

**GRATITUDE  
AS A SOCIAL  
PRAXIS**

# GRATITUDE AS A SOCIAL PRAXIS

César Ceriani Cernadas (ed.)

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# GRATITUDE, GIFTS, AND EMOTIONS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE LAND OF A RURAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Mariela Pena

## INTRODUCTION

This work explores the *praxis of gratitude* category in different spheres of political action. A promising approach to the subjective motives and to the affective nature that, as has already been revealed by social sciences, through the so-called *affective turn*, conform behaviors related to political life (Ahmed, 2004).

Specifically, this study is proposed as a theoretical reflection anchored in a concrete empirical case. It takes as a reference the Rural Movement of Santiago del Estero-Vía Campesina (MOCASE-VC), a social movement in the north-central region of Argentina, consisting of rural marginalized people, which by now has a 28-year history of political life. This organization, which initially aimed to act as a trade union and to offer legal advice regarding conflicts with business sectors on land possession and ownership, later became a social movement as a response to contemporary capitalism's way of life.

My interest in addressing this empirical case as a means to investigate *gratitude as motivation for action on social movements* stems from the attention to the centrality assigned in their collective identity to the concepts of *territoriality*, *solidarity*, and *community life*, perceived as the horizon for a *new way of life*, which repositions the organization as the pivot of social life. From this perspective, I have designed a series of objectives that approach us to the values and practices built by the organization and to its connection with what is known as the praxis of gratitude. These objectives are carried out under two complementary approaches:

“ On the one hand, I focus on a biographical narrative analysis of active members of the organization, inquiring on the expression of gratitude towards the organization as a vehicle for political participation and its connection with the subjective transformations that took place since political performance (Arfuch, 2014). Based on this, two types of narratives were selected. The first corresponds to one of the movement's mentors, who is of non-rural origin and who decided to dedicate his life to political participation in the rural area. The second belongs to a couple of local political leaders, or historical members<sup>24</sup>, born in one of the base communities of the MOCASE. I argue, from this source of analysis, that in the mythical structure that founds the identity base and sustains the political praxis of the Movement, the notion of gratitude is a key meaning that activates a series of motives, rewards and satisfactions, acting as a gift. ”

(Mauss, [1925] 1980, cited in Abduca, 2007)

On the other hand, I explore, under the category of *praxis of gratitude*, the collective actions of the organization in connection to what, in previous works, we called *policies of daily life*. The latter refers to the assignment of domestic, productive, and political tasks, the use of different public and private spaces; and the forms of political participation of women, men, and young people (Pena, 2017).

Regarding the anthropological fieldwork, most of the interviews and observations were done during cohabitations with families of two of the organization's base communities from 2015 until the present day. I conducted the aforementioned autobiographical narratives, in-depth interviews, and employed the technique of participant observation. Furthermore, these data were complemented with content analysis of written publications, such as "memory books" produced by the MOCASE-VC, which were facilitated by individuals with whom we have worked.

For methodological purposes, I find it is key to make the study's field

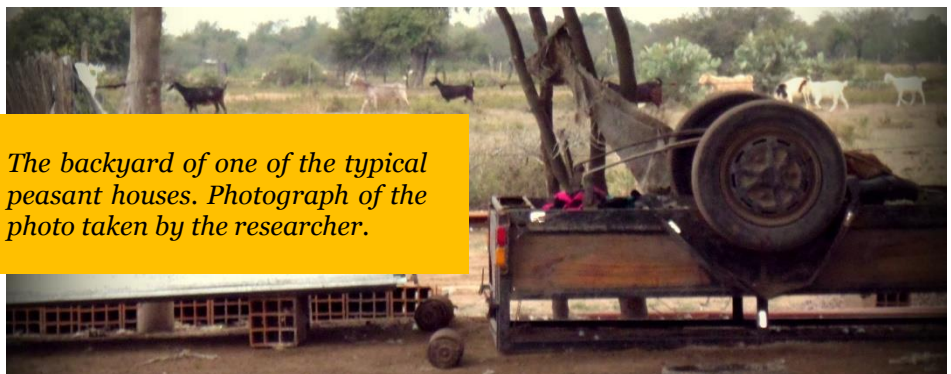
24. Militant or "historical" partner is the native term by which the organization refers to those who belong to the movement since its inception, most of which occupied a central role during its founding, and who still actively participate today.

conditions explicit, since it is placed in a rural and socio-economically disadvantaged location, to which entry and transport are very difficult. At the organizational level, the MOCASE-VC currently centralizes ten *Centrales Campesina*, Centrals, which are spread out in different regions of the province of Santiago del Estero. In turn, each of them assembles a variable number of *base communities*, which are the most basic level of *rural families'* organization. Since the beginning of our research, we have focused our field work on the Quilimí Central, but we have, at times, contacted members from different Centrals.

Quimilí is a city located in the center-east of the province, about 200 km from the provincial capital and 80 km away from the provincial border with Chaco. It has a population of approximately 15.000 inhabitants. From there, *base communities* are scattered at 5 to 70 km from the city on dirt roads. During our research, we visited the Santa Rosa, one of the closest, and Rincón de Saladillo communities, whose access conditions are more restricted. The latter *base community* is located at about 60 km from Quimilí connected by an unpaved road which contains a high level of clay and becomes waterlogged to the point of being impassable during the rainy season. One of the main concerns for rural families is the lack of drinkable water, which makes it necessary for them to store rainwater in earth dams or cisterns. During winters the problem worsens, as water quality deteriorate and people end up drinking dirty water.

