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**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ECONOMY OF CARE:
ARGENTINIAN PROPOSAL**

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Context

In January 2002, Argentina devalued its national currency and defaulted on its external debt, ending the *Convertibility Plan*, a fixed exchange rate regime-cum-market friendly reforms and free capital mobility. By the second quarter of 2002 Argentine GDP had plummeted 15% in annual terms and the unemployment rate had reached its all-time high, 21.5%. Not surprisingly, economic depression, unemployment and rising inflation caused an upsurge in income poverty levels which rose from 38.3% to 57.5% of the total population in only one year.

The post-Convertibility model, a combination of high real exchange rate, negative foreign transfers (debt payment) and import-substituting export-led growth has achieved remarkable success in the GDP growth and employment generation fronts. However, Argentine social situation remains complex. Poverty levels are still as high as 31.4% of total population, inequality has come to a halt at levels equivalent to those reached at the beginning of the nineties, unemployment remains above the two digits (and would be higher were not for the *Jefes Programme*) and 45.5% of all wage workers -half of them women- do not have any form of social protection.

Before an equal society in the Latin American context, Argentina's high absolute poverty incidence and unprecedented inequality have now become structural features, and as such 'naturalized'. Limits to improving equality stem from the unequal distribution of capabilities and assets that freeze differences between those who can partake satisfactorily in the labour market from those that can not, and the dearth of redistributive macroeconomic, labour market and social policies.

In this context, child care provision and access to child care are shaped by social differences that structure the variety of ways in which families make *labour-care arrangements*, the degrees in which markets and communities are present, and the levels at which state-provided services reach different population groups. In this unequal and heterogeneous society, our hypothesis is that there might be more than one *care diamond*. In turn, the ways the *care diamond* operates might reinforce gender and income inequalities.

The project

Our research will resort to quantitative and qualitative approaches; will analyze recently collected data –the 2005 Buenos Aires City TUS– and make use of existing secondary data. It will also produce primary qualitative data.

The Buenos Aires TUS will allow us to perform an in-depth analysis of child care provision *within the families*, backed by very detailed information provided by the Buenos Aires City Annual Household Survey, the core survey it was attached to. Though arguably restricted –since it represents 10% of total country population in a district with high standards in public services’ provision–, this analysis will focus on low-income strata families and will be contrasted with (a non-statistically significant but considerable number of) time use questionnaires collected during 2006 at working class neighbourhoods in the Provinces of Buenos Aires, Mendoza and Salta[‡].

Institutional analysis will also focus in the City of Buenos Aires but will be framed and contextualized in a national perspective. The State both *provides child care* and *regulates* the ways other *care diamond* pillars do so. Though there is not enough empirical data available to perform an in-depth analysis of each of the four pillars (State, families, markets and “communities”), our focus will be on *families*, and the ways *public policies* –by action or inaction– contribute to shape them. We will get indicative information on families’ demand for child care services from markets and communities (through the TUS and in-depth interviews).

Indeed, child care demand and care provision through family, the State, communities or the market bear class and gender relations. Even when care, and particularly childcare is assumed to constitute a distinctive feminine responsibility by all income groups, women and families differ in the way care is provided within the family, the amount of care commoditization they can afford, their demands on State care provision and the ways they resort to informal care networks.

General objectives

The project aims at analyzing social differences at work in the provision of care along two lines:

1. The varying degrees by which public policy regulates and supplies care services for children, and the social stratification of this provision.
2. The ways different types of families (according to class, lifecycle, etc. and breadwinning model) make child care arrangements depending on public, marketed and community-provided care availability; and their impacts in terms of gender roles and labour market outcomes.

Focus and features of the project:

1. Focus on child care: we believe childcare is key in understanding poverty inasmuch as it limits women’s partaking in labour markets. This is even more acute the less the family income and the more children there are.
2. A strong class focus, since care needs are solved differently along income lines and State provision of care reaches classes differently.
3. Two aggregation levels. At the Nation State level, we will provide an institutional evaluation and work with secondary data. When focusing in the City of Buenos Aires and

[‡] Questionnaires were collected during 2006 as a module of in-depth interviews conducted to trace labour market long-term trajectories, as part of a research project funded by Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica (PICT 2002 N° 10887) based at Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento and directed by Prof. Luis Beccaria.

selected neighbourhoods, we will take advantage of time use data and carry on qualitative research.

4. Our research lies at the crossroads of public policy and family labour-care arrangements. We will focus on the State as a care provider itself and as a regulator of the responsibilities that should be assumed by families, markets and communities. Family care arrangements will be analyzed through *kinship relationships*, and on the role women take within them. We assume we would get indicative information on markets and communities.