the issue also include: a) the definition of the causes, b) the appointment of liabilities, c) the definition of proper fields for solutions, d) the characteristics of the required expertise to manage attention, and e) the scope of political will of and for the intervention.

From this perspective, to consider social policies implies contrasting them with the processes of social structuring and with the characteristics of the pattern of accumulation of the current phase of capitalism. Framed in this way, a critical outlook on state intervention makes compulsory to question the impacts interventions have on the forms their targets dwell in, experience, perceive, and sense their own conditions of deprivation/need (Danani, 2004; De Sena, 2014; Cervio y D’hers, 2012).

According to estimates by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2014), in 2013, 165 million Latin Americans were poor (28.1%); of this total, 69 million people lived in extreme poverty or indigence (11.7%), having this body forecasted no statistically significant changes in both indexes for 2014.

The approach implemented by several national bodies of the region to measure poverty is based on the level of income, to the point that the differences registered in this index are analyzed in relation to two elements: the evolution of average income of people and the transformations in the distribution of that income. This form of measurement coincides, in general terms, with the methodology implemented by the main social programs aimed at tackling poverty which were first put into practice in Latin America in the 90s and then massively implemented from 2000 on: the Conditional Cash Transfer Program (CCTP).

This type of programs are fostered by countries’ administrations, having the support of international financial institutions, as a manner of “tackling” poverty (focused on the level of income) and of restricting its’ passing to other generations. In 2010, the CCTP reached more than 25 million Latin American and Caribbean families, getting to include 113 million people, i.e. 19% of the total population, and involving a cost near to 0.4% of the regional GDP (Cecchini y Madariaga, 2011:7).

\[\text{In the last report by the ECLAC, advances towards a multidimensional measurement of poverty have been introduced, so along with income, other non-monetary dimensions are considered (for instance, employment, social protection, and education lag) that make it possible to reduce mistakes of inclusion/exclusion when identifying poor people in Latin America. Nevertheless, the body asserts that the available information is still subject to the data of household surveys of each country, whose concepts and data collection instruments vary, situation that hampers the multidimensional quantification of poverty in the region. (CEPAL, 2014: 73).}\]

\[\text{Specialized literature establishes a difference between Conditional Income Transfer Programs (CITP) and Conditional Cash Transfer Programs (CCTP). For the purposes of this article, both concepts are considered equivalent.}\]

\[\text{Even though the CCTP does not encompass every type of state intervention on poverty, a decision was reached to consider it as a reference for the analytical approach of this article due to it being one of the most widespread forms at present both at the regional and national levels.}\]
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Through the CCTP States transfer money to “poor” households in exchange of a commitment given by the beneficiaries\(^{10}\). More specifically, the condition is that families make investments –previously specified by the public bodies in charge of the operation– aimed at making the “human capital” of the target people accumulate, especially in relation to health, nutrition, and education. The basic assumption behind the CCTP is not just to reduce immediate poverty in terms of income deficit but also to promote the social inclusion of families by developing human capabilities that enable, in the long term, “to skip the vicious circle” of poverty.

Being eligible for the benefit means the so called “beneficiaries” need to demonstrate they have certain qualities individually and as a family related to the “poverty situation”. In turn, continuing in the program depends on complying with a series of actions and behaviors expected from the beneficiaries in order to achieve their “social inclusion” and to restrain the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. For instance, depending on countries and programs’ requirements, beneficiaries have to: demonstrate they have reached specific levels of nutrition, have their children and pregnant women take medical tests, attend to training courses, prove having registered to school and attended there regularly, etc. (Cena y Chahbenderian, 2015).