In Rincón de Saladillo, and several other communities', houses are usually built by countryfolk using their own hands and *mud*. Only some families have accepted construction with brick and cement. Families often live with more than seven children in very small spaces. Access to electricity in households is very recent, dating only to 2013. The basic means of communication is battery-powered radio. The Internet signal is very low in some places and only one family we visited had a television. Households do not have natural gas either, which means that food is cooked using firewood, whether in or out of the house. Boys and girls attend the only primary school in the area, where groups of students of different ages meet in the same classroom. For primary health care they must go to the nearest town, which is 30 km away.

Several families who usually receive visits from other related organizations which are integrated to global Vía Campesina, kindly offer their homes, waiting and appreciating that the guest, in this case the researcher, learns *factually* their way of life by accompanying them in their routine and daily social activities. This includes food preparation, family visits, community meetings, work with animals, *matedas* (a native social meeting organized around the *matte* beverage), and everything else involved in their daily routine. *Ir al campo* staying in their communities, is strongly recognized by, members of the communities and it reinforces trust, not only in the researcher's good intentions, but also in the seriousness of the constructed knowledge, since they dislike the information that is known about them "without having been there". In turn, for the countryfolk it provides a way of showing their way of life's legitimacy, the authenticity of their peasant identity, the "good use" of the lands they occupy, and their honesty as political activists. Additionally, the urban environment is hostile to many of them, a fact expressed openly in recurring statements. They said that "they do not feel comfortable" outside their homes and that they feel the need to return home as soon as possible. Following observations during this work in the communities, we indicate that the MOCASE-VC features a process of construction of a sociability mode based on the community, as part of its symbolic world, which is key in sustaining their daily political practices. In this context, *the gratitude to the organization, meaning the group as a whole, provides the social actors with sensitivities that act as a model to support political participation.* In summary, this study provides knowledge about the specific experience of the MOCASE-VC, its impact on organized countryfolk' biographies, and its potential in the face of research on *the praxis of gratitude* in social movements.



*The backyard of one of the typical peasant houses. Photograph of the photo taken by the researcher.*

feel comfortable" outside their homes and that they feel the need to return home as soon as possible. Following observations during this work in the communities, we indicate that the MOCASE-VC features a process of construction of a sociability mode based on the community, as part of its symbolic world, which is key in sustaining their daily political practices. In this context, *the gratitude to the organization, meaning the group as a whole, provides the social actors with sensitivities that act as a model to support political participation.* In summary, this study provides knowledge about the specific experience of the MOCASE-VC, its impact on organized countryfolk' biographies, and its potential in the face of research on *the praxis of gratitude* in social movements.

The work is organized into four sections. The first focuses on the current characteristics of the social movement that I find of special importance for this, and reviews their emergent conditions and political trajectory. The second part introduces a series of theoretical lines and focuses on the autobiographical narratives of some key members of the rural movement. These provide strong indication to my argument that, in this collective organization, the praxis of gratitude plays the role of a mythical structure. The third section analyzes the politics of daily life, based on my field work in two of the base communities of the movement. The fourth section concludes the findings of all three sections. My aim is to incite new questions to encourage future research that will help consolidate the *praxis of gratitude* category and demonstrate its potential for the analysis of the social world.

## **PRESENTATION OF THE EMPIRICAL CASE: THE MOCASE-VÍA CAMPESINA**

The Rural Movement of Santiago del Estero (MOCASE) began formally in 1990 in the city of Quimilí, in the Argentinian Province of Santiago del Estero, where most of the rural population lived for generations on land plots that they used in subsistence farming, without property deeds. Santiago del Estero has one of the highest poverty rates,

the largest number of rural population as well as migration and environmental degradation. Part of its population began to organize in what later became a movement that turned the land conflict into a symbol of territorial disputes, and of confrontation to the development model, to private property, and to capitalism as a way of life (Michi, 2010).

Previously, from the 1970's onwards, a process of "silent evictions" developed. This was based on the settler's ignorance regarding their rights on the lands and on the extreme power inequalities that prevailed back then. Expropriations escalated in the 1990's, when export, as in oriented mechanical agricultural production, known as the *soybean frontier*<sup>25</sup>, led by a business sector of extra, resulted in a profound change in the agricultural structure. Additionally, these expropriations were performed within an autocratic government system, despite its formal democratic context, which was implemented as the working: "and peasant population suffered through various forms of complicity and overlaps between the political, economic and legal regional power."

Against this background, part of the rural population gathers in an organization whose most urgent problems were linked to the conjunctural conflicts regarding land possession and ownership, and seek legal and union advice from external agents who are then incorporated into the movement as *technicians* or *soft hands* (Durand, 2010). During the initial stage, a rural organization started developing, accompanied by these key external actors. This organization is symbolized as a popular mobilization in 1986 known as "El Grito de los Juríes". Representatives of these same organizations meet three years later, and finally, on August 1, 1990, the Rural Movement of Santiago del Estero was formally established.

Soon afterwards, the organized countryfolk realized that these transformations had also occurred in detriment of forests, and natural soils, and that they had caused a general rural life precariousness, unemployment, deepening poverty, and increased migration.

25. The term refers to the increase in land available for the planting of soybeans and other export-oriented agricultural products through transgenic and technological modifications.



The idea and the need to "unite" to address the imposed changes rose, and several collective efforts were proposed regarding land conflicts as well as labor, political, and economic issues. Examples of this are the "stops in front of the *topadoras*, bulldozers, of the businessmen who came to occupy the land, which consisted in impeding their passage with their own bodies. Also, in the economic sphere, incipient forms of organization were created in the form of cooperatives for the commercialization of products that previously could only be sold at a very low price (Durand, 2006).

