

Peasants' Social Representation of Politicians in a Clientelist Rural Context

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ABSTRACT

In Latin America, political clientelism is one of the main obstacles to the process of sustaining truly democratic practices. Thus, this article proposes to study peasants from the Province of Formosa, Argentina's social representation of politicians, in hopes of shedding light on the relationship between said representations and clientelist practices, with the objective of making a contribution to the development of alternative means towards democratization in the area.

The results of this case study show that, at the center of the peasants' social representation of politicians, there lies a tendency to place their expectations for receiving assistance within a context of a personalized and hierarchical relationship framework. Nevertheless, the majority of these farmers consider the assistance received to be insufficient and inadequate, stating that politicians actually look to satisfy their own interests and not those of the general public. In conclusion, the peasants' social representation of politicians favors clientelist practices, even though these small farmers do not identify, via their culture or their expectations, with these practices. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: clientelism; peasants; politicians small farmers; social representations

INTRODUCTION

The concept of political clientelism is commonly found in studies on Latin American political practices (Auyero, 1999) possibly because, although liberal democracy has been established in this subcontinent as a government ideology, in many contexts, this has not translated into concrete political practices on a local level (Pfoh, 2005). In short, political clientelism is a profoundly complex phenomenon (Carvalho, 1997) that takes on varyingly different forms depending on the context in which it is found (Trotta, 2003). Furthermore,

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it is an often difficult concept to characterize scientifically because of the negative overtures with which it is commonly acquainted as well as the accusatory tone that tends to contextualize its use (Auyero, 1999). In practical terms, political clientelism refers to an informal exchange relationship of a hierarchical nature, involving two subjects, a patron and a client. The patron, having greater access to resources, agrees to provide material goods and different types of assistance to the client, who, in turn, responds to this assistance by giving the patron his loyalty, political support or vote (Audelo Cruz, 2004).

One of political clientelism's most distinctive features is that, within its field of study, there exist several, often contrasting, theoretical positions. For example, Güneş-Ayata (1997) shows that clientelism has been considered, on the one hand, to be an anti-democratic practice, whereas, on the other hand, to be a means by which to bridge marginalized populations with decision-making centers, thus favoring the development of the population's political awareness. Likewise, Trotta (2003) shows that there are authors who highlight the oppressive nature of these relationships, while others prioritize its cooperative side, regardless of existing asymmetries. Thus, to stereotypically consider clientelist practices as anti-democratic and dysfunctional is not only an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon, but it is also an analysis that provides little insight into the complexities inherent to peoples' experience with democracy (Lazar, 2004).

Nonetheless, it is clear that, on a descriptive level, political clientelism is a type of unequal relationship (Clark, 2004; Hutchcroft, 1997; Lauth, 2000; Roniger, 1997) whose structure is based on the individual and personalized relationship between a patron and a client and thus can be differentiated from bureaucratic and institutionalized relationships (Pfoh, 2005). Because of the give and take nature of these interactions, both parties generally perceive clientelist relationships as being mutually beneficial. (Audelo Cruz, 2004; Clark, 2004; Roniger, 1997). Nevertheless, it is a practice that, at its heart, implies the dependency of one actor on the other (Auyero, 1997, 2000, 2001; Trotta, 2003). Moreover, this unequal relationship is able to sustain itself over time because the actor that is in the position of dependency perceives it as being legitimate (Auyero, 1996), a perception based on the existence of a group of personal agreements between patrons and clients as well as on a system grounded on the exchange of favors (Manzetti & Wilson, 2007).

In the past, political clientelism has been studied by various social disciplines. Despite the fact that it has the potential for making an interesting contribution to the comprehension of this phenomenon, the field of psychology has generally refrained from becoming involved in these types of studies. In fact, authors such as Auyero (1996, 1997, 1999, 2001) and Trotta (2003) have suggested that the lack of attention paid to the subjective dimension of political clientelism is a major limitation of contemporary studies that focus, instead, on conducting objectivist research, thus omitting any consideration of actors' representations. Auyero (1996) points out that although clientelism does, in fact, have a dimension that is related to the practice of exchanging support for votes, it is also a practice based on the existence of an internalized *habitus*, in other words, 'patterns of appreciation, perception and action (not just political) in the mental structures of the subjects involved in these exchange relationships' (Auyero, 1996, p. 32, author's translation).

