
“The poor are us”: Middle-class poverty politics in Buenos Aires and Seattle

Victoria Lawson and Sarah Elwood

Department of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, Washington, USA;
e-mail: lawson@uw.edu; selwood@uw.edu

Santiago Canevaro and Nicolas Viotti

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones, Científicas y Técnicas, (CONICET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; e-mail: sancanevaro@gmail.com; nicolas.viotti@gmail.com

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Abstract. We investigate middle-class poverty politics in Seattle and Buenos Aires in a period of recovery from deep neoliberal economic crisis. Reading these cases in relation to one another allows us to examine what sorts of class subjects emerge in the US, which is theorized as remaining deeply entrenched in neoliberal governance and Argentina, conceptualized as postneoliberal. We investigate the poverty politics of middle-class residents engaged in anti- or pro-poor activism against homeless encampments or squatter settlements in urban neighborhoods. Rooted in relational poverty theory, we conceptualize these forms of activism as relational practices through which class subjectivities are reiterated or challenged through interactions across class lines. Specifically, we examine (i) how middle-class actors frame their differences or alliances with poorer residents and (ii) how these framings of middle-class selves and poorer others are expressed in poverty politics and cross-class antagonisms or alliances. Our analysis reveals poverty as a key site for the making of middle-class actors as individualized, aspirational, normative subjects in both countries. And yet the poverty politics of middle-class actors is not a foregone conclusion because cross-class alliances do arise, pointing toward the potential for alternative readings of class difference.

Keywords: Relational poverty, middle class, poverty politics, class subjects

Introduction

What happens to the poverty politics⁽¹⁾ of middle-class subjects in periods of recovery from deep neoliberal economic crisis? Scholars argue that in the UK and US, the political and cultural consensus of neoliberal governance remains remarkably robust, even as economic crises unfold (Hall et al., 2012: 3; Peck, 2001). However, in Argentina, the immediate postcrisis period witnessed class solidarities and more egalitarian politics that some label as “postneoliberal” (Luzzi, 2005; Svampa, 2005). We explore what happens to the neoliberal “sacred cow” of individualized, normatively aspirational middle-class subjects in the recovery period after crisis. Reading the US and Argentine cases in relation to one another reveals what sorts of class subjects emerge in a country theorized to remain deeply entrenched in neoliberal governance: the US, and a country conceptualized as postneoliberal: Argentina. Our project asks (i) how middle class (MC) actors frame their differences or similarities with poorer residents and (ii) how these understandings constitute poverty politics and cross-class antagonisms or alliances.

⁽¹⁾Poverty politics refers to ideas, discourses, and actions by social groups in response to poverty, either to ameliorate its effects or to defend themselves against its presence.

Within neoliberal governance, class identities and subjectivities are defined in terms of stark differences between “the poor” and the “successful.” MC actors are framed politically and culturally as the aspirational subjects of contemporary capitalism, whereas the poor are seen as flawed and in need of self-improvement. These framings bolster neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility for poverty and close off more collective responses to structural poverty. We study the poverty politics of MC residents who live near poor settlements in urban neighborhoods in Buenos Aires and Seattle. Our empirical project investigates the “relational practices” of anti-poor and pro-poor MC activism to understand their poverty politics. This comparative project calls into question theoretical framings of neoliberal class subjects that take the US experience as the norm, framing neoliberal class subjects as autonomous, entrepreneurial, and freedom loving (Brown, 2003; Lawson et al., 2012; Schram, 2000; Watkins, 1993). Accounts of neoliberal class subjects and poverty politics are often framed through Anglo-American lenses, paying insufficient attention to how these forms “become native” in specific places (Robinson, 2003; Roy, 2003; Sheppard et al., 2013). While much research has focused on class divisiveness, we explore what else, beyond entrenched individualism, is present in both countries. Our comparative approach explores the conditions under which more socially connected class identities and poverty politics arise. Through multidirectional learning across places and disciplines, our team of Argentine and U.S. researchers conducted 12 months of in-depth fieldwork analyzing cross-class relations in urban neighborhoods, investigating social imaginaries and cross-class alliances (rather than only individualisms) and enacted poverty politics that arise from struggles over urban space.

This project is rooted in relational poverty theory, which understands poverty to be produced by powerful others (Mosse, 2010). This research theorizes “non-poor” actors (such as MC) as deeply implicated in the production and transformation of poverty through their roles in legitimating political-economic and social relations of difference (Du Toit, 2009; Roy, 2012). Relational poverty research traces (i) how poverty is produced through dispossession or adverse incorporation into capitalist economies (Peck, 2001; Harvey, 2005); (ii) the cultural and political production of class through discourses of difference (Schram, 2000); (iii) performances of class identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Watkins, 1993); and (iv) governance of liberal individualism (Brown, 2003). Relational poverty research focuses on how class difference arises in struggles between elites and workers (Harvey, 2005; Lawson et al., 2008); however, much less attention has been paid to MC actors or to practices that build class alliances rather than always reinscribing difference.

While relational poverty research has been conducted in places as diverse as India, Uganda, Argentina, South Africa, and the US, little work has engaged in comparative analysis across global north and south. Our comparison certainly confirms the presence of anti-poor activism in both cities by MC actors along with its individualistic poverty politics that blames the poor for being flawed and in need of reform. However, the comparison also reveals that MC poverty politics are not entirely as theory leads us to expect. By posing conceptual questions from one place to the other, we reveal the complexities of MC poverty politics, including unexpected cross-class alliances. Alliances matter because they bring together class subjects who see themselves as connected to the poor, rather than in opposition, articulating class identities based on commonalities rather than differences. Furthermore, they reveal actually existing alternatives to neoliberal individualism and its poverty politics of personal responsibility and self-improvement, understanding poverty as structural and related to MC privilege. By dedicating theoretical attention to relational practices of both anti-poor and pro-poor MC activism, we extend prior work that prioritizes the reproduction of class boundaries and antagonisms. By decentering Anglo-American theorizations of neoliberal class subjects and MC poverty politics, our analysis of relational

practices reveals where and when a poverty politics of individualism or more socially connected forms arise.

Theorizing and comparing middle-class poverty politics

This section theorizes MC subjects as playing a crucial role in the normalization of liberal individualism through their engagements with poverty and poor others. Our approach does not fix MC as a discrete category, but rather understands MC as simultaneously a material position, a social imaginary, and a strategy of governance (Bourdieu, 1984; Crompton, 2008).⁽²⁾ In what follows, we discuss the ways in which aspirational MC subjects are produced in relation to poverty and poor others through relational practices (see also Fernandes and Heller, 2011). We situate these practices in a comparison of periods of economic recovery in Argentina (argued to be postneoliberal) and the U.S. (theorized as still entrenched in neoliberal governance) to explore where, when, and how MC individualism is re-entrenched or more socially connected poverty politics may arise.