Thus, this organization quickly became a means of collective action around the identity of *countryfolk*. On this basis, the opposing ways built around the capitalist way of life can be understood: individualism and private property, and their proposal for the creation of horizontal *networks* and solidary *sociability*, sustained in the notion of *community life* as an alternative political form. This comes from the amalgam of its own framework, coming from the experience of local struggle, with external and global discourses such as environmentalism and conservationism, influenced by experiences such as the Zapatista Movement (EZLN) of Mexico or the Movement of the "Movimento de Trabalhadores Sem Terra" (MST) of Brazil.

Later on, after a fracture in 2001 due to differences regarding the organizational form, which strategies to follow, and the ways for obtaining resources and political alliances, two different groups continue as MOCASE and MOCASE Via Campesina. The latter assumes a horizontal structure, as in without leaders and assemblies involved in the decision-making process. It also acts through alliances with other national sectors, especially some unemployed people urban movements, and with global organizations such as the Latin American Coordination of Field Organizations (CLOC) and the Via Campesina.

In this process, in which the countryfolk assumed themselves as part of an alternative *way of life* that recovers and reworks traditional knowledge, they propose transformations in five key points:

1. The political form of direct participation and decision making through assemblies, the respect for Human Rights and the notion of relative autonomy from the State;

1. The agricultural and livestock production, respect for the environment, ecological awareness, and economic criteria to distance themselves from the capitalist logic of “accumulation” towards the notion of *soberanía alimentaria* (food sovereignty);
2. The concept of *territoriality*. A place where solidary, alternative, and fair social bonds are created;
3. Instruction through a recovery of the popular education theories, in order to promote autonomy and horizontal participation in the production of knowledge and political education (Michi, 2010);
4. The reconfiguration of gender relations, since many women have become activist, as well as leaders of cooperative productive projects. Also the implementation of sexual and reproductive rights programs in their communities.

Currently, people organized as the Rural Movement of Santiago del Estero, Vía Campesina (MOCASE-VC), have achieved formal recognition in most of the territories they inhabit. In some cases, over achieving family properties’ deeds, and, in others, through registration as indigenous communities. This allows most of them to maintain their traditional way of life, growing food and grazing goats on small areas of between 1 and 4 ha, their homes and farms for subsistence activities, combining them with new strategies based on some of the transformations achieved. Mainly, they mix traditional activities based on family administration with others organized at community level, such as community gardens and grazing spaces, and cooperative ventures such as jam production.

In many cases, the mentioned alternatives are fostered through provincial, national, and international funding and subsidies, which the MOCASE-VC administration is responsible for managing, based on its global political orientation of confrontation, claim and multiple strategic alliances with both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Thus, the MOCASE-VC has managed to combine its rural identity with the indigenous origin of a large part of its population in its policies of resistance and legitimacy in the face of conflicts over land.

Considering the rural organization's path and achievements, we are interested in analyzing the reconfiguration of the dominant values and the way they are experienced in everyday interactions, creating an alternative sociability and dissent against the morality of individualism, proposing the notion of *community* as a privileged horizon (Michi, 2010). Related to this, during the field work carried out previously (2015-2018), our findings about *emotional energy* have been significant (Jasper, 2012). The latter was inspired, at a subjective level, by protest experiences in the public space and different key events in the path of the collective struggle. To illustrate this point, it is remarked that within the set of forms of protest are especially highlighted what they call *retomas* and *aguantes*, which consist of actions carried out as soon as the rural organization becomes aware of the eviction of some family belonging to the organization. As a result, the mode of operation is to communicate the situation to all the centrals and base communities, from where men, women, and children come to relocate families who were evicted in their old *ranchos*, to rebuild them if they have been burned or destroyed, and then make a kind of collective and provisional *camping* that can last several days or weeks. While the custody is being carried out, they live in community, with mixed groups and rotating tasks, and the course of action is discussed in assemblies. Regarding this way of collective action, it has been said:

**“ The aguante is a material and spiritual help, and, at the same time, where people expose their own bodies to police violence and topadoras. They fight to support those who may lose everything over the course of one night. It is an activity of support to other families in which the mystique of the resistance action joins the idea of a pilgrimage, of movement towards another space ... ”**

(Heller, 1998, cited in Durand, 2006: 140, *own translation*).

These experiences were key to the construction of the MOCASE-VC's identity, and to the strengthening of the movement's internal loyalties, providing *affective commitments* that tend to be prolonged in the long term. They have also contributed to the resignification of individual experiences generating feelings of gratitude, strength, and self-esteem.

In this context, it is understood that issues related to the transformation and strengthening of community bonds within daily life are not indifferent to the MOCASE-VC. For example, from the early stages of the movement's formation, in the 1990's, certain problems that affected women's participation in political life were incipiently incorporated. Later on, they gradually added their own educational institutions dedicated to children and adolescents, such as the School of Agroecology and the recently established Rural University, which regain Popular Education elements.



*A practical class for the young people who attend the School of Agroecology, in the Central de Quimilí. Image taken from the MOCASE Via Campesina website*

These contestations to the dominant values of individualism provide the men and women with a sense of *dignity*. Therefore, it can be observed that these meanings and practices oriented to collaborate with this project are incorporated under what we could term *praxis of gratitude or reciprocity*.

# GRATITUDE AS A MYTHICAL STRUCTURE IN THE LIFE STORIES OF THE POLITICAL LEADERS: "THE MOCASE GAVE MEANING TO MY LIFE"

As was previously stated, the purpose of this analysis is to address the notion of *praxis of gratitude* from the case study of the Rural Movement of Santiago del Estero, Argentina, this will be done by taking into account both its manifestation in the *autobiographical narratives* of the political leaders of the organization, as well as the representations and *daily political* practices linked to it. In this sense, the empirical case also incorporates the discussion about the potential of contemporary social movements to think about the community as a mode of alternative or counter-hegemonic sociability, locating the notion of *reciprocity*, together with values and ethics such as gratitude, solidarity and cooperation, as part of that framework of response to capitalist society. To this end, our research was framed in the theoretical line of social studies on *emotions* and oriented around the concept of "cultural policies" in the study of social movements and their disputes to redefine the different areas of social life in the current neoliberal context.