Given the arguments stated above, I conclude that the study of the subjective dimension of political clientelism is a necessary enterprise. In concrete terms, it is an endeavor that implies the study of how the social representations and worldviews of actors (in this

investigation's case, peasants¹) are linked to clientelist practices. This research is important not only because it is an unexplored area of study within the field of psychology, but also because it has the potential for being a source of innovation when designing strategies for processes of democratization.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory-descriptive investigation was undertaken in a rural village in the Province of Formosa (Argentina). This geographical area is dedicated to the production of cotton and vegetables and is characterized by an elevated percentage of smallholders as well as by its clientelist practices. The objective of the investigation was to explore the psychosocial factors that influence rural development processes in peasant communities, one of which was the study of the subjective dimension of political clientelism. Specifically, this paper outlines the peasants of this town's social representations of 'politicians,' in an effort to articulate the peasants' worldviews with the clientelist practices in which they partake.

Three techniques were utilized to gather information: revision of secondary sources (primarily population, agricultural and economic censuses), participant observations carried out while living with a local, peasant family for a period of 5 months and the conduction of interviews. For the purposes of the general investigation, a total of 71 in-depth interviews were carried out with peasants (many of which were group interviews), as well as 11 with other actors including medium farmers, agents of rural development and one peasant leader. Within the group of interviews conducted with peasants, it is of importance to note that only 25 of them broached, in a direct manner, subjects linked to these farmers' social representation of politicians. Two more interviews can be added to this group of interviews dedicated to this subject matter, one of them conducted with a medium farmer and another with a peasant leader. Nevertheless, spontaneous references to the social representation of politicians appeared in the majority of the interviews carried out with peasants, a factor that allows for the statement that the results presented henceforth find their support in the totality of the corpus of the research.

In order to analyze the material gathered, both the interviews as well as the participant observation registries were transcribed, followed by a content analysis conducted with the support of Atlas Ti software. The research procedure was organized into three phases. Firstly, three introductory interviews were conducted, allowing for a first approach to the social representation that peasants have of politicians. In this way, the main topics related to the object of study were identified which enabled the construction of categories that were then used to systematize subsequent interviews. This led to the creation of an interview protocol that was further enriched by a revision of existing bibliography on political clientelism. In the second phase, 20 interviews were conducted using this protocol, which provided the tools for specifying and reorganizing the categories identified

¹The word *peasant* (used here as a translation for the Spanish term *campesino*) refers to a particular type of small farmer (Landini, Lacanna & Murtagh, 2010), who is characterized by the practice of predominantly using family labour to work their land as well as by the fact they have limited possibilities of making surplus income in a systematic manner (Manzanal, 1993). In fact, *peasants* are poor farmers who run their farms with the objective of achieving subsistence rather than obtaining profit (van der Ploeg, 2009). Despite the fact that the word *peasant* is not widely used in colloquial English and that it may be said to have a derogatory connotation in some circumstances, I opt for maintaining its use due to the existence of a long-standing tradition of 'Peasant Studies' in this language.

initially. Next, the different categories of analysis were used to organize the totality of the material, a process during which all references – taken from the rest of the interviews conducted – related to the subject studied were included in the analysis. Additionally, some relationships between different categories' content were established, thus generating a broad description of the representation that peasants have of politicians. Finally, the third phase consisted of carrying out four additional interviews, two to peasants and the rest to other actors, with the objective of clarifying areas that needed further specification.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this paper is based on the principles of social constructionism, which sustains that what people perceive as 'reality' is the result of a socially constructed process based on discursive exchanges (Burr, 1999; Gergen, 1996; Ibáñez, 2001; Potter, 1998). Nevertheless, given that the interest of this work lies in exploring peasants' common sense knowledge in relation to a particular social object, as are politicians, this paper will utilize the framework of social representations theory, which is compatible with social constructionism (Jodelet, 1986).

