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The Representation of Poverty and the Poverty of Representation

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Abstract

In this essay I draw upon both my reporting at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, United States, and my ethnography of the digitization of mental health work in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to examine the representation of poverty and the poverty of representation in contemporary social and political discourse.

Keywords: Poverty; ethnography; journalism; representation.

Acknowledgements

This is the revised version of a text I presented at a panel on "Problems of Democracy", held at Columbia University on November 8, 2024, in relation to the 25th anniversary of the Center on Organizational Innovation, founded and directed by David Stark. I thank David for the invitation to be part of this panel, and especially for his mentorship and inspiration over the years, and also my fellow panelists Laszlo Bruszt and Gina Neff, for their great insights and warm welcome. I thank Daniel Hadad for the opportunity to write for *Infobae* and for his openness towards my work; Laureano Perez Izquierdo, Román Lejtman, Omar Lavieri, Carlos Eduardo Martínez and Alexis Rafael Pérez Yepes assistance with Convention reporting; Fred Turner for reminding me that history does not wait but that research will; David Stark, Fred Turner, María Eugenia Brockmann, and seminar participants at Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison for comments on an earlier version; and María Eugenia Brockmann, again, for encouragement and support.

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> "There are times in life when the question of knowing
> if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees,
> is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all."
>
> — Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 1990, pp. 8–9.

Asked to present at a panel on "Problems of Democracy" held just days after the 2024 Presidential election, my mind turned to two recent pictures of myself taken in two very different settings, exactly two weeks apart, during the preceding summer (Figures 1-2). In August 2024 I took a selfie as I was about to enter the United Center Arena in Chicago for the final evening of the Democratic National Convention, the evening in which Kamala Harris was going to make history as the first Black and Southeast Asian woman to accept a presidential nomination (Figure 1). I covered the Convention as a special correspondent for *Infobae* — the leading Spanish-speaking news site in the world and currently ranked 16th across all languages by SimilarWeb, immediately below *The Guardian* and *Fox News*.

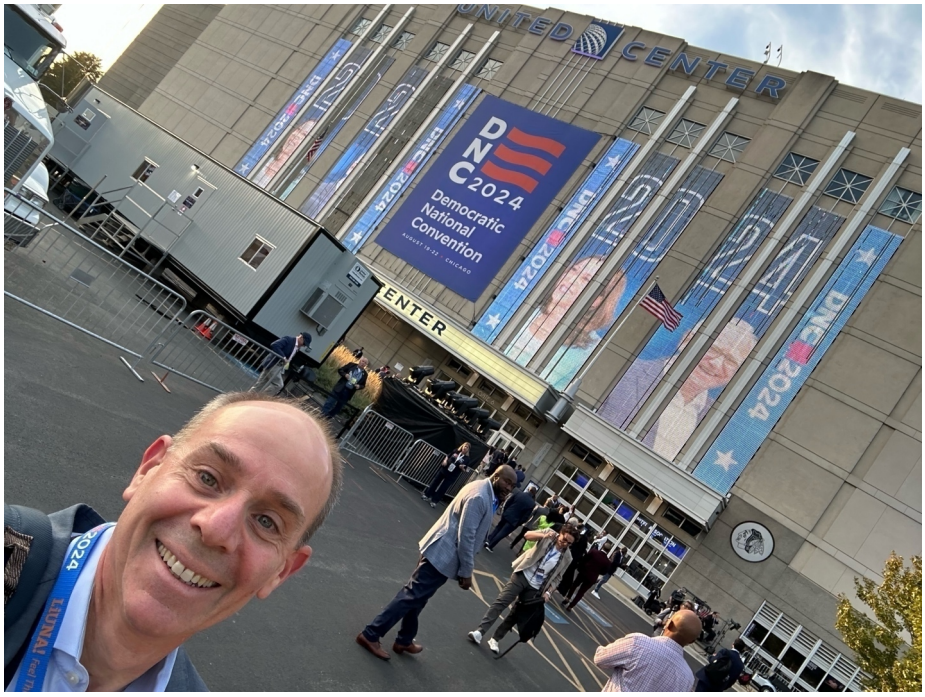

Figure 1: Reporting at the Democratic National Convention, August 22, 2024.