In Argentina, the CCTP has emerged and developed massively since the 2000s. In terms of their scope, the most representative ones are the “Unemployed Head of Household Plan” [“Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados”] (2002-2005), and the “Families for Social Inclusion Plan” [“Familias por la Inclusión Social”] (2005-2010). Currently, the main programs of this kind which exist still today in the country are the “Universal Child Allowance for Social Protection” [“Asignación Universal por Hijo para Protección Social” (AUH)], the “Allowance for Social Protection for Pregnant Women” [“Asignación por Embarazo para Protección Social”], the program “Social Income with Work – Argentina Works” [“Ingreso Social con Trabajo – Argentina Trabaja”], and the “Program to support Students in Argentina” [“Programa de Respaldo a Estudiantes Argentinos” (PROG.R.ES.AR)].

Lacking statistical data corresponding to Argentina\(^{11}\), and given that official information available on the CCTP is scattered in various places, one of the problems encountered when studying this kind of programs (and other fundamental socio-economic indicators) resides in being unable to handle consistent and reliable data. However, for some years up to now several private efforts have attempted to register and build information, which enable developing a global approach of the phenomenon being studied.

Regarding poverty and social programs in Argentina in the present, some of the most significant data may be summarized as follows:

- Taking into account the 60 social programs administered by the national government, in 2014 18 million benefits\(^{12}\) were collected worth more than 120 million pesos, which accounts for 14% of the annual budget\(^{13}\). From this total, three conditional transfer programs (AUH, PROGRESAR, and Argentina Works) account for 36% of all the social plans granted nationwide (Hilding Ohlsson, 2014: 14).

- In turn, taking into account the performance of some indicators tested by the Barometer of Social Debt of Argentina – Bicentenary (2010-2016)/ Year V [Barómetro de la Deuda Social Argentina –Bicentenario], created by the Observatory of Social Debt of Argentina [Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina, ODSA] of the Catholic University of Argentina [Universidad Católica Argentina]\(^{14}\), for 2014 one can observe:

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10 While transfers are usually in cash, some programs supply food, clothing, school items, or certain services related to education, health, and work, such as training courses, informational or educational conferences, etc.

11 Even though the National Institute of Statistics (INDEC) prepares and publishes periodic reports, since early 2007 it has been politically intervened, which leads to the fact that their data lack reliability.

12 The estimate number for the beneficiaries is lower given that an individual might receive more than one plan simultaneously.

13 This total does not include the social plans and programs implemented by provinces and districts in the country, which in several cases overlap with the ones granted by the national government.

14 This survey was conducted during the fourth quarter of 2014 to a representative sample (in terms of probability) of 5,683 urban households of different regions of the country. Consequently, this data can be generalized to every household and adult population of Argentina residing, at that time, in cities of more than 80 thousand inhabitants.
28.7% of urban households are in a situation of poverty, and 6.4% live in indigent conditions. 

28.6% of households from the main urban centers in Argentina receive some kind of social program for employment or transfer of income. Taking into consideration exclusively those households whose incomes cannot afford to buy a basket of basic goods and services (situation of poverty), this value rises to more than 6 out of 10 (64%).

5 out of 10 households of a very low socioeconomic status (SES) receive some type of social program (50.1%). This figure increases up to 7 out of 10 when considering households of a very low SES whose day-to-day life falls into the situation of poverty (71.6%).

7 out of 10 poor households located in shanty towns and squatter settlements in Argentina receive some kind of monthly income transfer (78.6%) enabling them to access the market of goods to meet their basic needs.

In the case of the poor households who are beneficiaries of social programs, most of the heads of households are women (66.7%), having incomplete secondary education (68.1%), being unemployed/subemployed (74.8%), or having a precarious job (69%). In turn, in 69.4% of these households kids are found; which underscores the need to resort to state assistance as a subsistence strategy.