In this article, I will not carry out an exhaustive overview of social representations' theoretical framework. However, it is worth mentioning some elements of the theory that are relevant to this paper. First, as Krause Jacob (1999) states, when one speaks of social representations, there need be a necessary distinction between a carrier (which is the social group to which it belongs), the object to which it refers, and the content of the representation, which makes reference to the common sense knowledge the group has of the object. This investigation deals with the peasants of this localities' social representation of those they deem as 'politicians.' Additionally, it is important to note that social representations have two main functions: they serve as a means towards comprehending reality, and they guide behavior on a daily basis (Banchs, 1986; Howarth, 2006; Jodelet, 1986; Krause Jacob, 1999). These are essential functions in that they determine the importance of studying the social representation of politicians, research that will enable a better understanding of clientelist practices, which can then be used to design strategies to facilitate democratization processes.

Third, it is important to note that not all commonly held beliefs are social representations, being that the latter should necessarily reference a social object relevant to the group to which it belongs. This is the case of 'politicians,' in that they constitute a central element in the lives of peasants living in this area. Finally, it is important to note that social representations are not usually politically and ideologically neutral (Howarth, 2006). In fact, the act of organizing and categorizing reality from a particular point of view, and not another, can often function as content that legitimizes or obscures relationships characterized by inequality and domination (Montero, 1994), as is the case of the social representations studied in this work.

RESULTS

The following section presents the results of the research conducted. In the first place, it clarifies the category 'politicians,' a category that constitutes the object of the social representation in question, but, as taken from the peasants' point of view rather than that

of an outsider. In what follows, three elements are described that, to my judgment, organize the social representation's content: politicians' functions and role, existing expectations of politicians, and the intentions that underlie their actions. Next, the typological dichotomy that divides politicians into 'good' and 'bad' categories is presented, organized on the basis of whether or not politicians comply with what is expected of them, a classification that allows peasants to lend meaning to their experiences with politicians as well as function as a guide for their conduct towards them.

Politicians: actions and general functions

This section attempts to clarify how peasants define the category of 'politicians,' what types of social actors are included within the limits of this category and, finally, what functions are executed by each and every one of these actors, in an effort to gain an understanding of how peasants make sense of politicians and political practice. From peasants' perspective, politicians are first and foremost elected representatives, particularly in the case of mayors and town councilors. However, this group also includes political brokers, people who work with and for politicians, as well as others who aspire to obtain an electoral office. Finally, and in a more descriptive sense, politicians are people who visit homes, who work to obtain votes and who launch political campaigns, all practices that characterize pre-electoral periods in clientelist contexts (Auyero, 1999, 2000).

Peasants were asked what mayors and town councilors 'do,' as well as what their function is. In response, two main groups of responsibilities were identified. The first is related to helping and assisting people and being of service to those who need them. The second group of responsibilities is comprised of activities such as: cleaning the town, maintaining the quality of roads and paths, and building bridges. The interviewees stated that the role of mayor, specifically, included everything related to an executive function, for example management of the town, administration of the town council and the implementation of various projects. Peasants also mentioned that the mayor should: provide assistance for soil preparation (a common form of assistance in the area), take water to their wells and listen to the people's problems or needs. On the other hand, there are two types of specific responsibilities that seem to befall town councilors. The first involves formulating and obtaining approval for town projects. The second is their function as spokespeople for the concerns of the rural population, also focusing on gathering information (gossip) regarding the loyalty of their supporters, a role similar to that of political brokers whom, additionally, busy themselves during electoral periods with activities such as handing out government benefits and campaigning for votes.

Nevertheless, many of the interviewees answered that they did not know what mayors or town councilor's function was. As some interviewees stated, 'I don't even know what they are here for.'² Others simply pointed out that their job was to receive a salary and spend time in an office and were otherwise unable to specify which activities they were responsible for. These interviewees stated, 'all of them have their own office and they stay there and don't come out of there.' Or, worse yet, they state that these government employees get rich off of high salaries, meanwhile providing no form of benefit to society in return. As one peasant states, 'The town councilor is useless to the Nation, he is a blood-sucker of the Nation, the town councilor is insignificant, [. . .] he does nothing.'

²All references quoted, when not bibliographical, are textual translations of taped interviews with peasants.

