Militant World: some characterizations of militancy in the province of Jujuy, Argentina

Mundo militante: algunas caracterizaciones de la militancia en la provincia de Jujuy, Argentina

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Abstract

The present work analyses the militant world through the study of the militant career by taking up Howard Becker's career perspective. The objective is to give an account of how this world is constructed and developed through the experiences of militants from different spaces of political participation.

In this way, it proposes to investigate the shared logics of the militants of the province of Jujuy, Argentina, from understanding the way in which they interact beyond their space or sphere of belonging, taking up again a microstructural perspective. The aim is to understand contemporary militancy by overcoming the limitations of macro-structural studies, mainly by accepting that there is currently a diversity of forms and spaces of militancy, which breaks with the borders of the more structural and traditional militancy of parties and unions.

To achieve these objectives, a longitudinal analysis of the trajectories of five militants from different spaces of political participation in Argentina was carried out, considering the subjective and objective aspects based on the narrative of the militants themselves through the use of the life story technique.

This work allows us to give an account of the analytical contribution of the "militant world" to expose the continuities and ruptures, as well as the generalities and particularities of contemporary militancy in Argentina.

Keywords

Activism, Argentina, militant career, political commitment, militant world, political participation

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza el mundo militante por medio del estudio de la carrera militante retomando la perspectiva de carrera de Howard Becker. El objetivo es dar cuenta de cómo se construye y desarrolla ese mundo a través de las experiencias de militantes de distintos espacios de participación política.

Se propone indagar en las lógicas compartidas por los militantes de la provincia de Jujuy, Argentina, a partir de comprender la manera en que interactúan más allá de su espacio o ámbito de pertenencia, retomando una perspectiva microestructural. Se pretende entender la militancia contemporánea superando las limitaciones de los estudios macroestructurales, principalmente aceptando que en la actualidad existe una diversidad en las formas y espacios de militancia, que rompe con las fronteras de la militancia más estructural y tradicional de partidos y sindicatos.

Para alcanzar estos objetivos, se realizó un análisis longitudinal de trayectorias de nueve militantes de diversos espacios de participación política de Argentina, considerando los aspectos subjetivos y objetivos a partir del relato de los propios militantes por medio del uso de la técnica del relato de vida.

Este trabajo permite dar cuenta del aporte analítico del "mundo militante" para exponer las continuidades y rupturas, así como las generalidades y particularidades de la militancia contemporánea en Argentina.

Palabras clave

Activismo, Argentina, carrera militante, compromiso político, mundo militante, participación política.

Introduction

Fillieule and Accornero (2016) affirm that the changes in the forms of political commitment and the diversity of contemporary militant practices forced the social sciences to shift studies of macrostructural levels (the study of political parties or unions) towards related microstructural studies, for example, to individual trajectories. These works accounted for militancy as a dynamic process where involvement and commitment can be partial or total, short or long term. That is, together with traditional militancy, a new type of estranged militancy develops (Pudal, 2011) as a result of global political, social, and economic changes (Berardi-Spairani, 2020a), which lead to the emergence of new spaces participation and diverse political com-

mitments, which even develop at the same time, due to the emergence of new and diverse demands.

The work on militancy in Argentina has been fragmentary, most of the research focused on the structural conditions of the spaces for participation or the waves of protest, recovering a macrostructural key.[1] However, in recent years analyzes have been developed from a microstructural perspective,[2] even taking up the perspective of a militant career.[3]

Starting from these antecedents, this work proposes to analyze the militancy from a microstructural level, its central objective is to give an account of the militant world from the study of the militant career (Agrikoliansky, 2007), and to investigate the way in which the militants reaffirm the existence of that world beyond time.

This work analyzes the way in which subjects get involved in militancy, what are the factors that determine enrollment in this type of activity, and its sustainability over time. This leads us to investigate the differences or similarities between the militants from different spheres of political participation. Here, the question is what are the elements in common that each one of them maintains, and if despite the differences (traditions or objectives) there is a set of logics and regularities (learning, militant practices, hierarchies within the spaces of participation) that are shared by all militants?