Given many do not earn a proper income, or do not have a job with full rights, and that mechanisms of social protection are nonexistent, for several years up to the present millions of Argentinians have had to resort to the State to meet their basic needs. This situation appears as evident not only due to the fact that programs targeting the most poor sectors have broaden their scope—which can be observed, for instance, in the sharp budgetary rises aimed at broadening the scope of already available plans, or in the creation of new ones, in particular from 2012-2014 (Hilding Ohlsson, 2014). This can also be identified through the sustained decline in the living conditions of large sectors of the population who, while receiving social plans, keep reproducing their day-to-day lives in conditions of deprivation: even though poverty was reduced between 2010 and 2011, in 2014 it came to represent 28.7% of the Argentine population (ODSA, 2015).

In this context, the condition of “beneficiary” translates not only into an indicator of the access to state assistance. It is also the expression for a structural (and involuntary) situation of social expulsion of “socially unknown” subjects—in terms of their economic autonomy and the rights derived from them being part of the formal system of social security. Nonetheless, defining poverty as the result of a series of individual behaviors imperiling “human development”, the CCTP make subjects liable for the situation of deprivation suffered (past-present) and for the possibility of “leaving” that situation (future), rendering invisible the structural conditions that gave way to (and will keep on giving way to) state interventions that “fight against poverty” (De Sena, 2014; Cena y Chahbenderian, 2015).

The theoretical-political basis for the development of the CCTP as a privileged method to tackle poverty in the countries of the Global South at the turn of the 21st Century corresponds to Simmel’s view on the assistance to poor Europeans in the turn of the 20th Century. In fact, in both cases, assistance aims at ensuring

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15 The ODSA defines the poor as “those households/people whose income is lower than the money income threshold necessary to acquire in the market the value of a basket of basic goods and services (Total Basic Basket – CBT)”*. The indigent are defined as “those households/people whose income does not allow them to acquire the value of the Basic Food Basket (CBA). This basket includes a series of products necessary to fulfill a minimum threshold of nutritional needs –energy and protein requirements in respect of food intake” (ODSA, 2015: 30)*.

16 In order to analyze the capacity for economic subsistence of urban households in Argentina, the ODSA considers two types of economic transfers: a) those requiring to meet conditions to receive them, but which do not include the condition according to which the beneficiary has to work as a requirement of the program; and b) employment programs requiring a determinate amount of weekly hours of work.

17 In the study we have quoted, the variable “socioeconomic status” (SES) measures “the concentration of socio-educational capital of the family, the access to goods and technology, and general conditions of the residence. This index is classified into four categories, each one of the same size as the other: a) Medium-high (first quartile); b) Medium-low (second quartile); c) Low (third quartile); and d) Very low (fourth quartile)” (ODSA, 2015: 25)*.
the reproduction of the order, making available compensatory mechanisms which restrict conflict arising from socio-economic inequalities, the foundations of the capitalist regime of accumulation. This type of conflict management in hands of the state, characterized by Simmel as one of the particular roles of assistance, is updated in contemporary societies in the midst of the implementation of the CCTP. In fact, by preventing the poor person from becoming a threat to order, these programs foster the channeling of its energies (bodily, social, and biographical) in favor of the society by way of a (compensated/assisted/defined) development of a “human capital” that halts the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

In this way, social programs aimed at tackling the multiple expressions of poverty in urban environments articulate conflict avoidance (of the antagonisms brought about by structural conditions of social and economic inequality) with an energetic compensation (developed into a condition to access and to continue in the social programs) projected over the body and emotions of beneficiaries. Consequently, acquiring particular skills and aptitudes defined by the State as “individual investments” to strengthen “a fairer and more inclusive society” would occlude the structural conditioning that gives way to (and reproduces) the “social question” that social programs aim to tackle on behalf of the social well-being.

This structural occlusion, the grounds for the actions of state assistance, denies the poor person the right to make demands in relation to their situation (sensu Simmel), regardless of the benefits obtained from the specific operations in which they are included. All taken into consideration, the poor person shall be defined just as the passive target of a kind of assistance to which they have no longer any rights but the one derived from the reaction their condition of social expulsion provokes in other “legitimate” subjects (taxpayers, citizens, consumers, etc.). Consequently, social programs, having become forms of building and administering the “social question”, construct subjects and society; i.e., they build practices and social sensitivities, evolving into a key element of the policies of bodies/emotions.