Tasks and duties of mayors and town councilors

Now, in order to clarify the content of the social representation in question, one must not only be able to comprehend the general functions that peasants assign to politicians, but it is also necessary to explore what expectations exist of their practice, particularly in the case of their relationships with peasants. In this sense, peasants' expectations of mayors and town councilors go beyond that of merely demanding compliance with the formal duties enumerated previously; instead, they are tied to specific desires, needs and hopes. Consequently, understanding the nature of these expectations is of dire importance to comprehending both the social representation of politicians as well as the way local politics functions in this area.

The following section presents the elements that constitute peasants' expectations of politicians. First, the peasants (1) expect their leaders – particularly the mayor and town councilors (because they hold the most important positions) – to come around to their homes, as do political brokers during electoral periods. In this community, a visit to a peasant's home has a very particular and human significance. Because farms are often located kilometers away from paved roads, any attempt to reach them is a clear gesture of interest towards either the family or individual that is being visited. To visit, then, means to get to know how someone lives, his or her hardships, suffering and needs. Last, peasants wish to be visited so that they can communicate their state of suffering and need and thus obtain the assistance they need in order to resolve it.

The most important responsibility allocated to politicians is precisely in regards to this last point and it entails, (2) assisting and helping peasants, poor people or those in need. This expectation translates into three, concrete actions. The first deals with, (2.1) 'giving direct assistance or help to whomever needs it,' whether it is because they are poor or because they are in an emergency situation. This includes providing welfare plans to those of humble origins, giving money for transport tickets, obtaining pensions or taking water to people's wells during times of drought.

The expectation is not that these be carried out through the use of institutionalized public welfare plans, but instead, within the context of the face-to-face, personalized relationships that characterize political clientelism (Pfoh, 2005; Trotta, 2003). This demonstrates that political clientelism retains a value often lost in bureaucratic systems: that of treating people, not with the indifference that often characterizes these systems, but rather in a humane and personalized manner (Güneş-Ayata, 1997). Consequently, the expectation is that the politicians respond to people's needs not as government employees complying with their duties, but rather as good people who worry and are committed to meeting poor people's needs.

Peasants utilize two, interrelated arguments to provide justification for why politicians should assist those in need. The first is that assisting them is synonymous to holding public office. As one peasant states, 'because when I needed, I went, I spoke to him, I was caught in that tornado [. . .]. Then that mayor helped me [. . .] they are there for that.' The second reason is that the peasants perceive politicians' assistance as payback for the electoral support provided previously, a support that enabled the government employee to obtain their post in the first place, as well as the salary he or she now enjoys. One peasant explains, 'if I vote for Mariano, it is so that Mariano tomorrow, for example, buys some medication for a child.' In this manner, peasants confuse the difference between the public and private realms, the former pertaining to politicians' responsibilities when

holding public office as well as government funds destined towards social welfare plans, and the latter to an individual's personal economy and the salary he or she receives for the position held.

From the peasants' perspective, a mayor or town councilor's duty to assist applies not only to their public property, but also to their personal wealth, within which is included, in a very particular manner, their salary. This is because their salary is understood to be a sort of 'prize' given to those who have been elected, rather than payment for carrying out a particular role and is, as such, not necessarily the property (at least not in its totality) of the person to whom it is paid, since they receive it thanks to the 'help' of people's votes. Consequently, when a peasant asks a town councilor or mayor for a favor, he asks of them not only in response to their public duty, but also as a person, a perspective that generates the expectation that politicians must lend assistance even if it means using their personal wealth or salary to do so. This can be clearly observed in the following fragment:

If you're in need of some medication [...], they have to help you [...] they tell you they don't have, they themselves tell you that they don't have extra money [...] because the town councilors have to be there if you need some medication, if your family is sick they have to help, they have to take it out of their own salary [...] but here, when you go and ask for something when you need it, most of them tell you the tale that they don't have any extra.

The second form of assistance, circumscribed within the general category of the responsibility to assist and help is, (2.2) 'providing support for production or providing jobs,' which is different to giving direct assistance because, regardless of the fact that it too is directed at satisfying certain needs, it does so by way of facilitating or enabling people to work. This type of assistance can include supplying seeds for planting, giving credits for agricultural production, assisting in soil preparation or even providing public employment. Finally, a third type of assistance that peasants expect from politicians is, (2.3) 'helping peasants sell and obtain a good price for their production,' since one of the smallholders' major difficulties is liaising with the market.