To carry out this work, the concept of "world" formulated by Becker (2008) was recovered. Although this concept was coined from the idea of art, in this work it was considered that it is applicable to the study of militancy because both in art and militancy its members have diverse origins, which generates a strong heterogeneity in its interior; and also, because although there is a set of activities and traditional logics (which constitute a set of agreements called "conventions") that are incorporated through learning, both the diversity of the members and the development of their practices, which arise in specific contexts, allow proposing new logics that come into the discussion with the existing ones. Thus, the militant world can be considered as a network of people who develop a type of corporate activity and who are linked through a set of "conventions", which are not rigid and

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1   Among those works, the following stand out: Jelin (1985), Svampa and Pereyra (2004), Pereyra (2008), Murillo (2013); Vommaro et al. (2015).
2   Among others, Giorgi (2014), Lodola (2009) and Levita (2015).
3   Among others, Vázquez (2010), Zenobi and Pereyra (2015), Berardi-Spairani (2017) and Pereyra and Berardi (2020).

which tend to change from the development of the militant activity itself. (Berardi-Spairani, 2017).

In the Argentine case, starting in the 1990s, militant practices began to be altered mainly with the emergence of new spaces for participation, for example, organizations of the unemployed. In this way, the activists of these organizations developed new political-militant practices that coexisted with other more traditional ones (Auyero, 2002; Frederic, 2004; Quirós, 2006). From this, it can be argued that "conventions" should not be thought of as rigid and immutable; on the contrary, the militant task leads to (re) interpreting them, putting them in discussion, or (re) inventing them.

Therefore, the concept of "militant world" allows interpreting the militant practice understanding that the actions that are developed have a high degree of freedom, at the same time that the militants cooperate and/or compete within that world, favoring the emergence of new activities product of new spaces for participation, new demands and changes in political cleavages. However, this does not necessarily generate new worlds since there are certain recurrences that remain; for example, the forms of entry into the militancy, the learning process that militants go through, the role of experienced militants, and the development of political construction.

Thus, the "militant world" as an analytical tool allows us to observe the sequences that a militant career goes through, giving an account of the continuity of traditional forms of cooperation, in addition to those that are incorporated from the new forms of action.

On the other hand, although militant activity could be analyzed by applying the Bourdieusian concept of the *field*, in this work it is considered that the concept of the *world* tends to be a more dynamic and complete instrument for this objective, mainly because it allows us to understand militancy as a dynamic process where its actors constitute a totally heterogeneous corpus as well as its practices. However, Bourdieu's concept of field is defined by a set of "objective relationships" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 3) that are determined and/or conditioned by *habitus*[4], which places subjects within a social space, and whose practices are established by the membership structure.

In other words, the relationships that are generated are conditioned by the habitus, which determines the demands of the field itself. The practices

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4   Habitus should be understood as a "system of durable dispositions […] principles that generate and organize practices" (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 86).

(and relationships) that occur within the field are fixed by the field's own — rigid — structures, where the accumulation of capital (social, political, etc.) and the experience within it allow the development of practices.

The rigidity proposed by the concepts of field/habitus does not allow us to fully interpret the dynamics and changes generated by the militant process itself, such as the emergence of new practices or spaces for participation, or even the involvement of subjects from different sectors of the social space.

On the other hand, here the *career* perspective developed by Becker (2012) will be reassumed, who proposes to analyze the trajectories of people, taking into account the subjective and objective aspects that the subject goes through, considering that each sequence is the result of the previous and condition possibility of the next, giving rise to a procedural model for the study of political commitment (Fillieule, 2001). This article suggests accounting for militancy without focusing on the analysis of a specific organization or specific protest cycle. The interest is in showing that there is a militant world where its members share certain common regularities and sequences beyond their different positions, recovering the perspective of French studies on militancy and activism (Agrikoliansky, 2007). This work focuses specifically on the analysis of three stages shared by the militants: 1) beginning of the militancy, 2) learning and 3) political construction.

On the other hand, this proposal does not pretend to carry forward a generalization; on the contrary, it aspires to discuss new ways of approaching militancy studies based on the analysis of political militancy in an Argentine province.