The Convention from the inside is different from what one either sees on the screen or reads in the news. The Convention was divided into two parts. On the one hand, the morning and afternoon were devoted to internal politics, with some spaces closed and others opened to journalists. There was a bureaucratic texture to its culture, and its tempo and scale were slower and smaller than those that characterized the evening proceedings. On the other hand, the latter were focused on presenting a public-facing view by way of representing the Party and its various campaigns — especially the presidential one. There were several publics in question: the candidates and speakers, delegates inside the Convention arena, the journalists and influencers, and the potential voters watching on television and online. To get candidates and speakers excited as they perform, and elicit favorable coverage from journalists and influencers — and

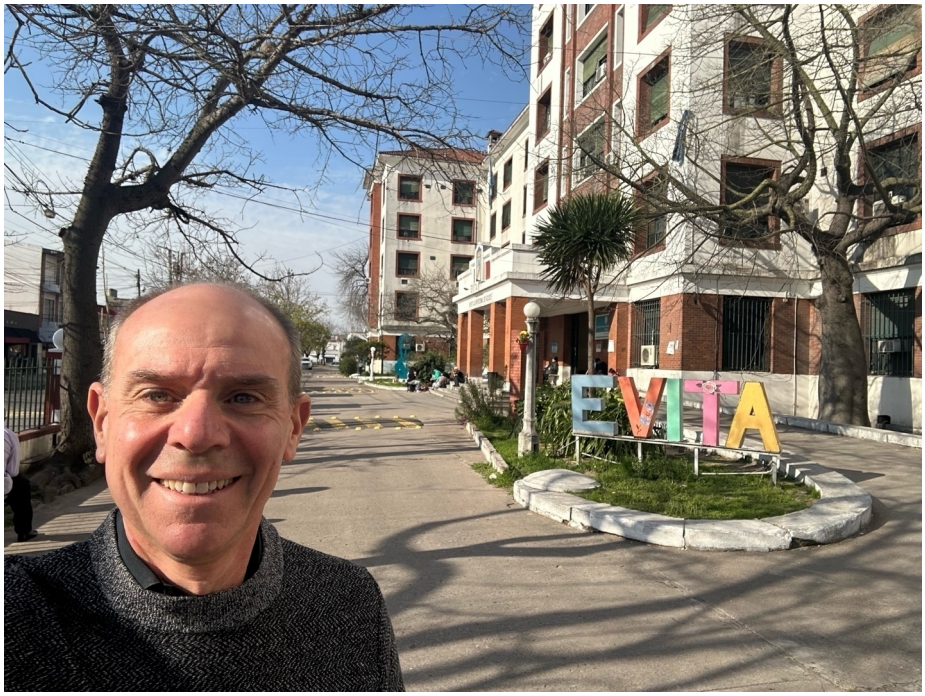

Figure 2: Fieldwork at Hospital Interzonal de Agudos Evita, September 6, 2024.

everybody else who chimes in on social media — the organizers aimed to create a mood that was closer to a music festival than to the ideal-typical agora. In the pursuit of firing up the base and motivate voters, only good news applied — and when there were bad ones, they were tied to the other side. A certain aesthetic of achievement pervaded the atmosphere inside the United Center, and it was remarkable how put together, polished, and upbeat everybody appeared to be.

The final evening of the Convention was the apex of that micro-cultural construction. As soon as I walked in, I was enthralled by an electrifying climate in which every soul felt like that they were about to witness history in the making. The air was dense, the temperature was hot, and it was nearly impossible to get a seat. I had to wait more than half hour to get one in the press area, even though they were supposedly enough of them for each member of the press corps. Once I got it, I did not move for the rest of the evening, patiently waiting for the moment everybody else in the building was also waiting for. It was a well-choreographed crescendo and I was certainly feeling the adrenaline rush, all of which shaped my chronicle of that evening, with the unsurprising headline of "Kamala Harris Made History".

Less than ten hours after filing that story, I left my apartment in Chicago, went to the airport and flew to Buenos Aires for my ongoing study of the digitization of the mental health professions in the city with the highest proportion of psychologists per capita in the planet.[1] From then on, I made the effort to change my focus from reporting on media and politics, to doing ethnography on technology, work, and health. This was the fifth fieldwork trip for this project since December 2022, and I was used to the routine. But this time, the switch from Chicago to Buenos Aires could not have been any starker. From the excitement of a historically unique

1. The research on technology, work, and mental health in Argentina is supported financially by a Delaney Grant made by School of Communication at Northwestern University.

opportunity in one of the world's richest countries, to the gloom you hear in stories shared by burned out professionals who work in under-resourced hospitals trying to help patients who live in terrible conditions. Poverty is so rampant in Argentina these days, that most of the country now lives in households below the level of poverty, in which an adult makes less than US $8.5 per day — including 18% of them who are below the indigence level, which is equivalent to earning less than US $4 per day.