Relational poverty research traces how political and cultural framings of idealized modern subjects (autonomous, entrepreneurial, freedom loving) are also always framings of class subjects. Building on enduring historical narratives, neoliberalized contexts intensify the scripting of poor people as flawed, racialized, and immoral, in opposition to MC subjects who are framed as whitened, socially mobile, respectable, and personally responsible (Adamovsky, 2009; Elwood et al., 2015; Roy, 2012). Theorists argue that these framings of MC-ness reinforce a cultural consensus around the social relations of neoliberal capitalism by prioritizing and rewarding individuals' relationships to markets, financial autonomy, and competitiveness (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; O'Connor, 2002). To the extent that MC subjects consent to this normalized identity, they reproduce class difference (Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Lawson et al., 2008). This idealized MC plays a crucial political role because this imaginary constitutes the normalized “contented majority” that simultaneously bolsters and depoliticizes both class privilege and poverty (Zizek, 2000; Zweig, 2000). Specifically, if MC subjects are self-made, then neither the state nor private enterprises have any responsibility for addressing poverty or redistributing privilege. Because of their centrality in these discourses, MC actors play crucial roles in framing dominant understandings of who is poor, why they are poor, and what should be done about poverty.

We unpack these class dynamics through a focus on *relational practices* in residential spaces. Fernandes and Heller (2011) have drawn attention to MC class practices to understand how MC actors distinguish themselves from lower classes through the activation of economic, social, and cultural capitals (from Bourdieu, 1984). Our focus on relational practices moves beyond an emphasis on symbolic and material productions of difference to explore grounded activities of direct service provision, community organizing, and policy advocacy that bring MC people into close contact with poverty and poor others. These practices are a window into how individualistic or more collective imaginaries are negotiated, transformed, and actually enlisted in producing particular class subjects and poverty politics. By comparing seemingly similar forms of relational practices to each other—anti-poor and then pro-poor activisms in Seattle and Buenos Aires—we uncover specific forms of class identity, difference making or alliances, and poverty politics that emerge and are reworked in different contexts.

MC-ness is historically constituted in similar ways in Argentina and the US. In both countries, MC is understood as a dominantly White, Euro-descended national identity conferred on citizen-subjects who are idealized as entrepreneurial, autonomous, self-reliant, and personally responsible (Adamovsky, 2009; Brown, 2003; Garguin, 2012; Germani,

⁽²⁾MC always codes in shifting and heterogeneous ways inflected through racialization, national identity, and place.

1981; Grimson, 2007; Guano, 2002; Jackson, 1985; Ruben, 2001; Sautú, 2001). However, theorists suggest differences in MC subjectivity in each country, making our comparison of the contemporary period of recovery in Argentina and the US fruitful. Both countries endured deep neoliberal economic crises, Argentina in 2001 and the US in 2008. But according to World Bank data, both are now in economic recovery. In Argentina, economic growth has averaged 5% yearly since 2003 and levels of unemployment and poverty have fallen dramatically and in the US, economic recovery has begun, but slowly, with 2% average growth since 2010 (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>). Comparing MC identities and poverty politics during economic recovery reveals whether “competitive individualism” (emphasized in Euro-centric theory), deeply divided class subjects and antagonistic poverty politics are operative both places or whether the individualized MC subject is ever reframed as a “social being,” rooted in a more collective social imaginary. Some argue that in contrast with a still-entrenched US individualism, conceptions of “the individual” in Argentine scholarship are in tension with a more extended idea of the “social.” O’Donnell (1984) argues for an Argentinean “corporate individualism,” and others argue that “social ties” were a common resource during the economic crisis, coupled with a declining emphasis on ideals of neoliberal subjectivity (Kessler and Di Virgilio, 2008).

These differences prompt our investigation of whether MC dynamics in the Argentine economic recovery period is generative for theorizing postcrisis poverty politics in the US. A more collectivist “social analysis” solidified in Argentina post 2001 wherein some MC citizens blamed the state, corporate banks, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for poverty and middle-class vulnerability, rather than reinforcing anti-poor antagonisms (Adamovsky, 2009). This period has been dubbed “post-neoliberal” in that multiple forms of political power, emerging from grassroots movements, workplaces, and neighborhoods, reworked class politics around poverty and inequality (Brand and Sekler, 2009; Escobar, 2010; Massey, 2012). The 2001 crisis spawned the election of left-leaning governments of the Kirchners (2003–2007) that pushed for international financial autonomy and challenged neoliberal ideologies (Yates and Bakker, 2014). Beyond government policies, other innovations emerged from social mobilizations, such as “*fábricas recuperadas*” (worker owned/managed factories), cross-class neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas barriales*), and barter clubs (*clubs de trueque*) and broad support for social transfer payments for poor and MC families (Luzzi, 2005; Svampa, 2005). Some scholars caution however that postneoliberalism in Latin America is partial and fractured, raising questions about whether these more collective class identities have persisted since crisis (Gago and Sztulwark, 2009; Villalon, 2007). There are continuities with the neoliberal nineties alongside social innovations and more egalitarian politics of the last decade. Kessler’s (2014) analysis of inequalities during the Kirchner’s governments argues for a multifaceted inequality. While some aspects of social inequality have improved in terms of gender and childhood rights, inequality and poverty remain central and controversial problems that suggest limits to social solidarity.

In contrast to framings of Argentina as postneoliberal, US neoliberalism has been theorized as unassailable. Peck et al. (2010) emphasize its intractability because of the thoroughgoing neoliberalization of countless social, political, and economic processes, and the seamless accommodation of prior crises within neoliberal agendas. In the US, the 2008 crisis did not lead to a societal shift in explanations for causes of poverty, but instead generated responses that reinscribed MC normativity and resistance to social assistance for the poor. For instance, the White House Middle Class Task Force’s focus on MC people as most in need is symptomatic of the US government’s response to the crisis, along with policy responses aimed at stabilizing MC homeownership during the foreclosure crisis. This period saw heated backlash across the country against expanded social assistance measures such as temporary emergency extensions of unemployment insurance and

expansions in food stamps (Kristoff, 2013; Lubrano, 2010). Despite substantial suffering, political resistance unleashed since the Great Recession led to the extension of tax cuts for the rich as well as fiscal retrenchment that gutted many social programs—once again deepening the neoliberal rationality of personal responsibility for poverty (Censky, 2011; Krugman, 2013). These framings of the US as rigidly entrenched in neoliberal politics and Argentina as postneoliberal suggest the productive possibilities of comparison, of posing questions about MC poverty politics from each context to the other.