Methodologically, a qualitative approach was adopted through in-depth interviews with political activists in the province of Jujuy, Argentina, using the life story technique (Kornblit, 2007). The life stories will allow giving an account of the moments that the militant went through, recovering the construction of the narrative of the self, giving an account of the turning points that determined the commitment. That is to say, that from his own narration, the militant makes "his world understandable" (Meccia, 2012, p. 41), through his biographical evolution, but also through his relationships with "his peers and their social environments" (Meccia, 2015, p. 15).

This type of tool allows us to observe the temporal dimension and the development of the militant, showing the different events that the militant subject went through, constituting him as the narrator of the history of the society of which he is a part (Saltalamacchia, 1987; Della Porta, 2014); re-

cover not only the perception of the subjects regarding the facts but also the elements that intervened at the time the action was carried out (Becker, 2009). In this way, this study is developed from an interconnection between the actors' view of their own militant career and the researcher's analysis through a process of reflexivity (Burawoy, 1998).

For the development of this article, a corpus of nine interviews with militant-leaders of various organizations in the province of Jujuy was used, which were carried out between 2014 and 2017.[5] The cases presented here were selected considering that 1) the militants began their militancy between the years 1990 and 2000, a time in which in Argentina not only new spaces for participation emerged, such as organizations of the unemployed but also traditional spaces such as unions or parties went through transformations, fractures and alliances; and 2) that the militants have reached the rank of leader. This condition not only makes it possible to compare each of the militant careers but also to observe the instances that go through within the hierarchies within the militancy.

Ascription to the militant world

According to the perspective of Diani (2004), the entrance to militancy is conditioned by the social networks that the subject possesses, these ties (family, neighborhoods, or friends) not only represent the processes of political socialization (Dubet, 1994), they are also the bridge between the future militant and the offer of militant participation available[6] (Klandermans, 2004). That is, it is not enough to have a personal or psychological predisposition for the military, it is essential to have the necessary links to guarantee that outcome.

In this way, the militant initiation process may be subject to different variables, mainly conditioned by factors external to the subject. In some cases, the subject enters the militant world by participating in the claim of a specific demand, establishing a type of partial political commitment based on

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5   The accounts of militants that make up this work are part of a broader investigation regarding the militant career in the province of Jujuy, Argentina, in which more than 50 in-depth interviews were conducted with social, party and union activists.

6   This is subject to the transformations that occur in cleavages and socio-political contexts (Canelo, 2001 and Berardi-Spairani, 2018a).

their intervention in assemblies, marches, cultural activities, and even in the organization of the occupation of public space, but once the demand was satisfied or defeated, the militant abandons his participation.[7]

There are also other cases where the subjects join the militancy by means of small participation (distributing flyers, being part of a protest or assembly) and substantially begin to increase their commitment and involvement with the space of belonging, mainly conditioned by the social networks that are woven into these spaces (McAdam, 1982). At that moment, a learning process begins and the configuration of new links within their organization and the militant world.

The militant analyzed careers allow us to show that interpersonal networks are fundamental and are configured as *initiators or promoters* of this participation. One of the main links that allow an approach to militancy is the family. Different militants realize the importance of their affective ties, families mainly tend to be key in the process of militant initiation and political socialization (Vázquez (2010):

> I believe that I have political blood, let's say, from family histories, I was always involved in politics in one way or another, I always accompanied my father in politics, in political events, in meetings, many times to youth meetings, without understanding anything, accompanied political events, listened to speeches, I was close. (Pablo, *Justicialista* Party, September 2016)

In other cases, secondary socialization spaces such as school, work, or the neighborhood are those that play a central role at the time of the establishment of the political-militant commitment, although there are different ways of approaching the militancy:

> When I began to study Anthropology, I approached a student group […] because I became friends with colleagues who were active there, so my involvement was more a matter of friendship there. (Martín, Classist and Combative Current / Association of State Workers, September 2016)

> [I] was a swallow (seasonal) worker […], sometimes I stole to eat, [at that time] some neighbors from the area took us to start organizing as a group, as