I took the selfie in Figure 2 as I arrived at the *Hospital Interzonal de Agudos Evita*, in the municipality of Lanús, Province of Buenos Aires, during the second week of fieldwork. Named after Eva Perón, *El Lanús*, as the hospital is popularly known, occupies a special place in the imaginary of mental health professionals in Argentina in particular — and Latin America in general — due to its pioneering role in a number of progressive policies starting in the late 1950s that aimed to lessen socioeconomic inequalities, including making psychotherapeutic services accessible for free to the lowest income strata of the population. To make it even more iconic, it is also the birthplace of legendary footballer and pagan deity Diego Armando Maradona (Figure 3).

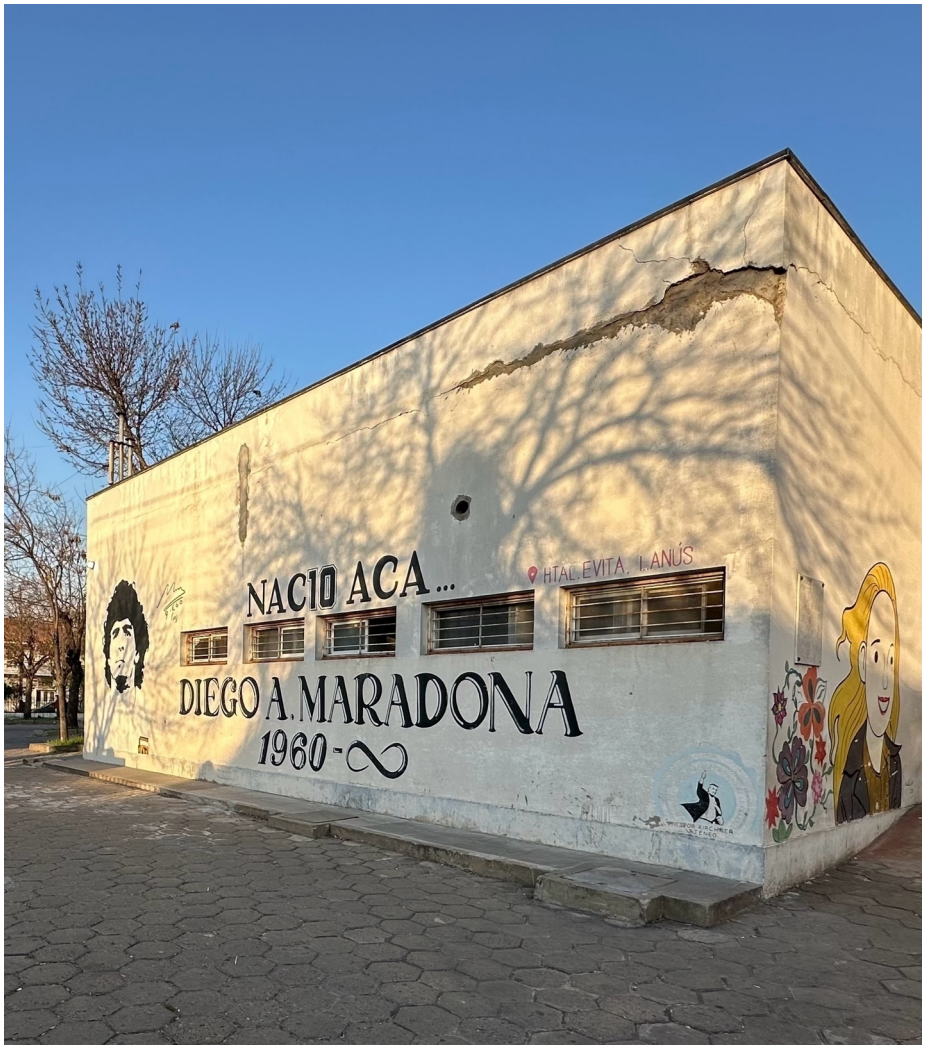

Figure 3: Façade of Ward where Diego Armando Maradona Was Born, Alvear Hospital.