Studies on emotions demonstrated that groups tend to become stronger when they share feelings in relation to certain events that reinforce their loyalties and their collective identity. The *emotional energy* generated during face-to-face interactions provide the individuals with a group consciousness and contributes to the feeling of belonging to collective ventures. Within this theoretical framework, the 'sense of belonging' to a group involves different feelings, such as love, pride, and enthusiasm, which together generate *affective commitments* that tend to last in the long term (Jasper, 2012). Social movements, while instrumentally motivated by power or material benefits, are also grounded on motives such as honor, pride, and concern about human dignity. According to the author, loyalties and collective identity "expand the list of goals of an

individual to include benefits for the group beyond those received by that individual as a member. These goals are not completely selfish, nor fully altruistic" (Jasper, 2012). Thus, we can include *gratitude as a structuring element in certain forms of political action, exploring their role in processes such as participation in collective organizations.*

On the other hand, Álvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar propose that social movements are a crucial field to understand cultural practices and politics' interconnections from a perspective that conceives both aspects as inextricably linked and intertwined in social life (Alvarez et al., 1998). Cultural practices, as drivers of new meanings, values, and subjectivities, possess a quality of redefinition of the political, that is often underestimated. Based on these considerations, they suggest extending Jordan and Weedon's *cultural politics* concept to the analysis of the daily interventions of contemporary Latin American social movements (Alvarez et al., 1998). In addition, this perspective includes contributions of gender studies in social movements, which consider this category as a primary form of significant power relationships, while incorporating the political dimension of daily family life. Thus, for countryfolk organized in the MOCASE Vía Campesina, whose daily lives are completely shaped by the experience of political organization the ideological or moral motives cannot be separated from their material interests, which are clearly also vital to their subsistence. They live on a territory, within a social environment, and with a set of natural resources created by this collective's experience.

In summary, we were able to observe, in the studied collective processes similar to those that Jasper evidenced in other contexts: "The desire to produce an effect on the world is another great family of motivations, together with its inherent emotions, this desire often comes from a moral perspective, or an ideology, that suggests that the world should be different to the way that it is" (Jasper, 2012). Therefore, social movements like this can be thought of as promoters of alternative modernities that resignify notions such as those of ethics, rights, and social equality.

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE OF ÁNGEL STRAPAZZON

“I am grateful to the monte [dry forest] because my life made sense, it took all the senses of the world. Because I discovered that the value of loving and being loved is more beautiful, because I'm strong-headed, I like to face giants, and because capitalism is a mill that seems invincible, but I think we're going to beat it.”

Angel Strapazzon

The stories or narratives that take their own biography as central axis constitute a privileged way of access to the social meanings and to the terrain of the subjectivities produced in a specific historical conjuncture. They also allow an approach to the *affective* dimension of social and political life, an axis that the social sciences have already recognized as a key perspective (Arfuch, 2016).

According to Lindón, this perspective implies removing us from the particular values, beliefs and *ethos* that are a constructive and indivisible part of the social action (Lindón, 1999). Autobiographical narratives do not tell about the action that occurred in itself, but they are a later version that its author recounts on past action. They have the characteristic of being fundamentally *experiential*, implying that the author narrates, remembers, interprets, and connects lived experiences. The author suggests that he or the narrator performs a ‘montage’ that should not be understood as a deceit but comprehended as the perspective that the subject imprints on the facts, in reference to the current conditions of existence. From there, the narrator establishes new connections, sequences of events, and can even interrogate his own past. The relevance of the autobiographical narrative is that the individual is transformed into a "singular expression of the social".

Moreover, a key about thinking of the autobiographical narratives as *stories* or *fables* is that they carry out “social meanings”, and, therefore, they can be connected to a form of *myths*:

“ ... the myth would represent a kind of mediation between the collective memory that speaks of the common past, and the individual experience [...] the myth assumes the role of a 'collective metaphor' that preserves and perpetuates a memory, a common past, in systems of representations that can be narrated, and organized by symbolic codes. ”

(Lindon, 1999)

Taking into account these considerations, we argue that *the praxis of gratitude is a key component in the mythical structure of these life stories transcending the individual experience to express shared meanings that conform the identity of the Social Movement.*

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Angel Strapazzón could be as one of the main mentors of the MOCASE Via Campesina, even though he refuses that name precisely from his own logic, which places himself in a chain of *gift exchanges* and reciprocity rather than in a leadership role.

As it has been analyzed in previous studies, at the beginning of the conformation of the movement the specific conjuncture, and the long history of oppression to the rural population, converges with external influences of urban roots, also interested in generating transformations (Durand, 2006). One of the thoughts currents is linked to Christian missionary organizations, established in the area since 1960. Those linked to the Rural Movement of Catholic Action, grouped locally in the Agrarian Leagues, and later, without the support of the Catholic Church due to internal tensions, formed different NGOs such as INCUPO or FUNDAPAZ (Durand, 2006).

Within this trajectory there is also a more microscopic history, which explains the origins of the MOCASE-VC from a network of singular individualities that stand out and converge in specific interests and actions, and allows reconstruction from another level of analysis. Much of this micro-history has to do with the influence of Angel Strapazzon, whom I first met through the voices of the countryfolk, who recognize him as a key actor in their militant trajectories, and who later agreed to being interviewed with the autobiographical technique.



In the life of Angel there has been a breaking point since his initial encounter with one of the *wise elders* or *sacháyoj*<sup>26</sup>, that originated a cycle of motivations, gratifications, and rewards, and that was founding both of the organization itself and of its identity imprint.