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7   In this work, we propose to analyze the trajectories of militants who achieved high degrees of political commitment. However, according to Pudal (2011), it is possible to identify new forms of estranged militancy based on specific commitments to certain causes that challenge the activist as a subject.

an organization, [and] we started with a glass of milk[8] for the neighborhood boys. (Patricio, Tupac Amarú Neighborhood Organization, November 2015)

I joined the union mainly because of my work, a colleague invited me to participate and join the list, and well, I entered, participated, and started being a member. (Blanca, Union of Sports and Civil Workers' Union, September 2016)

In perspective to what Diani (2004), Dubet (1994), and McAdam (1982) argue, these stories show how entry into the militant world is determined by what we could call *facilitators*; the friend, the neighbor, the parents, they are the bonds that the subjects have before becoming militants, and they generate a framework of possibility for entry into the militancy. Political involvement is not determined only by interests (which can be key) but by interpersonal networks.

The recognition of the militant world

Inside the world, the militant goes through a learning process. Although, as the interviewed militants maintain, learning constitutes a constant characteristic in political practice, it has a fundamental character at the moment in which the subject confirms his political commitment and interacts in the militant world.

This learning has two aspects: one, linked to the process of influence of the *experienced* (Becker, 2012), referents or leaders of the participation space, who transmit knowledge, experiences, and, to a certain point, discipline. The other, related to the militant practice itself.

The experienced militant is the one who transmits knowledge about the logics, norms, regularities, and meanings of militancy; thus, in the political action, accompanying the leaders, the militant incorporates knowledge and practices that are typical of that world. The transmission can be oral, but also in the political action itself.

To become active in something, there must first be a previous step that I think is to listen and learn, because politics is done by doing, but it is also

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8   The glass of milk refers to a set of kitchens that Argentine social organizations set up in the 1990s, with the aim of guaranteeing some type of food for children from impoverished families in the face of the lack of response from the State.

important to listen, fill yourself with values, have political references that help you have different views of the world. (Pablo, Justicialista Party, September 2016)

Listening in the militant world is synonymous with learning and refers to incorporating logics that is later put into practice in political practice. But learning is also inscribed in a process of interaction with others[9] and configures a process of internalization of methods without which the militant career would be limited and would condition the militant work. Thus, dialogue and exchanges with other militants allows access to fundamental knowledge for practice, but also recognition and competence within the militant world.

> You learn not only from your peers and referents but also […] you learn a lot because you see the other different groups, you are only just understanding why there are many groups, how they move, what are the plans and policies that they pretend […], there you understand. (Martín, Classist and Combative Current / Association of State Workers, September 2016)

> When you militate, you have to be willing to listen to the other militants, if you think you know all of them, you've lost […], you learn inside the organization, but also outside, in each activity, in each march. (Patricio, Tupac Amarú Neighborhood Organization, September 2016)

The learning process is dynamic and is subject to militant practice, in which new channels of connection with other militants are created, new participation initiatives and repertoires of political action are proposed; but also, the ideological or doctrinal frameworks that determine the particularities of each space of participation. Learning then appears as the result of both elements that come into conflict within the militant world, encouraging new learning processes.

> Militancy ends up being a dialectical question, that is, ideological conviction leads you to certain practices, and in the development of that practice you also take on new elements that are also modifying the ideological question […], you incorporate new things. (Rodrigo, Association of Unemployed Workers of Jujuy, September 2016)

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9   As Morán (2011) maintains, it is important to understand that the learning process also develops in the process of political socialization.

> The ability to organize ourselves and ultimately put into practice everything that one learned or what one said was doctrine, convictions, to put them into practice […] you incorporate it when you start your militancy. (Cecilia, Justicialista Party, September 2016)

Although the influence of the *experienced* tends to be key, the social and economic transformations, the changes in the political cleavages, and the incorporation of new actors into the militant world allow the emergence of new perspectives regarding the militancy and calls into question "the logics ", Generating novel experiences as a result of new formats of political action.