Research design: Comparing cross-class engagements⁽³⁾

Our comparative research design is rooted in the epistemological commitments of relational poverty work that “de-familiarizes” monistic knowledge claims about the production of class difference. We theorize MC poverty politics as shaped by geo-historical context in ways that lead to new conceptual insights. In doing so, our comparison builds concepts from an empirical site (Argentina) assumed by Anglo poverty theory to be “abnormal” in order to call into question preexisting theoretical generalizations about MC poverty politics (Sheppard, et.al. 2013). Our collaborative theorizing by Argentine and US-based researchers renders the forms, limits, and possibilities of poverty politics in each site both familiar and strange and raises critical questions that might otherwise be taken for granted by local researchers. Our comparison of anti-poor and pro-poor politics is not drawn on the basis of exact empirical equivalence, but on the basis of the forms of MC poverty action that actually exist in each city. For example, that pro-poor politics take such distinct forms (left-wing activism and a faith-based group) is theoretically informative because they reveal the kinds of spaces in which more progressive poverty politics *can even exist*. These differences are precisely what needs to be theorized in order to understand how poverty politics are framed, limited, or emergent in each place. Ultimately, we are interested in *grounded expressions of a similar process*: the making of MC identities in relation to poverty.

Our empirical research focuses on “relational class practices” of pro-poor and anti-poor activism to understand the production of MC class subjects, cross-class boundaries or alliances, and poverty politics in each country. In these distinct urban contexts, we explore the ways in which MC subjects frame their identities in relation to poor others; where, when, and how cross-class boundaries or alliances solidify; and what forms they take. This comparison prompts questions about what Argentina can teach us about class subjects and poverty politics in the US. What can the US reveal about poverty politics and the construction of middle-class identities in Argentina? Do other-than-neoliberal class politics emerge in the wake of the Great Recession in the US? Are the more collective responses and structural critiques of poverty evident in the recovery period in Argentina accompanied by a reassertion of neoliberal social constructs? Our comparative analysis nuances north-centric framings of neoliberalism and broadly celebratory framings of postneoliberal alternatives in Latin America.

We conducted a 12-month comparative case study in two residential neighborhoods in Seattle and Buenos Aires in 2012–2013. The spaces of urban everyday life are key sites where class subject positions are negotiated, reinscribed, and resisted (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Leitner et al., 2007; Lemanski, 2006). We examine mixed income neighborhoods where MC and poor actors are in close juxtaposition. Our research sites, Edgewood in Seattle and El Bosque in Buenos Aires, each have MC and poorer residents, as well as social assistance organizations and sites where residents come into contact. Both neighborhoods have

⁽³⁾All quotes from Buenos Aires were translated from Spanish by the authors. All names of places, individuals, and organizations are pseudonyms. Unnamed speakers requested anonymity or did not provide a name.

experienced an influx of new MC residents and tentative signs of gentrification evident in new shops, restaurants, and townhouses. Severe poverty is also present, and each neighborhood is home to a homeless encampment or squatter settlement.⁽⁴⁾

In El Bosque, Villa Esperanza is an informal settlement occupying national railway land. Founded in 1994 by railway workers, the settlement is home to approximately 3500 people, some in permanent structures. Residents are diverse in age, gender, and race; some are Argentinean, and others are immigrants from Bolivia and Peru. Residents live in a complex political and social environment with several leftist movements and Catholic base communities active in the settlement advancing social justice, side by side with violence, drug trafficking, and organized crime. In Seattle, Camp Take Notice is a self-governed homeless encampment founded in 2008. It occupied publically owned land in Edgewood from 2010 until its eviction in 2013.⁽⁵⁾ While in Edgewood, Camp Take Notice was home to 100–200 people, including families with children, single adults, young and elderly, men, and women. The settlement included White, Latino, and African American residents, as well as immigrants. Like Villa Esperanza, which grew after the crisis of 2001, Camp Take Notice was founded on the brink of the U.S. banking and housing crisis and grew throughout the Great Recession.

El Bosque and Edgewood are also productive comparisons because each was the site of mobilizations in which MC residents took action to resist or support poorer neighbors in the settlements.⁽⁶⁾ These actions were undertaken by community organizations, residents' associations, and faith-based organizations. Their pro-poor and anti-poor activisms are relational class practices that provide insight into how class subjects are framed and how poverty politics unfold. Within these relational practices, MC subjects negotiate what it means to poor or MC, what should be done to assist struggling residents, what forms of assistance are appropriate, who is blamed for poverty and who is seen as in need of what.⁽⁷⁾

In Edgewood, the Neighborhood Action Council (NAC) is a community organization rooted in the US tradition of town meetings for democratic deliberation about neighborhood life. Since the 1990s, NAC has organized neighborhood social events, recruits new housing and business development, competes for public funds for infrastructural improvements, and coordinates official citizen consultation/participation processes in the neighborhood. It meets monthly and receives no public funding. Volunteers carry out its activities. Anyone may participate, but participants are primarily White MC homeowners. From 2011 to 2013, NAC mobilized neighbors in opposition to Camp Take Notice, seeking its eviction. Members organized phone and letter writing campaigns to government officials, lobbied public opinion through mainstream and citizen media, and testified at public hearings.

Edgewood is also home to Neighbors in Faith (NIF), a decade-old group of volunteers from churches and synagogues that assist poor and homeless people. The group meets monthly to coordinate activities of member congregations. It is incorporated as a nonprofit but receives no external funding. Throughout Camp Take Notice's time in Edgewood, NIF

⁽⁴⁾Our project is centered on poverty and class identities and relations, not homelessness or squatting. We explore how MC residents understand, explain, and act in response to these visible presences of poverty and poor people in the spaces of their everyday neighborhood lives.

⁽⁵⁾Camp Take Notice moved among multiple sites in Seattle before coming to Edgewood and after its eviction, divided into three smaller camps on privately owned or church property.

⁽⁶⁾The activist organizations we researched are not identical because we are not comparing for equivalence. Rather, we theorize the particular forms of anti- or pro-poor activism in each city in relation to the geo-historical contexts that produce them.

⁽⁷⁾Use of pro-poor and anti-poor refers to the poverty politics expressed by neighborhood residents participating in these mobilizations, not to individual research subjects.

members provided residents with food, clothing, transportation, child care, and help with employment and housing search. During this period, NIF engaged in pro-poor activism, including campaigns targeting government officials, lobbying for expanded shelter provision, and increases in social service funding. As pressure to evict Camp Take Notice mounted in 2013, they mobilized MC residents to appeal to City Council and held nightly gatherings near Camp Take Notice (described as “vigil” not “protest”). This pro-poor orientation is unusual in Edgewood, where most other cross-class interactions around poverty are either apolitical (voluntary assistance programs, often nongovernmental organization based) or antagonistic, as with NAC.