Ángel came from a working family from the neighboring but richer province of Córdoba. As a university student he belonged to the intellectual and artistic environment of the city of Córdoba in the early 1970s. He was part of an environment of musicians, today popularly known, who interspersed creative concerns with intellectual and political ones, influenced by the revolutionary environment of those times.

As a young student of philosophy, a musician, and following American and Indigenous intellectuals, Marxists such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, in Ángel rose the curiosity for Argentinian folklore and, more specifically, for *ancestral* rural and indigenous *thought*, as it was called in those social circles. Consequently, he makes a first trip to interview one of the so-called *wise elders* of the *monte* in Quimilí. With him, Angel initiates a bond that, in his story, is the *catalyst* for his subsequent political action and a radical change of life and thought. Tito Rabello<sup>27</sup>, according to Angel's oral memory, was, around the time they met, an old man who still lived *rancho adentro*<sup>28</sup> and had shared instances of literacy with *rural bandits* like the popularly legendary Mate Cocido and Zamacola<sup>29</sup>. He was recognized as a *wise elder*, but also as a former political activist in defense of rural workers, akin to Peronism<sup>30</sup>. Our interviewed recalled, for example, that in a previous stage he had led a mobilization of workers to free the Peronist priest

26. In popular mythology of the region, the term Sachayoj, in Quechua *sacha* (forest) + *-yuq* (the one), means "owner of the forest", and refers to mythical figures considered nature's protectors.

27. His biography is being prepared by the same organization.

28. It is the local expression to refer to the traditional and simple type of housing of the local inhabitants, known as *rancho*, and inside in relation to its isolated location, in the most remote and undeveloped areas of the forests.

29. Rural bandits are a common figure in folk projections of Argentina, a local version of the universal figure who steals from the rich to help the poor. The historical figures of Mate Cocido and Zamacola, allude to personalities that during the 1930's confronted the powerful entrepreneurs of the region, and were protected and immortalized by the peasants.

30. Here he refers to Peronism in a broad manner, as a political movement that emerged in the 1940s around the figure of former President Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), with predominantly worker and popular traits, and with internal and heterogeneous ideological aspects.

with the surname Durovich<sup>31</sup>. He was also a *payador* or reciter in rural schools and was recognized for with esoteric qualities<sup>32</sup>.

According to Ángel's life story, during these first visits to the *monte*, with the initial motivation of making recordings about the "traditional wisdom", Tito Rabello had established with him a series of *trials* or *rites* that he should pass before showing his suitability to get the information he was looking for. This process lasted about three years:

**“***When I arrived and told him what I was going to, he said: 'Yes, it's all right, but who are you? Just a young boy. Let's see if I'll give it to you, if I'll let you record my life'. Three years he had me waiting, three years, do you understand me? [...] And he gave me brutal trials, but do you know what brutal trials mean? [...] He sent me to the monte to see 'the lights' referring to mythical lights I laughed and said that it was superstition, he left me in the forests for three days, telling me: 'I'll be back, I'll come find you', and he left me abandoned.* **”**

Within the framework exposed in the previous fragments, one of ideological and ritual experiences, furnished the *key milestone* that marks the beginning of Ángel's life as a political activist, which does not follow rational motives but rather *affective* and *mystical* ones:

**“***One day, following a fortuitous event for me, but for him a 'message' that was expressing 'this is your moment', he comes and tells me: 'Now, I'll put back my life, you, I'm going to put my life on your back. And you're going to take care of that. Because my life is not my life, it is the life of many beings that are from the monte [Own highlighting]. [...] He told me so for the (...) wasp bee. I see a wasp bee that makes a hole in the yard, he gets in and tells me: 'look, there are the children'. And the children got out botijas of those jugs holes.* **”**

31. No date.

32. In the voice of Angel appear mystical tales of telepathic communications between these wise elders, who lived in remote places and exchanged knowledge..

*E: What does “botijas” mean?*

*A: Did you see what the vases of water are, like the funerary urns? But tiny ones, which bees make. A wasp bee called chilalo; and as I am able to see it, he says to me: 'now you know how to see, you are going to start seeing, but you are going to stay here.' //*

After this event, Ángel narrates a period of personal crisis that results on the decision to permanently move from his hometown to Quimilí, adopting a new way of life that at that time, meant a radical turn for him. This transition is, in part, explained from the fact that he had taken the words of the wise Tito Rabello as a sign, which affected him deeply and; in another part, it is motivated by personal aspirations such as the senses of novelty and adventure, which he remembers as components of his youth. The next stage, catalyzed after this event, is the political meeting between Ángel and the group of so-called *third-world agrarian priests*, belonging to the aforementioned Agrarian Leagues and adherents to the Theology of Liberation. This group of around 30 religious people, who, according to the interviewee, ‘disguised as priests, but in reality were revolutionaries of Marxist-Gramscian roots’, had Argentinian or European origin (Italian, French and Catalan mainly) and were settled in the area working in rural schools:

*"The priests 'took' primary schools and trained teachers, received social psychologists from Argentina, set up literacy teams ... that is, there is a pre-MOCASE that these guys are" (Interview with Ángel).*

However, this political impulse does not find a complete explanation without also considering Ángel's former gathering with the former local leaders and thinkers, also immersed in the experiences of political organization that had existed among rural workers during the years of the Peronist government, and that had been later placated during dictatorial governments.

Thus, Ángel's political work, together with other political leaders of rural and urban or even foreign origin, in confluence, first begins in a covert and incipient manner during the civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983), and then deepens with the return of democracy in the 1980s.