El Lanus is everything that the United Center arena is not, and the people look and behave very differently from those at the Convention. The building is old and in need of all kinds of repair. The paint in parts of the façade has fallen and requires retouching, the chairs in the wait areas are worn out, and since the main entrance door is open flies go in and out of the foyer freely. Many patients, family, friends, and staff members not only look concerned — as they do in most hospitals — but they also look as if wear and tear of life had taken a huge toll in their souls. When I talk to the professionals, the progressive ethos from the second half of the past century is still there, but within a context of marked impoverishment, to the extent that Candela — which is a pseudonym — a clinical psychologist who works at the hospital tells me that

> the life stories are terrible... All this is a manifestation of how the psyche survives so much poverty, of so many generations: economic, cultural, and relational poverty. It is all very broken... You are no longer guaranteed health in general, [and] mental health [in situation in which] someone does not eat [or] have a family; [someone] who was born without a family, in the street, who was sold, who was given away. People arrive [like that]: "I was given away to such and such a family, who in turn sold me. And so on."

Later in our conversation she adds:

> There is so much inequality, the life of some people is so unfair... That really hurts me. The difference I find in myself is that when I listen in private practice there is an internal relief: well, this person is not suffering (laughter) from something terrible. They are suffering from their own psyche, or from their relationships, or from what I don't know, but they are not suffering from the basics of living. And that is a relief, because in the hospital [their suffering] hurts [me] all the time.

Joaquina — another pseudonym — a Candela's colleague, also says that working in these conditions hurts:

> Almost all of us do psychoanalysis [as patients]... because this is Argentina... We work on our angst... and we see how to get out of this situation [as professionals] suffering as little as possible.

She adds:

> The patient remains in limbo. Do you know what the limbo is? The professional's body... that's what they told us in a supervision. The professional ends up grabbing [the patient] and carrying [the patient] on their shoulder.

She illustrates the situation with the following story:

> Last Friday we [referring to her and a social worker] ran for four blocks, and then [our superiors] challenged us, and we all started crying (laughter). I am telling you something tragic, anyway. A 14-year-old patient, so that she would not be at risk in the street, we brought her in a police car. So that she didn't have to go home, where the abusive father is... But we don't have to do that, because it was too much... And we had been the previous Friday in [the municipality of] La Plata for 10 hours...

> for her to be hospitalized in a facility that has child and adolescent psychiatry. But they did not accept her. And after 10 hours of waiting, they gave her a letter telling her that she had to come back here.

When my interview with Joaquina concluded, I hopped in a taxi and went back to my rental apartment in Buenos Aires. During the taxi ride, in a somber mood after a difficult day of fieldwork, I started scrolling through the pictures on my phone to get my mind to a happier place. That led to a realization that had eluded me when I was in the thick of reporting: while the poor are omnipresent in Buenos Aires — and in so many other metropolises around the world — they were conspicuously absent during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. They were neither present nor represented. On the one hand, there were no speakers representing the poor as a constituency — or even ostensible poor people in the audience. On the other hand, neither Harris nor Waltz devoted major portions of their speeches to those who live below poverty levels. Yes, there was the often-repeated sentence about "not just getting by but getting ahead". However, that applies to low-income people as well, not just to those who are poor. And the bulk of the economic plan focuses on lifting the middle class and fighting against the ultra-rich. Between the middle and the top, the bottom — and especially those at the very bottom — becomes invisible. In an article published two months after the Convention, we read that

> at a town-hall-style event with Mr. (Bernie) Sanders in Milwaukee this month, one woman spoke up with a direct criticism of Ms. Harris. "Kamala has been talking about the middle class," she said to applause. "But she has not addressed the poor or the working poor" (Nehamas & Green, 2024).

Not representing poverty and the poor entails excluding from view 11.5% of the United States who live below the level of poverty, according to the 2022 Census (Shrider & Cramer, 2023).