In El Bosque, Vecinos is a MC group of residents organized in opposition to Villa Esperanza. The group receives no public or private funding for their work and is not affiliated with any political party. They protest the settlement, expressing racist and classist views on social media (<http://asentamientoenchacarita.blogspot.com.ar/2014/09/desalojo-en-los-terrenos-linderos-con.html>), they organize meetings and lobby police and city government demanding action. Their meetings take place in private houses, members wish to remain anonymous and they complain about drug sales, petty thefts, the presence of “illegal occupants” and “corrupt politicians.” Like NAC, they seek eviction of Villa Esperanza. Their desire for anonymity speaks to the very different context (tolerance) for anti-poor activism in Buenos Aires as compared to Seattle. Their activism contrasts with a broadly progressive politics across the city arguing that a severe housing crisis limits poorer people’s access to land and loans.

El Bosque is also home to a pro-poor activist cooperative called La Cooperativa that works in support and solidarity with Villa Esperanza. La Cooperativa was founded by socialist activists before the crisis of 2001 and is part of long-standing collectivist politics in Argentina. Situated adjacent to Villa Esperanza and also occupying national railroad property, it houses a cooperative pharmacy, community education program, alternative radio, nonprofit youth/cultural/arts groups, and organic food market. La Cooperativa members have organized in coalition with settlement residents against the shared threat of eviction.⁽⁸⁾

We interviewed 40 MC residents across these neighborhoods, including roughly equal numbers of mostly White men and women, ranging in age from 20s to 70s. Our interviewees self-identified as MC, and this is reflected in their occupational status, education, housing tenure, and lifestyle/consumption practices. We identified them through observation at meetings in both cities or by recommendations from community and organization leaders. In tape-recorded semi-structured interviews of 30–90 minutes, we asked interviewees when and why they moved to the neighborhood, positive and negative aspects of neighborhood life and their local activities, including the pro-poor and anti-poor mobilizations. We also observed public meetings and community events and analyzed archival materials such as community meeting agendas and media and blog coverage.

Our analysis focuses on MC people themselves, seeking their characterizations of MC and poorer subjects and their expressed and enacted poverty politics (who is poor, why, what should be done). Following established practices for inductive interpretive analysis (McKian, 2010), our empirical discussion draws on selected quotes that represent themes repeated across the interviews and takes frequently expressed statements as illustrative of broader social imaginaries about poverty and class. We triangulated across archival, observational, and interview data to build our interpretations.

⁽⁸⁾Such experiences of cooperation are common in poor neighborhoods and villas. Since the 1960s, progressive organizations have promoted cooperation between poor residents and mostly middle-class activists from different backgrounds. Dozens of left-wing “territorial movements” (autonomous or belonging to radical left-wing parties) militate daily in Buenos Aires’ shantytowns.

Collaboration is essential to our comparison because each place and team of researchers are differently positioned within circuits of poverty knowledge and neoliberal politics. Over three years, we worked together on all aspects of this project, including formulating research questions and design, conducting fieldwork, framing the objects of comparison, analysis and writing. Working in both countries and languages, all members of the research team analyzed field materials from both cases, differences in poverty governance and social policy regimes, and the agenda-setting power of different social groups (elites, MC, poorer groups). Our collaboration critically rereads Anglo-American assumptions about MC poverty politics and claims about a “postneoliberal” Argentina by taking seriously the conceptual insights that pose questions from each place to the other.

Negotiating class subjects and poverty politics

We now turn to our findings about the nature of MC class practices in each city: anti- and pro-poor activism. Anti-poor activism: the NAC and Vecinos section compares forms of anti-poor activism across Buenos Aires and Seattle. We trace how MC residents frame themselves as normative individuals, whether they engage in class boundary making and how each activist group rationalizes a politics of eviction. Pro-poor activism: the NIF and la Cooperativa section turns attention to pro-poor activism, exploring the extent to which MC activists engage poorer residents as members of a common community. Our comparison explores the ways in which class distinctions are broken down, how poverty is understood, what actions address poverty, and the political agency ascribed to poor residents.

Anti-poor activism: NAC and Vecinos

In both cities, we encountered MC people allied in opposition to impoverished neighbors with the common goal of evicting them. Seeking to eject the poorest residents, these MC poverty politics in Buenos Aires and Seattle are on one level virtually identical—a relational practice of class boundary making. In both places, anti-poor activists frame poor subjects as lazy, dirty, and lawbreaking, and blame them for destroying a clean, beautiful, quiet, and safe neighborhood aesthetic. In Seattle, Terri, a White homeowner and administrative assistant who describes her background as “real middle class” says of Camp Take Notice’s presence in Edgewood, “...*drug use has gone up, and... they’re trashing stuff.*” NAC member Scott, a lower MC African American homeowner, assumes its residents are dangerous, saying, “[I] look at ‘em differently, like they’re a criminal...I don’t wanna turn my back, you know? I don’t know who they are.” In Buenos Aires, Mariela, a White lawyer and homeowner, frames the impact of Villa Esperanza in nearly identical terms, “...*the slum is ruining everything. A lot of people who live across the street from it are scared because they rob people, they steal stereos, people cannot leave their car in the street, kids cannot go out on their own.*” Marianna a 20-something dental student says, “*But there is real damage to the neighborhood, the filth, the violence. I cannot come home alone at night. My friends cannot come whenever they want.*”

These arguments superficially focus on crime and pollution, but also invoke powerful moral framings of poorer inhabitants as impoverished because of individual failings: poor choices and lack of effort. Terri asserts that Camp Take Notice residents “*never wanted to do any better,*” while another NAC member speaking against the encampment says “...*this is where they want to be. There isn’t a lot of ‘bettering’ here*” (2011, anonymous White male at NAC forum). In Buenos Aires, Vecinos members similarly disparage their poorer neighbors, often pointing to “*a lack of personal effort*” when asked to explain why people live in Villa Esperanza. One neighbor commented “*People are dirty; they drop bags, garbage, everything out there in the street. None of them care...They all live together in one room, they don’t care. And even worse, they have that music on all day, they listen to cumbia the whole day and*

it's very hard to live with.”⁽⁹⁾ These framings often include derogatory racial references to Villa Esperanza residents as “*negros*” (referring to people from Bolivia, Paraguay, or Perú) or “*bolitas*” (referring to Bolivian migrants) and references to “offensive” practices such as living in large families or hanging out in the streets.

These condemnations emerge in anti-poor activism as a justification for eviction of undeserving poorer residents, but they also reinforce MC normativity, whiteness, and deservingness. Judgments of poorer residents are framed in opposition to a MC subject viewed as respectable, clean, and hardworking. Seattle homeowner and NAC member Melanie says, “*We’re trying to make this a good neighborhood...[and we’re] cleaning it up.*” “Cleaning up” the neighborhood secures the MC identities of Melanie and her neighbors by removing homeless people. NAC member Scott, who underscored the supposed criminality of Camp Take Notice residents and supported their eviction says, “*I let some of them mow my yard, and I give ‘em \$25.... You know, I’m trying to help ‘em out as much as I can, trying to be a, a guy who would want to help them out.*” Scott juxtaposes the supposedly criminal poor person against his own idealized self. He is the “guy who helps them out” even as he views “them” as inherently threatening.