Afterwards, when the expansion of the soybean frontier exacerbates the processes of evictions and territorial conflicts, it finds him already shaped by a previous trajectory of organization and pedagogical-political transformation that acts as a fertile substrate for the later implosion of what would happen to be called since 1990 as MOCASE-Vía Campesina. Without encouragement to expand on his political background, it is relevant to point out that the basic "political work" that Ángel carried out together with other rural leaders in the community that I have visited is central the figure of Raimundo Gómez<sup>33</sup>, another *wise elder* consisted of touring the different homes, traditionally isolated, promoting political reflection and collective activities to promote social organization. This task arises in an anticipated and defensive way against what they considered 'the march of capitalism' over the traditional way of life. According to Ángel, what motivated his concern and the consequent political action was:

**//**... *that they wanted to sustain their ways of life and their dignity; and win the capitalist, the estanciero, the patron of the estancia.*

*E: Was the eviction process already beginning before this conflict?*

*A: No, the 'old man' [Tito Rabello] told me that they were going to come for them again, as the English forestry companies came, so he told me: 'they are coming, you have to come and help, because if you come and say that you are a professor of philosophy and go to many ranchos, together with us, they will believe. He told me that I was the one they had been waiting for for many years. So, he organized strategies. He designed my life, definitely. //*

[Own highlighting]

This life story does not narrate any other topic than Ángel's initial political motivations in the first person. In other words, from his own memories and reconstruction from present times, when around 40 years have passed since the events reported. From that time on developed all the events that make up the origins and evolution of the MOCASE-VC, now a broad and consolidated rural-indigenous social movement, whose course exceeds the scope of this work.

33. On the life and political action of him has been published "Raimundo Gómez, Walker of the monte [forest]" (Gómez, Ithurralde and Otero, 2011).

However, I must emphasize that, from the moment that is narrated in his story to the present, Angel has had a preponderant role as organizer and activist of the organization, in a constant and permanent way, since he has settled down in the town of Quimilí and he works in that and other Rural Centers. Since that time, and with his partner for 27 years, "La Flaca" María, also the political leader of the movement, they have remained key participants, being present even during the stays in which this research took place.

In this work, we are interested in that fragment of his narrative for the purposes of our objectives, because the figure of Angel and the *wise elder* we have mentioned, Raimundo Gómez, will also later appear as a *catalyst* for most of the stories of the countryfolk whom we interviewed, especially those from the *base communities* belonging to Quimilí Central.

These life stories will also recover the idea of *gratification* and recognition to another person who gives a *gift* [don], who comes to reveal something that was 'in there' of the person who relates and who drives a radical turn in biographies, initiating political activity and contributing to sustain the value of political practices for a prolonged period, up to the present.

Thus, the idea of *gratitude*, the revelation of an identity and a *sense of life* that was overwhelmed, as well as the need and *responsibility to circulate that gift* reappear. *This mythical structure promotes the reciprocity intention. It is a key part of the original myth, or in other terms, of the MOCASE's "mysticism", inexplicable for outsiders.* According to Angel's words, Tito Rabello "designed his life, in definitely".

In consequence, as I try to show below, others will be the ones who reiterate that signifier in their narratives, as receivers of Ángel's political actions, together with the *elders*, who started the organization. The MOCASE-VC, now as a collective organization and beyond individualities, appears in the biographies as *giving a gift* in the form of a *sense of life*, in a holistic and integral way, a life that appears as gratifying, dignifying, and restorative to the oppression previously suffered. It is this *gift* that, through political activity, the organized countryfolk contribute to sustain

and convey to the community and the generations that follow. These senses of gratitude and reciprocity, in the form of a *myth* that is recreated daily, sustain and contribute, to a large extent, to the identity and political praxis of the MOCASE-VC.



*A typical countryfolk-indigenous assembly for the discussion and collective decision making. Image taken from the official website of the MOCASE Vía Campesina.*

## **FROM RURAL WORKERS TO RURAL LEADERS: THE NARRATIVES OF TWO “HISTORICAL MEMBERS”**

The auto biographical narrative previously presented has a counterpart in the first encounter with the local inhabitants of the town of Quimilí, mostly temporary rural workers in conditions of exploitation for foreign large companies, and are offered as unique expressions of the emergence of MOCASE’s history. In their narratives, the first instances of meeting between Raimundo Gómez, Ángel and "La Flaca" María are represented as key founding events. Since then, they began to periodically visit the different rural homes of Rincón de Saladillo during the decade of 1980 aiming to have initial political talks with the local people, and afterwards they managed to politically organize the community in the early 1990s.

To begin with, recounts a ‘suffered and difficult’ childhood and adolescence, characterized by poverty and naturalized *gender asymmetries*, centered on the authoritarian figures of her father.

At the age of 15, being single and cursing her first pregnancy, she was sent by her family to work as a domestic employee, living in a separate room inside their house, for one of the wealthiest families of the City of Santiago del Estero, which was usual in such cases. When her son was 8 months old, she returned to her family's home, and her parents and brothers became a key part in her son's upbringing. Soon after, she married Raimundo and they built their own *rancho*, close to her family's.

For Luisa, meeting Angel and La Flaca was a key *pivotal point* in her life as a *woman*, initiating what she considers as *starting to speak*, or starting to *have a voice of her own*. In previous works, we have already extended on this argument from the analysis of what have been denominated by the MOCASE as gender *workshops*, initially organized by La Flaca and then followed by other rural women, addressed exclusively for women mainly as a result of the observation of their difficulties for public speaking and participation in the political organization (Pena, 2017). According to Luisa's memories, the beginnings of the political intervention of Raimundo Gómez with Ángel and La Flaca, at the beginning of the 1990s, are also some of the *crucial moments* that provoked a redefinition of gender relations and a comprehensive change in women's lives:

**E:** *Do you remember when they started talking about those things?*

**L:** *...when the organization started. Because, when we were in the first meeting organized by Don Raimundo, he started. He saw that there were many women who did not speak, who remained silent. The woman looked always behind. The man sat here, and the woman was hiding because she could not talk. And if the man went to the meeting and said, 'Let's go to the meeting, woman,' she would leave, and if he did not say 'let's go', the woman did not know where she was going because she could not ask.*

In her own trajectory as a political member of the MOCASE, Luisa recalls her own fears and difficulties, as well as her remarkable turns, recalling the beginnings of her shyness and introspection during political meetings and, later on, her transition towards organizer of meetings focused on 'the new' women in the organization.