Third, another expectation peasants have of elected officials is that (3) they not behave according to a political logic where their own interest in votes and in accumulating power prevails over people's needs. In this way, peasants long for forms of assistance that are equal for all; where the priority is placed on helping those who need it the most and not just their own supporters, where promises are kept and homes are visited all year-round and not just during electoral periods. In addition, there emerged the expectation that politicians (4) are responsible for the common good; in other words, not just for assisting people, but also for the continual implementation of projects that benefit the community, for example, improving schools or installing street lighting.

An interesting element that becomes apparent in these interviews is that the profile of peasants' expectations is decidedly one based on principles of assisting others, making the terms 'public office' and 'assistance' almost synonymous. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how personalized or individualized this assistance is. In fact, peasants consider it necessary that this help stems from the information gathered through home visits, allowing the politician to get to know the particular needs of each family, a process requiring a certain level of human recognition that enables them to perceive someone else's suffering, on an individual basis. At the same time, this type of assistance seems to highlight a view

of politicians as being people who have monetary resources rather than being people who hold a public office, a perception that makes politicians' responsibility to assist those in need a result of their personal good will rather than the result of a formal responsibility. In this context, the common good – understood as benefits that are useful for everyone and cannot be appropriated in an individual manner – are relegated in the face of a more personalized form of assistance.

From what should be to what is: what political leaders actually do

Previous sections of this paper were dedicated to clarifying the manner in which peasants define the category of 'politicians,' as well as the expectations that the former have of the latter. This section will attempt to explain, through a comparison between these expectations and the descriptions of politicians' practices, the origin of the negative connotation that characterizes, in general terms, peasants' perceptions of politicians as a social group.

Despite the fact that during the interviews it was possible to identify varying points of view, an ample majority of the peasants argued that politicians (as a general category) do not comply with what is expected of them. Even those peasants interviewed who have distinct party affiliations, support this view of politicians and tend to admit that even those of their own parties have 'limitations.' Thus, it becomes clear that peasants have an *overall negative assessment* of politicians.

As stated previously, one of the main expectations peasants have of politicians and municipal authorities is that they carry out frequent home visits so as to educate themselves on peoples' needs. However, in reality, this does not occur very often. As one peasant states, 'they never come, only [in] electoral periods.' Additionally, peasants demand that authorities and political brokers provide different types of assistance to people who need it. In this sense, some interviewees state that there is a lot of assistance for poor people, such as welfare plans and low-cost soil preparation. Others, however, state that although help does exist, they receive nothing. Either way, an ample majority of the peasants consider that, although assistance does exist, it is scarce, insufficient or of poor quality.

Despite their dissatisfaction with the scarcity of the help provided, as well as with its apparent limitations, this general dissatisfaction does not imply that peasants consider all levels of government to be equally responsible. In fact, many interviewees explained that help is sent by federal and provincial agencies and yet it is appropriated and redirected locally. Consequently, the most commonly held idea is that this assistance is retained at a municipal level and is *kept for themselves* rather than redistributed. As one peasant claims, 'something arrives for distribution and they just divide it up between themselves and the poorest people are left with nothing.' These references to government employees' illegal appropriation of public funds also apply to their salaries, a conception perhaps sustained by the idea that they collect their salaries without complying with their 'obligation' to use it to help the people. In any case, this perception is telling of the appeal that the government employee's salary holds for peasants, as well as the fact that it is difficult for them to conceive of politicians exercising a function that should be remunerated.

The subjective perception of politicians' reasons

It is clear that the overall (usually negative) assessment that peasants have of local political practices is related to the strong contrast that exists between what they expect of their

leaders and what these effectively *do*. However, in order to obtain a more precise understanding of how peasants arrive at these conclusions, it becomes necessary to explore how they explain politicians' failure to live up to the expectations peasants have of them.