In Buenos Aires, Vecinos members similarly position their own goodness and hard work in contrast to undeserving poor residents. One resident argued, “*This neighborhood was built thanks to the effort of migrants and working people. Nobody gave us anything for free here. But these people, they don’t belong here. They came because they are opportunistic. They found their way here and because no one said anything, they built their houses and stayed*” (Anon White resident). Poor neighbors framed as dirty, noisy, and lazy are assumed to threaten the MC neighborhood aesthetic that more privileged residents have worked hard to create: “*This is a middle class neighborhood where people seek a quiet life-style, because there are more trees. It’s a unique neighborhood of Buenos Aires, with paving and stone curbs*” (Mariela). These framings produce class difference and shore up class boundaries by cementing imaginaries of the poor as different and the MC subject as clean, moral, law abiding, and rights bearing.

In both Buenos Aires and Seattle, anti-poor activism maps poverty and privilege onto individuals’ choices, behaviors, and morals. Yet a close comparison of statements about poverty and poorer neighbors reveals differences in the depth of this choice-based narrative about poverty and poorer people. Among anti-poor activists in El Bosque, even their strong condemnations of poor people tend to be qualified. Eugenio, a 60-year-old shopkeeper in El Bosque says at first that poor residents are, “*all thieves who live on drug trafficking and drug selling,*” but later says “[N]ot all of them are in this business and there might be hard-working people.” He resists blaming the settlement’s existence on its residents, saying, “*... it’s not people’s fault...*” Even as El Bosque resident Marianna condemns supposed violence and filth among the poor of Villa Esperanza (see above), she also says, “*[The problem is] not the people, it’s the way people live... I know they are not there because they want to be, but because they cannot or...I don’t know, because they were left on the tough side of life. But at the same time, I want to move, because as much as I understand, I don’t want to live with these people next to me.*” Marianna calls her poorer neighbors dirty and violent and says they are ruining her neighborhood, yet she explicitly acknowledges that people do not choose to live in Villa Esperanza. Eugenio’s statement, “*It’s not the people’s fault,*” suggests that something other than bad choices, deviance, or individual faults is to blame, while Marianna’s expressions “*they cannot*” and “*left on the tough side of life*” suggest structural constraints.

⁽⁹⁾Cumbia is a style of Colombian music that has been taken up as “street music” in Argentina: articulating working class, racialized identities that challenge MC norms and values (Miguez and Semán, 2006).

No such qualifications were evident in the statements of anti-poor activists in Edgewood. MC residents working against Camp Take Notice ignored or directly refuted structural causes of poverty. A speaker at a NAC meeting said, “*We’re not necessarily tying the presence of Camp Take Notice to increase of homelessness, not saying it’s a cause...*” (Anon White male, 50s) and denied that homelessness is on the rise, despite documented city-wide and national increases post Great Recession.⁽¹⁰⁾ NAC members consistently explain poverty as resulting from a failure to exert individual agency. Homeowner Melanie, echoing sentiments expressed by others seeking eviction of the settlement, blamed her neighbors’ poverty on choices she describes as, “...*I just want to be on disability [benefits] and hang out’.*” She contrasts this with her own “*hard choice*” in the Great Recession to rent out her home and live with a relative, staving off foreclosure until she could refinance her mortgage. Such accounts of poverty and economic vulnerability not only produce oppositional class subjects and antagonistic poverty politics, they prevent any recognition of cross-class vulnerabilities or structural forms of MC privilege. Melanie cannot recognize that her social and economic advantages (having a family safety net and access to financing) are part of what kept her from experiencing the same fate as her homeless neighbors, nor can she discern that they share in common a structural vulnerability in economic crisis.

The individualized framings of poverty expressed by anti-poor activists in both places differentiate poor and MC subjects and deepen class divisions. Yet in Buenos Aires, these MC actors are conflicted. They hesitate to blame poorer people and express some sense of common connection with them, as in Eugenio’s suggestion that settlement dwellers may be hardworking people (like himself). These sentiments leave open the possibility of a more complex poverty politics rather than only blame and exclusion. By contrast, in Seattle, even when MC actors experienced struggles similar to those of their poorer neighbors, they continued reinforcing class boundaries and MC privilege. NAC member Laura, a White thirtyish homeowner and business owner notes similarities between MC and poorer residents of Edgewood, saying, “*[W]e’re a patient community, we’re kind, we’re all struggling ourselves, we know how easy it would be to lose it all ourselves, but it’s time for Camp Take Notice to go.*” Laura recognizes that MC and poorer people are both vulnerable, but the only action she can imagine is eviction of more vulnerable others. The interests of MC residents framed as vulnerable must take precedence over the (greater) vulnerability of poor others, and the only target of action for addressing economic vulnerability is poor individuals themselves. Laura’s statement illustrates how profoundly individualized class subjects are in the US cultural imaginary and highlights a poverty politics of exclusion.

While Vecinos and NAC enact broadly similar poverty politics of othering and exclusion, their demands for eviction of poorer neighbors reveal important differences in how class subjects and relations are produced in these two geo-historical contexts. In both places, anti-poor activists demand that the state prioritize their interests over those of poorer settlement dwellers and are outraged that the state has not acted in their interests. In El Bosque, protests strongly emphasize the illegality of settlement residents. Vecinos frame them as migrants coming from Bolivia and Peru. They argue for the need to expel the “illegal inhabitants,” blame the state for not, as Eugenio puts it, “*enforcing the law,*” and make inflamed claims about threats to peace and order in the nation. One blog post reads, “... *[the settlement dwellers] demand electricity ...[the state gives] them electricity, they demand water...they give them water, they demand sewers...and they’ve already got them!!! WE DEMAND TO LIVE IN PEACE, IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD, IN OUR COUNTRY AND DO YOU KNOW*

⁽¹⁰⁾The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness (<http://homelessinfo.org/resources/publications.php>) and National Coalition for the Homeless (<http://nationalhomeless.org>) show increases of 3–14% from 2008 to 2012.

WHAT THE AUTHORITIES GIVE TO US??? THEIR BACK!!!” This post sarcastically invited government officials to a party planned in the settlement, “*Facundo Di Fillipo, Rocío Sanchez Andía, Fernanda Reyes are invited as well as any authority of the Government who would like to CELEBRATE THE USURPATION OF NATIONAL LAND.*” This illegality narrative is broader than references to the “criminality” of settlement dwellers. It emphasizes the fundamental illegitimacy of the presence of poor residents and expresses urgent MC demands in the strongest possible terms. The settlement dwellers are more than a noisy nuisance; they are a threat to the nation!