5. Conclusion

Social policies whose object is poverty and the regimes of accumulation are tightly bound owing to the fact that if in the short term they enable some needs of the population to be fulfilled, in the long term the reproduction of the capital is guaranteed. Therefore, social policies become a guarantee for the reproduction of the prevailing order inasmuch as they regulate the levels of social conflict linked to the “flaws” of the capitalist system in two ways: on the one hand, having an impact on the material conditions of existence of the “target” groups; on the other hand, affecting the particular conditions and qualities of the access to health, food, education, work, etc. of the poorest sectors in society.

The State plays a key role in defining the “social question”, not only establishing priority issues and designing a series of programs to tackle them at a specific time and place, but also building practical and discourse constructions on the ways to define, measure, and approaching those problems. Therefore, the construction of the “social question” stems from struggles among groups (classes) to impose the universal way to define and approach “the social”. In particular, state interventions aimed at tackling the various ways poverty is expressed define the subjects that shall be included in the operations of their programs, the needs to be fulfilled (and the ones that shall not be met), the satisifiers linked to deprivations/needs identified, and the conditions for the entry and continuance of beneficiaries in the programs. This link between subjects-needs-satisfiers-conditionings constitutes the field where the state’s outlook on the poor and poverty is at stake.

Focusing on the CCTP implemented for some decades up to the present in almost every Latin American country, in general, and in Argentina, in particular, one observes that subjects are clearly rendered liable for their own deprivation/in need situation. Generally speaking, according to these state interventions poverty would stem from long-standing individual attitudes or behaviors which might be reversed through a series of actions defined and decided upon by the State, on behalf of “social well-being”. In other words, according to these programs poverty depends on the lack of “human” skills and/or capabilities and not on an unequal, unfair, and exclusionist system.
By determining the conditions for the entry and continuance in these social programs, the State defines not only the issue (poverty) and the subject (the poor person) but also the actions to be performed to “leave” that situation. Nonetheless, as shown by the abovementioned statistical data, even if the actions defined are carried out individually, the assisted subjects’ present (and future) keeps on reproducing itself under the same conditions of deprivation, i.e. under the same structural conditioning which remains as the logic of life these subjects have and can expect. In this sense, following Simmel’s arguments, assistance is introduced as the reproduction of the social order, i.e. as a tool to serve the purposes of the model of accumulation, enabling the reproduction of subjects whose day-to-day life unfolds against a background of expulsion, becoming precarious/poor bodies that the system needs in terms of the logic of its own expansion.

Through the definition of a group of practices, rules, appraisals, and expectations projected over the image of the “target”, public policies, in general, and social programs, in particular, have effects on the conditions of the reproduction of life of subjects, defining specific ways of doing, sensing, and perceiving of beneficiaries in relation to themselves, others and objects of the social world. From this reflexive frame, one can state that policies designed by the State to tackle structural fissures which impose a burden on social cohesion condense the possibilities to “name”, to “assign meaning”, and to “do” regarding the lives of others, becoming a key piece for the reproduction of social order.

An assumption of this article has been that the impact of the public policies on the (present and future) material conditions of existence of the target population gives way to the reproduction of the material base for the establishment of sensitivities. In other words, discourses, images of the world, definitions, and omissions –explicitly or implicitly– part of the universe of the state administration of poverty articulate with the social structuring processes, establishing an “effective” territory (material as well as affective) for the reproduction of social order. Therefore, besides “fulfilling” particular needs of the population, here the emphasis falls on the fact that public policies (also) operate on emotional aspects of life, given that by prescribing ways to do, to sense, and to perceive subjects and society are built.

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A. L. Cervio


*Translator’s Note: The quotations marked with an asterisk mean that, in those cases, the translation is ours.