Poverty affects a range of lived experiences often in a decisive fashion, but perhaps it is nowhere more acutely felt than in access to food simply because without adequate nutrition we cannot live a healthy and dignified life, and sometimes no life at all. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2024), 13.5% of the country's households experienced food insecurity in 2023. Moreover, this average figure masks significant racial and ethnic disparities, since food insecurity affects more than one in five Black and Latina/o households. The notion of food insecurity is closer to lived experience than is poverty level — or, in David Stark's customary reference, we have come down from 30,000 feet to maybe 10,000 feet above the ground. However, both are still farther from the texture of everyday practice, the few feet of height that characterize the social world that most of us inhabit — and the altitude level that we ethnographers relish. Thus, allow me a quick trip to West Africa to continue our descent into the depths of daily life. One of the most direct consequences of structural poverty and chronic food insecurity is hunger. Martín Caparrós opens his masterful book *El Hambre — Hunger* (2014), in English — with the story of Aisha, a woman in her thirties who lives in conditions of poverty in Niger. After spending some time with her, he tells her that "if she could ask for anything she wanted, anything at all, from a magician capable of giving it to her, what would she ask for. Aisha took a while, like someone facing something unthinkable" (p. 9).[2] Then, she answered, "I want a cow that gives me a lot of milk, so if I sell some milk, I can buy the stuff to make fritters to sell at the market and with that I can more or less get by" (*ibidem*). He continues,

2. Here and the following translations from Spanish are mine.

> But what I'm telling you is that the magician can give you anything, whatever you ask. Really anything? Yes, anything you ask for. Two cows? She said in a whisper, and explained: With two I'll never be hungry again. It was so little, I thought at first. And it was so much (pp. 9–10).

Later in the book, Caparrós reflects about this conversation as follows:

> If she could have everything she wanted, I asked her, and she told me two cows. Misery... is not only a curtailment of material boundaries; but also of mental boundaries, a reduction in the field of the imaginable (p. 70).

The story of Aisha points to how the representation of poverty is tied to a poverty in representation, or in Caparrós' formulation, "a reduction in the field of the imaginable". From an electoral standpoint, this poverty in representation in the United States has meant that the self-touted progressive party has deprived itself of 11.5% of the electorate. To put it bluntly, over the past few decades the Democrats have constructed themselves as the party of the 88.5%. They pride themselves, and rightly so, in having built a broad coalition aimed at attracting all kinds of constituencies. Except for one in nine potential voters whose economic fortunes have faltered and driven them underground. This is not only tragic politically, but short-sided electorally in a country in which presidential contests have become exceedingly tight.

Why was there such poverty in representation at the DNC and in the political imaginary of the Democratic party more generally? Answering this question would have taken the entire conference and I am not even the most qualified person to offer a comprehensive account. But let me draw upon my experience of alternation, ethnographic and personal, including three decades of shuttling between Argentina and the United States, to make conjectures about four potential contributing factors.

First, in the United States material wealth is often tied to moral worth. By implication, lack of this wealth is ever so subliminally tied to lack of moral worth — not just absence of success. However, perspectives on the connection between wealth and worth change from North to South. For instance, most Argentines would be suspicious of the moral worth of someone who is materially wealthy — and so would many fellow Latin Americans. Second, and related to the first, poverty in America often is seen as something that happens to the other, not to the self. By contrast, most people in Argentina and Latin America have been either directly impacted by poverty or have a close relationship with someone in that situation, and believe that there is a fair chance that they might become poor one day. Third, as a legacy of 1980s neoliberal ideas, there is a widespread belief in the United States about trickle-down benefits of economic growth whereby the gains accrued by the middle class will also spillover to the most disadvantaged members of society. Therefore, a focus on the middle class will also be seen as beneficial by implication to those below. Those of us who spend significant time South of the border know this to be an increasingly improbable economic dynamic. Finally, the aesthetic of achievement that pervaded the micro-culture of the Convention, with its polished ambiance and upbeat tempo, were somewhat at odds with presenting and representing the poor. Going back to *El Lanús*, I could not escape thinking about the contrast with Eva Perón's public speeches and subsequent policies centered on the poor or, as she often called them, "*mis queridos descamisados*" — my beloved shirtless people. I also remembered Diego Maradona's account of growing up in the slums of Villa Fiorito with his mother routinely depriving herself of eating, so that the children could have more food since there was not enough for all of them. Taken together, the wealth-worth nexus, the othering of poverty, the belief in spillover

welfare effects, and the aesthetic of achievement contribute to foster a political culture in which a self-proclaimed progressive party lessens its representational toolkit by neither presenting nor representing the poor.