This shrill illegality framing by Vecinos demands that the state prioritize their interests by evicting poorer neighbors. This is quite different than justifications used by anti-poor activists in Seattle. NAC members are also angry at what they see as the state’s failure to respond to their calls for eviction, as in Laura’s frustrated statement at a NAC meeting: “*I called King County Public Health and they helped them get rid of the rats. I thought they’d shut it down, but the City is doing all kinds of things to make it more livable.*” Not only did local officials not do what she wanted, but to her chagrin they helped the settlement residents. As in El Bosque, NAC members underscore the illegitimacy of their poorer neighbors, but on different terms. Immigrants (some of them undocumented) resided in Camp Take Notice and the encampment was occupying publically owned land, yet NAC members never framed their calls for eviction through an illegality narrative. Instead they made appeals to *propertied citizenship* (Roy, 2003), inscribed within assumptions about the legitimate rights of taxpaying, property-owning citizens to make demands of the state. NAC member Melanie, differentiating residents who pay taxes and therefore deserve public protections from those who do not, said, “*...the city isn’t providing them services, like police protection or fire or anything. And frankly, I don’t think they should be providing that, because they’re not paying for it. I’m paying for it...*” Compared to the irate appeals to national security from Vecinos, NAC members are more measured in their response. They assume that eviction is inevitable, just a matter of time. As one resident said, “*Everybody knows Camp Take Notice needs to go, including Camp Take Notice*” (Anon White female, 60s, 2013). MC members of NAC are secure in their privilege, confident that the state will (eventually) prioritize their interests over those of unhoused and “illegitimate” residents.

Our comparison reveals key differences in how poverty politics of exclusion are advanced in different contexts. We explain the intense focus of El Bosque activists on the illegality of the settlement as tightly linked with political histories in Argentina, where illegal land occupations and squatting are effective strategies for gaining rights to private and public land (Merklen, 2001). These histories solidify a political lexicon in which the rights of private landowners may be trumped by the rights of poor occupiers. In a political imaginary where poor others are also seen as citizens with legitimate claims on the state, Vecinos members are anxious about their MC privilege, worrying that politicians or law enforcement won’t control or evict poorer neighbors. The broader political culture shapes their sense of vulnerability and this MC anxiety stands in sharp contrast to the US case.

Steeped in an extended history of propertied citizenship in the U.S. (Del Casino and Jocoy, 2008; Sparks, 2010), NAC members expect the state to defend their privileged position. The idea that homeless people might have legitimacy as citizens is inconceivable. The only rights bearing actors they can perceive are MC property owners. For NAC, this assumption is confirmed by Camp Take Notice’s own conditions of existence. Since it was established, Camp Take Notice was constantly moving, evicted by city governments from one location after another. Against this backdrop, NAC need not agitate around the illegality of their poor neighbors in order to delegitimize them in the eyes of the state. Simply by virtue of being poor and unpropertied, they already lack status as rights-bearing citizens (witness Laura’s shock when the state assists campers with pest control). Their thoroughly individualized

view of class, together with rejection of any structural explanations of poverty, leads NAC members to strongly reassert MC privilege and this sharply constrains any impulse toward collective poverty politics.

Pro-poor activism: NIF and la Cooperativa

Other MC residents of Edgewood and El Bosque mobilized pro-poor activism in support of poorer neighbors. Participants in NIF in Seattle and La Cooperativa in Buenos Aires both express sentiments that break down class distinctions. In Seattle, these expressions suggest “the poor are us,” situating MC and poorer people as members of a common community. In Seattle, Erika, a White seventyish homeowner and retired nurse, rejects oppositional framings of MC virtue and poor deviance by comparing Camp Take Notice residents with members of her largely MC church, “...*there are some bad apples, but I think that’s that way anywhere. I would say the same thing about our church!*” She embraces cross-class commonality and recognizes the grueling realities of poverty, saying “*if you’re dealing with sleep deprivation and chronic stress, all of us will make bad choices.*” Other NIF members explicitly reject stereotypes of lazy poor people. Gloria, a White 70-something homeowner and retired administrator, says poverty is, “... *hard, hard work. The stereotype about people being in poverty because they’re ‘satisfied’ with it, they can get services and handouts—that’s NOT true!... They’re going to school, their kids are going to school, they keep up with everything and it’s hard... There ARE people who don’t choose to do better, but everyone I see is working very hard to get into the middle class, to get the skills, to get the jobs they want, to change their situation.*”

Here, we see both openings and limits in how MC actors pry their imaginaries of poverty and privilege away from dominant US discourses. Erika and Gloria express commonality between MC and poorer subjects and resist differentiating between MC norms and the behaviors of those who are poor. At the same time, Erika mentions “bad choices,” while Gloria revalorizes hard work, skills, and jobs as pathways to MC-ness and suggests some people do choose to remain in poverty. These expressions were repeated by other NIF members who, even as they troubled hegemonic narratives about *poor people*, remained steeped in explanations of *poverty* as resulting from individualized effort and choices. Even as MC actors understand poorer people as not so different from themselves and acknowledge collective responsibility for addressing poverty, their reading of its causes nonetheless remains squarely within hegemonic U.S. understandings of poverty.

In Buenos Aires, pro-poor activists also see themselves and poorer residents as members of a common community. But they understand and express the causes of poverty differently from NIF. MC actors linked to La Cooperativa express strongly “social,” inclusive and structural understandings of poverty. A staffer at the organic food cooperative, Sergio explains the presence of Villa Esperanza with reference to broader structures, “[I]t’s obvious that this situation is part of a broader process that has to do with institutions and with a deteriorating economy. But it also has to do with decisions that deepened poverty...*people were left out from development that took place in recent years, such as with the expansion of soy production and mega-mining ... There is a process of internal migration of people who have no livelihood alternatives in their hometowns. Ultimately, these situations of urban poverty and conflict are produced.*” Sergio is a college student and activist who views poverty as structurally and historically produced by unequal social relations of capitalist mining and agriculture. His involvement in the alternative food network is motivated by a desire to transform the food system in close alliance with the urban poor. Other activists at La Cooperativa also view need for social services as structurally produced. Maria is a fortyish, single nursing student who runs La Cooperativa’s pharmacy. Maria says, “*When times are difficult the people from the settlement come here more often and we recognize them. People used to come here for*

cheaper prescriptions, but when the State got more involved in 2004 and passed the generic drug law, then slowly people stopped coming here. Right now, because inflation is increasing, some people have come back here, but obviously fewer than in the early days.” Whether because of the state’s failure to assist or because of economic downturn, the pharmacy is understood as meeting a structurally produced need.