Today, Luisa has been married to Mundo for more than 25 years and they have nine children and a grandchild who, according to her, was raised oppositely to the way she had learned from her own parents. Not only has Luisa's family life dramatically changed, but so has her role in the community. She is one of the most active participants in the organization. The visual material made by the social movement, such as videos, photographs and documentaries circulating on the Internet, clearly and frequently show her on the front lines of protests, leading manifestations towards the public authorities and raising her voice on more than one opportunity, facing police forces. She has also traveled to other countries in the region to attend global social movements' meetings, and she actively participates in her community in the different internal *work areas* of the MOCASE. Luisa is also a usual host for activists, students, and young people coming from other organizations or the community in general, who are interest in getting to know the movement, such as myself.

Once again, the notion of a gift that has been delivered and in relation to which the subject feels *grateful* reappears. That gift, in turn, drives the political motivation to keep, recreate and extend it to the community. In the words of Luisa:

***// He [Raimundo] is the one who has founded this so that we can stay here, he Angel, and Skinny have started fighting. We always say, they have paved the way for us and made us open our eyes so that we can see that there was another better life. //***

On the other hand, Mundo, Luisa's husband, is the grandson of two rural workers who were evicted from their home in a neighboring area, called *Pozo del Toba*, in the 1970s, as part of the aforementioned "silent evictions". As a result, his family moved in to Rincón de Saladillo when he was 10 years old. He is also a key actor in the creation of the MOCASE and his memories are key to recall the beginnings of the social organization. When they met Angel, they did not have any experience in politic activism. In fact, he and Luisa worked in the cotton harvest and their own farming and Ángel was, at that time, conducting his first visits to Rincon de Saladillo.



From then on, they began to meet periodically with social and political purposes, and, afterwards, Ángel was introduced with Raimundo Gómez, Mundo's uncle, who was in charge of the local primary school. Mundo had a leading role during the creation of these first political instances that we can now recall as MOCASE's founding moments. He was also a participant of its subsequent split in 2001 between the initial MOCASE, those who wanted a traditional political structure, and the MOCASE – Vía Campesina, which is oriented towards relative autonomic decision-making politics, and focused on a more 'microscopical' political intervention, organizing countryfolk into base communities:

*“We had the opportunity, when we had the last assembly, when we decided as MOCASE Vía Campesina. I was happy that they choose me to go and talk to the other compañeros, (partners), so that we can meet in one place. It turns out that when we go, we are not accepted. Those leaders do not accept us because we wanted them as communities that participate, not that the leaders participate [...] And they were in a seat that belonged to the ministry that was part of the government's production. They gave them headquarters where to meet. And they always, the leaders, paid attention to the government. We wanted autonomy. So that was the decision [...] they made, they were not taken by the communities. We did not want that. We wanted the communities to have their decisions.”*

Based on these facts, Rincón de Saladillo was organized as a *community base* belonging to the MOCASE-VC and began to build the notions of community life, solidarity, and territoriality from the local political practice promoted by these initial leaders. At first, one of the fundamental changes had to do with cotton harvest's cooperative marketing and subsidies, program searches for the entire community, and then the creation and/or recovery of traditional practices and communitarian spaces, such as *community orchards*. These notions of community and solidarity include "the Earth" as part of their whole identity. To illustrate this, Mundo contrasts the MOCASE perspective with that of the *agribusiness* entrepreneurs, who they define as lacking the sense of transcendence and communion with a 'deeper way of life that countryfolk possess.

Mundo's narrative also allows us to reconstruct the fact that, based on the political organization, and what they perceive as 'the new path' that has been opened to them, countryfolk are also *dignified* and *gratified* by having recovered their previous knowledge, traditions and conceptions, which had been underhanded by capitalism:

“From the assembly meetings in the 90s, we started to see how the earth could be looked after, but we did not understand anything yet. We did not understand anything of what it was, let's say, the Pachamama, we did not understand anything, but it also throws you away, it's like a magnet, it's like one already comes from our ancestors, from our grandparents.”

To conclude this part, Mundo's words are illustrative of what drives and mobilizes them for their political participation beyond the substantive material issue that is the permanence in the territory they inhabit. These notions, taking up what we developed when we introduced the autobiographical narrative technique, speak to us of the *praxis of gratitude* as a fundamental part of the *mythical structure* that sustains the identity and daily practice of the MOCASE-VC.

*What changed the movement is dignity.* The strongest thing that it has taught me is to return to dignity, be worthy, be happy, not worry about anything. To enjoy that one can be with the family, can be calm, to be able to help the one who needs it, we who are not organized go and help him too. Or there are families that need things, we go and we help them. One says 'no good, this is not about the movement, we should not help it', BUT *We think of humanity.*



*Luisa and Mundo with some of their children and their grandson, Angelito, in their rural home, together with the anthropologist. Base community of Rincón de Saladillo, Quimilí.*

# THE PRAXIS OF GRATITUDE IN THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

As I have examined in previous works, the notion of *community life* is key to support the resistance in the territory, but also as an identity structure that sustains participation and is considered as a fundamental anchor for individual and collective goals (Pena, 2017). The new collective body reorganizes the ethics around individuals' lives. Subjects visualize that 'every aspect of life' of each of them also belongs to the collective and, therefore, as an organization, they should interfere and collaborate in any of them. The notion of 'private life' or 'family life' is no longer perceived as a separate sphere from that of political participation, and it is replaced by the idea that the well-being of its members is a collective aim that benefit the group as a whole.