New entrants to the militant world argue around tradition, identities, and logics, creating new ones, overlapping or replacing old ones. And, in this sense, the recognition of the world tends to be shaped by a sequence composed of dialogue with other militants, new militant experiences, and political commitment. But the contexts that determine the trajectories of each of the militants are also at stake (Berardi-Spairani, 2018a) and generate controversies in relation to the status quo of the militant world. This situation is reflected mainly by young militants:

> Young people not only incorporate the experience of leaders, but we also create new spaces that discuss with traditions […], we were born and live in different times, but despite the differences, we work for common goals. (Marta, Justicialista Party, September 2016)

Militant life and political construction

The moment of recognition of the militant world is also a moment of sedimentation of political commitment and of a militant career. However, even when there are high levels of commitment, the activity can be abandoned, a subject can cease to be a militant. So, the question is, what are the factors that guarantee the continuity of the militancy over time?

The discussion is not only summarized in the maintenance of the commitment, but also in the reproduction and subsistence of the militant within the militant world. Based on the trajectories analyzed, it is possible to affirm that the sustainability of the militancy has key determining factors: econo-

mic income, the professionalization of the militancy[10], and *political construction* (Berardi-Spairani, 2018b).

From the stories, it can be affirmed that militancy is a type of activity from which no economic retribution[11] is expected, but its reproduction requires the availability of time to carry it out; therefore, it is necessary to develop a type of activity that guarantees financial resources without limiting the time available for militant activity.

In this sense, all the activists interviewed maintain that militancy is a type of full-time activity where "putting the body on the line"[12] is a key characteristic, and they refer to leaving things of daily life to dedicate time to militancy: "With militancy, I left things, even time with my family, with my son" (Interview with a social and union leader, September 2016).

The different militant accounts show that the guarantee of access to economic resources that allow subsistence within the militant world (and outside of it), that full-time dedication, comes from the links generated in the militant activity itself. In some cases, financial resources are obtained by entering as an employee in the structures of the State, being an elected councilor or deputy, or even being a beneficiary of some type of program or social plan:

> I started […] to work in [an organism of the] State, [and later], they proposed to me to be a candidate for provincial deputy. (Pablo, Justicialista Party, September 2016)

> As an agronomist […] I joined as a technician in the Subsecretariat of Family Agriculture of the Nation, [this] allowed me to generate new links with other [social] organizations. (Juan, Evita Jujuy Movement, March 2016)

> I was militant during university […] it was also when I was in [the social organization], I started to collect a social plan[13], […] I had to pay for the servi-

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10 Returning to the work of Berardi-Spairani (2017), we understand that the professionalization of the militancy should not be equated with the professional politician, but rather with the ability of the militant to live on resources from the militant activity.

11 On this subject see Gaxie (1977).

12 "Putting the body on the line" is a native category that emerged in the various interviews carried out, through which the militants realize that the militancy has no time or place; It is a full-time activity where the subject must always be available. However, it is not a new category, as Peller (2018) maintains, "putting the body on the line" constitutes an expression that comes from the seventy's militancy in Argentina.

13 It refers to the social plans that were launched in Argentina since the late 1990s.

ce, it would be, having to work hours, that is, I started working, while I was a militant […] we set up a [trade union group that included the beneficiaries of these plans] and we joined the list of the state workers union. (Martín, Classist and Combative Current / Association of State Workers, September 2016)

The stories show that access to these economic resources can be due to expertise, militant status, or public recognition and/or the *patronage* of other leaders. These economic resources are sometimes linked to access to representation spaces, to technical jobs within the State or through monetary distributions that do not produce a direct link to government structures; but in all cases, the resources come from the State (whether national or local).

Thus, militancy as a full-time activity brings into question a central aspect of the militant's life, access to economic resources from the State. When the militant commitment is consolidated it is only possible to sustain it from the own resources that the militancy provides; Living from militancy or living for militancy are common factors that are reproduced in the militant world.[14]

But subsistence in the militant world does not only refer to an economic question. Another key aspect is public esteem and militant status. That is to say, the level of recognition that the militant has both inside and outside the world. Being known does not necessarily guarantee a public status, but it opens a way to form networks of solidarity, loyalty, and resources, even access to public and payed positions.