La Cooperativa activists’ structural understanding of poverty is borne out in their expectations of poorer neighbors. Alberto, who is 50 and has a militant activist background with leftist organizations, was a founding member of the Coop. He criticizes pharmacy clients for not participating in La Cooperativa’s broader political effort, saying *“It is clear that many of the people of the settlement come here because of the cheap prices. I would do the same ... The problem is that when people view this pharmacy as an economic necessity, it becomes more difficult to also create a broad awareness that is it important that this pharmacy exists so that people don’t have to deal with the big monopoly companies and they realize that they can build alternatives.”* Alberto criticizes poorer residents for acting only in their own individual interests, illustrating a key difference in the conceptualization of poor subjects that underlies the pro-poor activism of La Cooperativa and NIF. For Alberto, the settlement dwellers are collective social subjects, actors who should be involved in politics directed at shared vulnerabilities. MC activists at La Cooperativa see a common political project for both MC and poorer people and understand cross-class action as essential for effective antipoverty politics. They push for a “collective autonomy” in resisting neoliberalism.

In contrast, pro-poor activists of NIF remain embedded in deeply individualized understandings of poor subjects, poverty, and prosperity. Within their framings, an impoverished person seeking low prices at the pharmacy would likely be lauded for making “good choices.” Gene, for example, a White 60-something minister and NIF member, applauds an impoverished client of his church’s assistance program for seeking budget management skills, saying, *“I’ve always thought if they managed their money a little better, they could do better for themselves.”* NIF members in contrast advocate for the poor, but do not expect or invite the participation of poorer residents in their activism. They did not invite Camp Take Notice residents to participate in their vigil, testimony, or other anti-eviction activities. They emphasize the need for poorer people’s agency to be directed at self-improvement, rather than expecting them to be partners in efforts toward social change. Comparing expressions that on the surface appear to focus on “individualism” reveals differences in the understandings that activists in each place hold about the agency of poorer people and how they think poor subjects can and should participate in social change.

Different understandings of poverty and the agency of poorer people give rise to unique poverty politics in each place. In Seattle, pro-poor activism seeks to raise awareness, empathy, and a sense of MC responsibility to a not-so-different poor subject. Erika testifies to public officials: *“...these are people just like you and I who have had hopes, dreams, aspirations ... a lot of them have accomplished a lot. But through a series of misfortunes, now find themselves in a really challenging situation... they can never get ahead. Because they don’t even have enough income to cover rent, utilities, food, clothes and shoes for kids that need a new pair of shoes every 6 months because they’re growing!”* NIF members skirt close to structural critique (“they can never get ahead”) that seems to recognize persistent poverty as produced by something systemic. Gene gave passing reference to banks and failed pensions programs as creating poverty in the U.S. Great Recession, but quickly returned to framing poverty and privilege as a matter of chance and individual aptitudes, comparing himself to poorer neighbors, *“I think about my mother...and why am I so lucky?...she taught us all how do be citizens. What if you don’t have that?”* Gloria even mentions capitalism: *“That’s why I care so much about the poor. I know what that’s like as a child and people not taking care of you in the way they should...you feel such humiliation and such rage...I get why people sell drugs and*

things. *We live in a capitalist society—you have to have money or you're fucked! Someone in the household has to get money...*” In spite of mentioning capitalism as implicated in poverty, Gloria much more strongly emphasizes the necessity of individuals to care for one another, mobilized by empathy toward the pain and humiliation of those in poverty, or as Gene put it, having “*a really big heart for poor people.*”

Despite their strong pro-poor orientation, NIF members have no discursive repertoire for naming structural processes that make it impossible for poorer neighbors to get ahead. They resist blame narratives and have a gut sense of structural barriers, but are unable to name and act upon them. We argue this is a limit of poverty politics in the US context, which makes structural change unimaginable. NIF members consistently blame homelessness on bad luck, inadequate assistance, and funding cutbacks for services, not systemic issues such as lack of living wage work, lack of health insurance, defunding the social safety net, or a chronic lack of affordable housing. They recognize that the nonprofit sector cannot meet the need. But this prompts them toward activism that raises awareness, lobbies government officials to increase funding for homeless shelters, and mobilizes other residents to volunteer. Erika exemplifies this politics of “doing more” in her entreaty to Edgewood residents: “...[We] need to support the social agencies that help ward off homelessness. We have lots of choices as to where we want to put our time, energy, and caring!!!” This politics of “doing more” was strongly present in NIF’s actions around the eviction of Camp Take Notice. As the date for eviction drew near, NIF organized a nightly vigil at a busy intersection to “...shed light on the plight of the 10,000s who are homeless—or on the brink of homelessness—in our area. Where will the current—and future—homeless go...? Shelters are full; greenbelts are not safe. In the past 13 days, 9 newly-homeless families arrived at Camp Take Notice!... This is simply our churches/community saying, “We care about our neighbors in need” (blog post).

NIF’s pro-poor activism is notable in the US because it articulates a MC subject focused on combatting poverty and expressing commonality with poor people. Despite this, their sense of mutual connection is established on the basis of *individuals’* compassion and responsibility to care for one another. It remains encased within a surrounding frame of individualism and does not challenge hegemonic poverty politics. The underlying assumption is that citizens and elected officials would solve the problem if they were fully aware of, and empathetic with, the plight of poorer people. This “poverty politics of doing more” is an ameliorative approach that works within, rather than overtly criticizing structures of economy and politics that deepen poverty. Nonetheless, the NIF activists’ articulation of commonality and connection between MC and poorer subjects is significant. Against all odds in the US context of individualized class subjects and antagonistic class relations, they express cross-class commonality. A great deal of work on poverty politics in the US has focused on how neoliberal rationalities of individualism, choice, and freedom deepen class antagonisms. Yet, we find slippage in this narrative. NIF’s politics of doing more is sharply limited, yet it nonetheless opens a space in which class subjects articulate alliance and begin to sense systematic inequality, in spite of having no political language to articulate it. While small, these are significant cracks in hegemonic US poverty discourses.

In Argentina, pro-poor activism involves robust cross-class alliances. MC activists in La Cooperativa expect the involvement of poorer residents in a shared anticapitalist agenda. The two groups are allied in response to eviction. Together, they set up roadblocks and protests along the avenue separating the settlement from the MC residential areas of El Bosque. One of the leaders, Sonia and her husband are deeply involved in left activism since the 1990s. Sonia is 52, she has two kids and participated in the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) during the 1970s. Her husband is a political director with the piqueteros. He was a political prisoner during the dictatorship (1976–1983) and when he emerged from prison, he worked with human rights organizations and collectivist leftist organizations. Sonia describes their

collective process: “*We called everyone to a meeting one week because there were strong rumors that (the authorities) were going to enter the railroad land (where the settlement is built) to evict the residents and then after that evict us (La Cooperativa). So, it was us and them. We began meeting together in the settlement because they started a committee against the eviction which was attended by many leaders from the settlement, including leaders from other organizations outside the settlement, including us.*” The common threat of eviction informs the connections between La Cooperativa and the settlement, but this alliance also rests upon a sense of commonality that extends beyond that emergency. Sonia insists, “*We are all the result of 2001 here...*,” pointing to a shared history of economic crisis and vulnerabilities that unite the settlement and La Cooperativa.