In addition, I raise the argument that gratitude as a form of action or 'political praxis', *gratitude in action*, is a useful concept when it comes to shedding light on the dynamics and meanings that the people of MOCASE conduct within their daily life, comprehended and experienced as community life. To illustrate this idea and only for analytical purposes, I differentiate between values and meanings that manifest at a discourse level; and secondly, practices that can be observed during the base communities' daily life. Needless to clarify that both instances imply each other and that there is no strict division between action and words, but both are essential elements of a particular way of feeling and living.

However, I find it useful to separate different forms of expression, such as words or speeches, on the one hand, and community practices on the other, to clarify my idea.

The most forceful expression of *gratitude in action* I have observed during everyday community practices consists in the *constant availability* of all or most of the families to tend to what they call homes or zones *in conflict*. With this jargon, countryfolk refer to an eviction attempt, most of the times literally by 'rented' armed civilians for intimidation, and in others occasions through different kinds of legal instruments. As explained before, the irruption of these critical events initiates communication to organize peasant *aguantes* and *retomas* on behalf of the members of the MOCASE-VC being under risk.

During the beginning of my research, a mixture of innocence and hope made me think that perhaps these events were part of MOCASE's 'folk' and that they would have been become sporadic. On the contrary, I sadly had to witness the painful naturalness with which rural families coexist with the fact that usually one or more members of the family is absent from their homes, because some place is at the risk of violent eviction. When I conducted my first visits, I always asked about the household's formation and I usually found out that some of their members 'were at the *aguante*' or in the 'conflict zone', and it was impossible for me to gather all those who made up the domestic unit at the same time. Thus, it is not about extraordinary events but about the daily life of rural families.

In terms of the domestic economies, the costs that these practices represent are immense, since they lose part of their work force for the arduous rural work. It is far more difficult to quantify the subjective costs of coping with the reality that a close relative is often attending a confrontation which involves a greater or lesser degree of risk and physical violence or even life risk, depending on the case, and the uncertainty or the anguish implicated is even known by the youngest.

This organization, for territorial defense, also requires preparation in advance. Since countryfolk know that conflicts arise 'here or there' and 'at any moment'. This reality has reformulated relations within families including household tasks between the genders and generations, since the social movement does not distinguish between men and women when it comes to asking for assistance for families in the process of eviction. All 'hands' and 'bodies' are needed and necessary, either to *stop the bulldozers*, to cook, to assist those who are in the *aguante*, to propose strategies of legitimacy and dialogue, and to prevent physical violence. In terms of the *politics of everyday life*, this means rethinking and practicing previous conceptions around work distribution, relations at distances, and also the liberties and competences of each family member, not only between men and women but also among the younger ones, whose lives are essentially shaped by these activisms and the previous processes.

It is not difficult to understand that, in a collective organization that rose from the common conjuncture of territorial conflict, the logic of reciprocity is dominant and necessary.

However, it is a practice of reciprocity that is not usually rational or calculated and that, I dare to suggest, would be untenable without having the emotional driving forces and the *affective loyalties* built up by the organization over decades, the creation of a *rural identity* and its foundation in the traditional solidarity practices.

When I interviewed one of the oldest members of the community of Santa Rosa, he explained that his home was one of the few that had no direct conflicts because his property did have deeds, since it had been assigned through a social subsidy in the 60s. However, he and his family have been major players during several of the *retomas* that compound the memories of the MOCASE. The interviewee had no words to answer my question: why did he put his life at risk to help another family that is not even from his own community? He simply remained silent and I watched him cry. Then he replied: "I do not know if I did it out of interest or disinterest ... I just wanted to be there, it's like we have made a big family".

## CONCLUSION

The category of *praxis of gratitude*, or gratitude as a mode of political action, is a concept undergoing consolidation that promises to shed light on the *analysis of the affective dimensions that sustain social movements, and collective processes in general*. Anchored in a case study, the analysis presented in this paper helps demonstrate the feasibility of applying this notion to social studies' approaches, in this case an anthropological study, but with an interdisciplinary intention - and its potential to delve into different types of political processes, their conditions to perpetuate and strengthen themselves, and their subjective motivations. For the historical members of the Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero-Vía Campesina, we suggest that gratitude is expressed as a *mythical structure* in the identity of the social organization, which is a key component of territorial conflict sustainability in adverse material conditions.

The individual political trajectories were narrated as catalyzed by an encounter with *another* that *gives*, revealing the possibility of "a new way of life" which delivers hope and the possibility of transformation at a political, symbolic, and material level, which works as a *don*, recovering the concept of a classical anthropological theory.

The innovative aspect of this is that, according to our observations, the *emotion of gratitude*, the feeling of having been gratified and dignified from this initial exchange, is an important symbolic component when it comes to promoting responsibility and motivation to *circulate* that *gift* or *don* towards the created community and, in this case, also extending it to the territory, the nature, and the future generations as an integral part of a holistic thought.

This emotion of gratitude is put into action and becomes a practice completely imbricated with the political and material issues of this collective struggle. We tried to demonstrate, from the moment it is verbalized and manifested as the basis of the countryfolk's daily practices in the last 28 years, and their resistance is proof of that.

Those who are part of the MOCASE-VC have *realized* that they have something valuable to defend, something that gratifies them and encourages them not to let it be taken away, and to *give to the others what they already have*.

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