The principal discovery peasants make is that politicians, once they obtain their office, are no longer interested in the people. When they accept the position they: 'move up to their office and do nothing,' 'no longer know who you are,' or, 'forget.' In fact, peasants perceive that politicians no longer make home visits to see what the people need, but instead stay in their offices and ask to not be disturbed. Electoral promises often end up becoming mere anecdotes. In this way, from the peasants' perspective, the concern that politicians demonstrate during electoral periods for the needs of the smallholders is nothing more than a simulated pose that masks their personal and corporate interests.

Within the category of underlying motivations, the interviewees first mention politicians' interest in obtaining votes (in other words, in winning elections). They state, 'after they get your vote, they don't value you anymore [...] everything is about interest.' In short, the interviewees believe that political candidates lie to obtain their position and stop worrying about the people when they get what they wanted.

However, peasants' explanations reveal that they believe neither votes nor public office to be politicians' ultimate interest, but rather the money they can make once they are appointed. Stated previously in this paper is the peasant's belief that local authorities illegally appropriate funds that are received from upper echelons of the government. Furthermore, peasants interpret that mayors and councilors' salaries are also a part of this framework of illegal appropriation, since they do nothing to deserve them and do not use them to assist people in need, as should be, exceptional situations aside. Consequently, within a context of poverty – where holding public office is a precious commodity – someone in executive office's income, perceived in a sense as illegitimate, ends up becoming something that verges on the scandalous and indictable. This income is not just a salary but, instead, a 'super salary,' and an underserved and poorly administered one at that, due to the fact that it does not make its way back to the peasants in the form of generous attitudes and support. As a result, the salary (and any other economic benefit that could be obtained through the position) appears as the ultimate motivation behind politicians' interest in obtaining public office.

In this way, politics ends up being perceived as something dirty and negative. However, not all political practice or politicians are tainted by these terms or characterized in this way, a phenomenon which is analyzed in the following section.

'Good' and 'bad' politicians

As was indicated previously, locals have a distinctively negative image of politicians and their practice. However, and in contrast to these general observations, there do exist those people who support a particular politician. Those politicians who are set apart from the rest tend to be characterized in different ways, but always end up sharing some common features. They are described as being good people who assist the poor peasants in various ways. They are those politicians who not only help their own supporters but, instead, help needy people in general; they never say 'no' when asked for something and visit farmers on a regular basis, to see what they need. Furthermore, if they are or were mayors and town councilors, they are described as catering to the common good, building

bridges, installing street lighting, etc. From the peasant's perspective, these people are not ordinary 'politicians,' but more like good people for whom the general rules of 'politics' do not apply. Thus, not only does the social representation of politicians include a negative characterization of them as a social group, but it also allows for the differentiation, on an individual level, between good and bad politicians, a distinction that helps them organize their experiences and behavior in relation to these two types.

The existence of a category of 'good politician' has to be explained, provided that it represents – to a certain extent – an exception to the negative connotation that predominantly characterizes this group. In this sense, my analysis shows that the characterization of a politician as a 'good politician' seems to stem from two fundamental elements: the experience of having received personalized help continuously over a long period of time (even though it may no longer be the case) and the perception that the aid provided was altruistically motivated. In fact, if the motives behind the assistance had been perceived as the result of political interests, then the bond of emotional gratitude, where the peasants feel compelled to reciprocate, would not have been constructed. When peasants characterize 'good politicians,' they are not described as being motivated by money or votes. Rather, they are perceived as being motivated by pity, compassion or the desire to take care of or protect the poor peasants, thus establishing a hierarchical and unequal relationship that is mediated by the knowledge of people's needs and suffering, a description that places peasants in a passive and defenseless position. Interviewees state, 'we helps me because he has compassion for my children,' 'he helped me because he probably feels sorry for me.'

The fact that peasants are extremely poor and are constantly faced with situations of scarcity is a reality that should not be taken lightly in the context of this analysis. This is because this situation of need, as well as their perception of themselves as defenseless, are precisely the factors that generate – along with the assistance received – feelings of gratitude and deference towards politicians, feelings that are characteristic of clientelist practices and relationships. Of course, this is not the only possibility available for politician–peasant interactions, nor is it the only shape that political clientelism can take on. In fact, there exist cases in which the exchange of favors is based on strategic attitudes geared towards obtaining specific benefits, or on practices that are openly structured within a logic of control and oppression. Nevertheless, the analysis of peasants' social representation of politicians is a useful tool towards a better comprehension of the diversity of interactions that comprise clientelist practices.