At stake is not only an epistemic issue, but also a political crossroads since this nexus between the representation of poverty and the poverty of representation that I witnessed at the Convention is connected to a larger problem for democracy. Over the past few decades, while the progressives have turned away from representing the poor as they have embraced neo-liberal ideas, the conservatives have been courting them but whenever in power they have implemented economic and social policies that have only contributed to worsen their plight. In more recent times, this can be seen nowhere more starkly than in Argentina, where under the presidency of Javier Milei, the new global darling of the conservatives, poverty rates went from 42% to 53% of the population in less than a year (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2024). Thus, the paradox at the heart of this problem of democracy is that those who could do something for the poor do not aspire to represent them, and those who try to represent the poor will not do anything good for them. As history has repeatedly shown, structural poverty undermines the very foundations of a healthy democratic life.

The word democracy results from the combination of *demos* — the people — and *kratia* — rule — meaning the rule of the people. Since 2016 there has been a lot of important scholarship and commentary on shortcomings in peoplehood and rules in contemporary society, ranging from gender and racial discrimination to procedural concerns such as those arising from the events of January 6, 2021, in the United States. However, the poverty of representation regarding the representation of poverty that I have addressed within the context of the Democratic campaign has also applied to vast swaths of progressive discourse, which have often treated class as a derivative rather than a primary factor — if they have focused on it at all. This is quite striking in the case of the United States, for instance, since it requires a significant level of effort to not seeing the situation of a large minority of the population. In my adopted hometown of Chicago, there are poor people begging for food at the entrance of every supermarket in my neighborhood. Moreover, tents for unhoused individuals populate the greenery alongside the lakefront bike path where tens of thousands of dwellers exercise every day. In this context, unseeing poverty is nothing short of a remarkable social and epistemic achievement.

Solving this problem of democracy will be a multi-stage process that should begin with seeing the social differently since, by definition, groups and conditions made invisible cannot be represented, let alone addressed through explanations that can account for their circumstances and serve as the basis for plans to ameliorate them that can be persuasive and therefore electorally effective.[3] The social sciences can help and, if I may be partial for a minute, especially those of an inductive and interpretive bent that rely on alternation not only as a tool for making knowledge but also as a mode of intellectual existence. For those of us who are practitioners of ethnography, making the familiar strange by alternating between cultures creates opportunities to see what is normally not seen, re-present what is normally neither present nor represented within a given culture, and construct explanations that build from emic perspectives. This also applies to other traditions of discovery and narration outside of the academy, of course, and the choice of *El Hambre* — instead of a typical scholarly treatise on the matter — is a nod to the tremendous value of *la crónica* — the chronicle — a genre which has been quite successful in Latin America in recent times by combining journalistic and literary techniques to tell stories in novel and illuminating ways.

3. Special thanks to David Stark for calling my attention to the importance of the nexus between representation, explanation, and policy.

Finally, allow me to return to my beloved Buenos Aires one last time in this presentation. Figures 4-5 juxtapose two versions of the painting *Manifestación*, a Spanish word which means both to express and to demonstrate, thus suggesting that we cannot act if we do not also represent. The first one was painted by Antonio Berni in 1934 and the second, which is a tribute to the first, by the collective Mondongo in 2024 (Figures 4-5). If you were fortunate enough to be in Buenos Aires between mid-June and end of September, as I was, you could have seen both in a special exhibit space at the *Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires* — the Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires.