In both places, mutually felt vulnerabilities link pro-poor MC actors in cross-class alliances, as in the “poor are us” expressions of NIF, and efforts at La Cooperativa to combat drug monopolies and fight eviction with residents of Villa Esperanza. Yet explanations of this shared vulnerability differ, with implications for the kinds of poverty politics and cross-class alliances that are possible. The MC activists of La Cooperativa recognize vulnerabilities shared in common with their impoverished neighbors. They see this risk as rooted in their structural disadvantage through capitalist property rights. In contrast, NIF members see vulnerability as a matter of luck, with MC and poorer people as equally vulnerable to unexpected catastrophes that might pitch them into poverty. These understandings of vulnerability enable differing poverty politics. The Buenos Aires activists’ framing critiques unequal class relations and enables alliances that directly confront structural processes producing vulnerability. The Seattle activists’ cannot recognize structurally produced class privilege and only express a poverty politics of empathy.

Conclusion

This article employs relational poverty analysis to understand how MC identities are made through engagements with poorer others in residential spaces of Buenos Aires and Seattle. Our comparative research reveals how relational class practices of anti-poor activism contribute to the making of normative, aspirational MC subjects in both cities. And yet these boundary-making poverty politics among MC residents are not a foregone conclusion—we also find cross-class alliances in struggles over neighborhood space. Scholars have overlooked important nuances in MC poverty politics that open up the seeming unassailability of neoliberal individualism and show that, in some circumstances, MC subjects find commonalities with the poor, rather than always opposition and defensiveness.

Anti-poor activism is differently positioned within the broader poverty politics of Buenos Aires and Seattle. The anti-poor activists in Buenos Aires try to remain anonymous while vigorously blogging and engaging in actions, whereas in Seattle, the anti-poor activists are very public with no fear of reprisals. Despite these salient differences, the poverty politics of both groups of MC actors reveals the transnational durability of a poverty politics of deserving or undeserving, fear and threat, disgust and judgment, supporting theoretical arguments about poverty as a key site for making class difference. In both cities, MC anti-poor activists view poverty as resulting from individual failings, justifying the eviction of poor residents. In the US, this anti-poor activism is theoretically unsurprising, given entrenched rationalities of individualism, primacy of property rights, and the rule of law in favor of MC and elites. In Seattle, MC residents unequivocally blame the poor for lacking ambition, being flawed persons, and threatening the neighborhood. Their unswerving confidence that the state will protect their private property rights bolsters their anti-poor politics of indignation and disgust. In Buenos Aires, the presence of antipoverty politics, and the class antagonisms they reinforce, is more notable, given that the 2001 crisis spawned many cross-class alliances between MC and poorer residents on the basis of shared

vulnerabilities. In the period of economic recovery, Vecinos' opposition to the settlement reflects a powerful MC ideology of personal achievement, nationalism, and "correct" moral conduct that circulates widely in the Argentine media and popular culture. That said, even anti-poor MC actors are ambivalent, hesitating to only blame poorer people and questioning individualized explanations of poverty. Instead, MC anti-poor activists direct their anxiety at the Argentine state, fearing it will not protect their MC property-owning privilege. These findings point to the importance of political and cultural context for shaping the content of poverty politics. In Argentina, the national political context supports land and rights claims by the poor, raising MC anxieties about their own vulnerability. In the US, broadly unquestioned cultural and political narratives of individualism and personal responsibility for poverty legitimate and normalize MC privilege, constructing the poor as a problem that must, and will be, removed.

Seemingly similar pro-poor activism in each city reveals important differences in how MC actors understand the root causes of poverty and how they view the political agency of poorer residents. MC residents in Buenos Aires understand themselves as part of collective class struggles targeting structural injustices, contrasted with MC sympathy and volunteerism for an "unlucky other" in Seattle. Pro-poor activism in Seattle is limited, with protests only in the moment of eviction and acts of advocacy for, rather than together with, poor residents. They point to the need for shelter, but do not link this with a robust structural critique of housing or employment markets and do not organize cross-class political action. Despite working in support of the poor, the Seattle activists do not articulate a structural analysis of poverty, limiting the ways in which they organize and act.

By contrast in Buenos Aires, MC activists understand poverty as rooted in structural causes and in-common vulnerabilities. They see poverty as intimately tied with corporate control over pharmaceutical and food supplies, unaffordable housing, and a lack of political voice for vulnerable residents. Further, the pro-poor activists in Buenos Aires understand the poor as partners with full political agency in the struggle for social justice. As such, their alliance is inclusive, deliberative, and ongoing. In Buenos Aires, MC activists view themselves as connected subjects, as part of a common struggle with poorer residents and this understanding activates a vibrant cross-class alliance that fights for redistribution, a social safety net, and robust public sphere. This resonates with Kessler's (2000) argument that social ties and connectedness are key elements of class subjectivity in Argentina. The Buenos Aires case reveals that actors with MC privilege can support redistribution and an in-common poverty politics.

Our comparison reveals that MC poverty politics are more nuanced than prior research has shown. Our in-depth exploration of grounded class practices reveals that unexpected cross-class alliances do emerge in some instances, but it also shows that potential alliances are blocked in other geo-historical contexts. What produces these different outcomes? In Argentina, activists invoke long-standing political traditions and discourses arising from the postcolonial, postdictatorship, and postcrisis recovery periods. In El Bosque, activists' structural analysis of poverty is rooted in histories and discourses of leftist social activism, working-class political voice, and influential Catholic Base Communities working for social justice. MC and poorer residents alike organize around a shared anticapitalist agenda to make claims on the state. In Edgewood, pro-poor activism is based on narratives of individualism, personal compassion, and responsibility to care for one's neighbors alongside ignorance, or refusal, of the structural causes of poverty. The wide-reaching societal and political resonance of individualized framings of poverty, even within pro-poor spaces of politics, makes it difficult for activists to see structural critiques. Instead, MC activists raise sympathy for the poor, rather than work in solidarity with them to change structural conditions of homelessness, lack of living wages, or health care. Poverty is viewed as "bad luck" and the

solution is empathy and individual care for one another, producing a politics of volunteering, not alliances for structural change.

What are the political lessons for extending pro-poor politics that arise from this research? In Seattle pro-poor activism remains largely constrained within discourses that reinforce class boundaries and actions that remain individualized. However, the Buenos Aires case suggests broader lessons for MC poverty politics. Cross-class alliances matter because they bring residents into dialogues around root causes of poverty (landlessness, lack of income, lack of political voice, economic crisis, etc.). To the extent that different class actors recognize in-common vulnerability to similar processes, a more collective class subject is articulated and individualistic explanations of poverty and privilege are disrupted, which in turn shapes political discourse and strategies. Because the MCs are hegemonic aspirational subjects, their involvement in cross-class alliances is crucial in democratic states such as the US and Argentina. MC actors can play an influential role in shaping the cultural consensus about relational poverty in ways that can create political space for social justice projects.

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