The militants use different strategies to achieve high status and public esteem; begin to construct a leader profile to the extent that they achieve a set of political loyalties that guarantees them victory in an electoral process or selection within the space, but also that allows them to position themselves before the *real power*, exerting a certain political influence both inside as outside the militant world.

This public recognition is achieved, for the most part, from configuring a type of grassroots militancy close to the "non-militants", creating new spaces of representation both within and outside their original militancy that are linked to the new demands or dispute space with another leader within the organization of belonging.

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14 This does not mean that every militant aspires to that "living from the militancy", but the different interviewees realize that a "traditional" job would limit their possibilities of advancing in their militant career.

Thus, the militant sets in motion a political construction[15] that allows him to access decision-making spaces and intervene in political power, at the same time, that configures a dispute within the militant world and generates interactions outside that world:

> You [as a militant] relate to people, and they recognize you based on what you do to try to improve or help someone who is in a screwed-up situation [..], in the long run, that situation positions you. (Claudio, Justicialist Party, September 2016)

> Before joining the union, I was part of the neighborhood center, and then I got involved with the Justicialista Party and began to organize activities with the neighbors, […] but I came to the party mainly because of my place in the union. (Blanca, Union of Sports and Civil Workers' Union, September 2016)

> The issue of the Youth branch, the youth group […], but what they were for, to hang up posters, to distribute leaflets, but at the time they were not in decision-making places […], many Young leaders realized that mobilizing the youth in the youth space served to influence the party. (Claudio, Jujuy Justicialist Party, March 2016)

This political construction allows showing that the militant world is also a space for disputes, for influencing the institutional political system and positioning himself in a battle for representation, meaning, and the logic of militancy, for the maintenance of the status quo or transformation of that world.

These disputes occur both within the spaces or areas of participation and outside of them, and political construction plays a transcendental role. Then, those who are leaders may stop being leaders and have to rebuild their militant status, establishing a new strategy of political construction. The different militant voices that contributed to this investigation affirm that, in many cases, the leaders must return to the "plain", to build politically, to talk and interact with others. The idea of going back to the neighborhood, to talk with

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15   There is a set of activities that allows this political construction. From the interviews carried out it has been possible to detect that the militant transversality (participating in two or more spaces at the same time) and building or occupying uninhabited spaces of representation, for example, the areas of youth, peasantry, and even feminism in the parties, Unions or certain social organizations are key elements for this construction (Berardi-Spairani, 2017). In this sense, the militant tries to generate novel spaces or reactivate previously created spaces that were abandoned as spaces for militant participation.

people, shows that the militant role does not change despite occupying a leadership position.

Some conclusions

This work set out to account for the militant world as an analytical tool to understand the way in which militants construct their careers from a set of shared sequences, starting from the analysis of militancy in the province of Jujuy.

Through the stories, it is possible to observe that beyond the space of political participation in which they develop their practices, the militants share sequences and/or stages that are common and that must be thought of as action logics within the *world* in which they develop their practices. On the other hand, when observing the strategies that the militants carry out in their political construction, it was found that the competences within that world are established from reaching decision-making spaces or the influence on government policies. The diversity of these strategies shows that the logics of action are redefined at the moment in which the political cleavages change, that the spheres are disarticulated and re-articulated as a result of the same conjuncture, putting practices, traditions and doctrines into the discussion.

Although it is not possible to establish generalities from this work, it can be induced, by means of the analyze militant careers, that there are elements that show common logics that make a militant world.

On the other hand, although it could be questioned that the leader of an organization, party, or union is part of the militant world, the accounts of the interviewees show that even occupying a hierarchical place within the structure of political participation, they never stop be a militant. Mainly because from the own changes generated within the world (even in the spaces for participation) the leaders can lose their hierarchy and return to compete for their militant status, forcing them to establish new strategies of political construction.

Finally, this work allows us to open new questions about the militant world: 1) How is the exit from that world? 2) If the continuity of the committee determines the place in the militant world, what place does the distant or punctual militant occupy? Surely the continuity of investigations into militancy will allow answers to these and other questions.

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