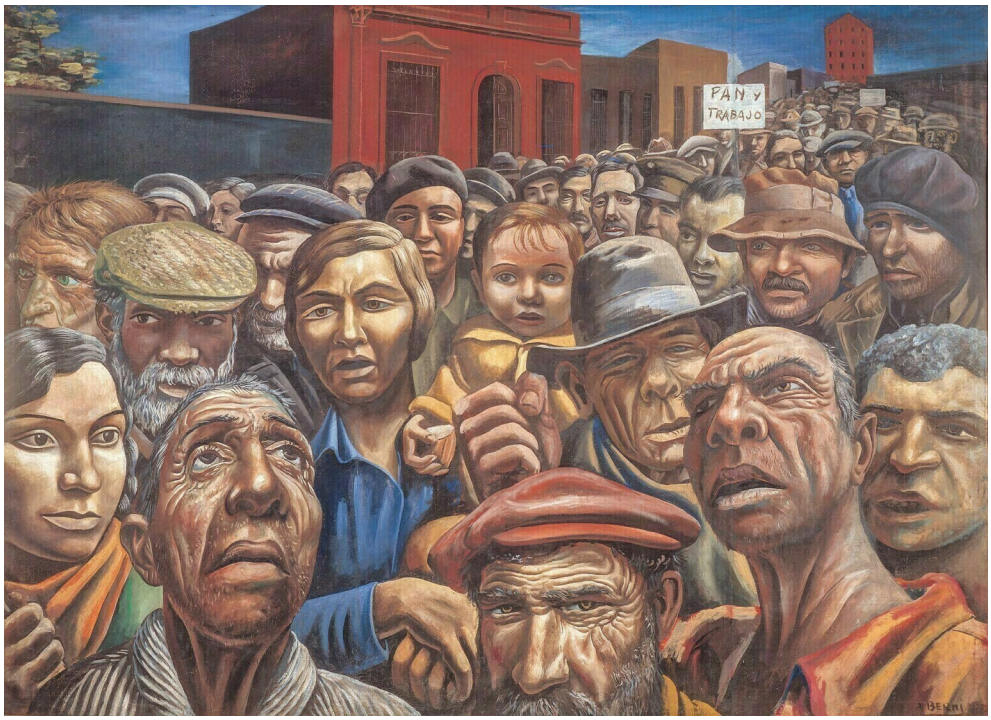

Figure 4: Manifestación, by Antonio Berni.

The original *Manifestación* is considered one of the masterpieces of new realism in Latin American painting. Berni said that reality "broke the eyes", a phrase that resonates with Candela and Joaquina's statements about their work almost a century later. Thus, Berni encouraged fellow artists to "live with their eyes open" and represent reality accordingly, as he hauntingly did in *Manifestación*. Mondongo's interpretation is infused with the same spirit as it displays modern techniques for representing the suffering of the dispossessed. Then and now, both paintings show the currency and power of looking at the social with eyes wide open, regardless of how much reality breaks the eyes — and the soul. Perhaps those who claim to represent the downtrodden should start turning their gaze away from the more pleasant economic realities of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, and their international counterparts, and towards the harsher circumstances of those who need the State the most. Maybe then this problem of democracy might have a fighting chance of being solved.

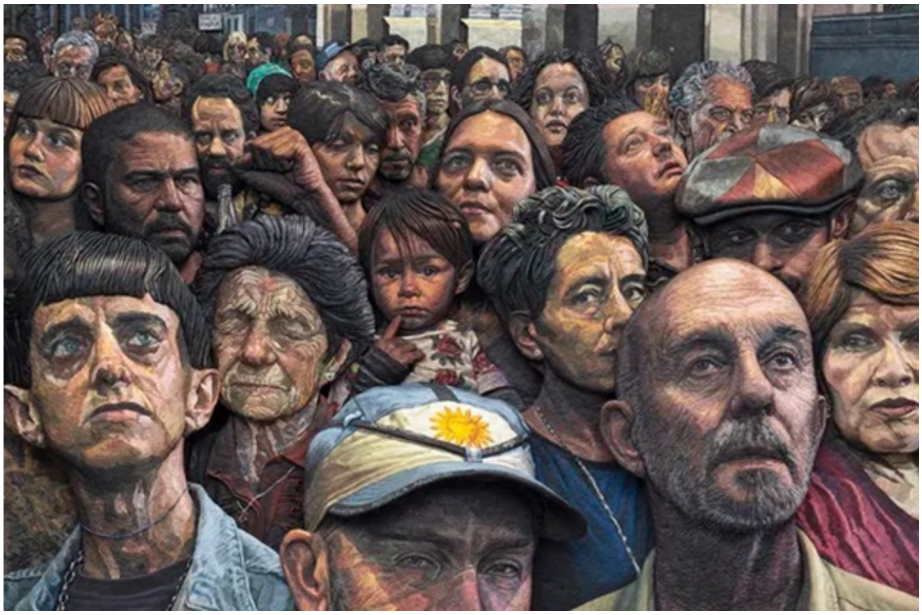

Figure 5: Manifestación, by Mondongo.

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