Before finalizing this section, I would like to point out that Auyero (1999) explains this differential assessment of some politicians or political brokers (in this case, evidenced by the differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' politicians) as being the result of whether or not they belong to someone's intimate circle of contacts or on how often they interact. Indeed, in this case study, the people who held a particular politician in high esteem generally felt as though they were 'their people.' However, this differential assessment seems to exceed merely being the result of the frequency of their interactions or whether they belong or not to their intimate circle of contacts. Thus, and though this opens a potential area of study to be explored, it would seem that the experiences that give birth to these perceptions and assessments are more durable than expected, even when contact is infrequent. One possible explanation for this durability is that the assistance received is done so within contexts characterized by pressing needs and strong feelings of defenselessness.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I described and analyzed the social representation of local politicians held by peasants from the province of Formosa, Argentina. The category of 'politicians' is one that, from the point of view of the interviewees, includes not only those who occupy or look to occupy some form of electoral office (applicable specifically to mayors and town councilors), but also includes political brokers who work with the former, generally functioning as intermediaries in the relationship between political leaders and the rural population. In an effort to summarize, the social representation that peasants have of politicians is based on a fundamental expectation, which is that of receiving personalized assistance within a framework of personalized and hierarchical relationships. Moreover, the description of what is expected of politicians shows that these expectations fall short in relation to the perception of what they actually accomplish, thus resulting in a negative valuation of 'politicians' as a social group, a valuation reinforced by the interpretations made in regards to the motivations guiding their conduct, generally considered as being based on personal economic interests. Nevertheless, the set of expectations that peasants have of politicians allows for the distinction, on an individual basis, between 'good' and 'bad' politicians, which links to – in the case of the former – paving the way towards the establishment of peasants' feelings of gratitude and deference. Thus, it is important to mention that the social representation described in this paper allows peasants of this area to lend meaning to the practices of those they deem to be 'politicians,' whilst providing a guide for their conduct in respect to them. However, it is interesting to note that the representation here studied exists not only in terms of cognitive processes, but also includes feelings and emotions held towards politicians, which, in turn, play a relevant role when it comes to guiding conduct and social practices.

The first conclusion that this work arrives at is that the social representation of politicians held by peasants of this area favors the development of political clientelism. In fact, the expectation that politicians should help those in need, within a framework of personalized and hierarchical relationships, can easily be linked to the development of clientelist ties, where the assistance provided and the emotions generated are used to the provider's advantage, since he asks for political support or votes in return.

A second conclusion that should be mentioned is that, regardless of the fact that the social representation of politicians favors the development of clientelist ties, peasants do not actively call for, desire nor seek out political practices of these characteristics. Instead, they ask for assistance but reject that it comes in the form of help conditioned by an interest in obtaining political support that appears only during electoral periods and that has, as its motivation, personal or party interests. In essence, what the peasants look for is that those people who possess the economic means to assist those in need do so; this does not mean, however, that they wish to be a means towards a political end or towards satisfying interests that are foreign to them.

Consequently, this means that the peasant communities do not identify with clientelist practices, but instead with only one of its elements: the personalized assistance that stems from a framework of hierarchical relationships. Thus, it is an interesting exercise to pose the question as to whether it is possible to generate forms of social assistance and of local politics that do not adopt clientelist practices but that do include, in contrast to current forms of bureaucratic governments, the cultural norms that are particular to the peasants. This is because, it would seem, that the very act of imposing on these communities

political forms that are foreign to them is one of the elements that favor the development of political clientelism, a practice that is then criticized. In sum, it becomes necessary to ponder alternatives that avoid the vices of bureaucratic political systems, where people's needs are treated with indifference. Certainly, this would be a task that far exceeds the fields of Social and Community Psychology. However, an enterprise of these characteristics would undoubtedly be of great value to democratic systems, which currently find themselves exploring options that would allow for the expansion of democratic experience through participative alternatives that reclaim the idea of citizens as active subjects. It is an interesting exercise to consider that peasant culture, characterized by a tendency to personalize relationships, could proffer some ideas that might help generate better democratic alternatives.

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