Introduction
Argentina a Decade after the Collapse

Old and New Social Movements

by
Pablo Pozzi and Fabio Nigra

A popular joke in Argentina satirizes the inability of neoliberals to confront the role played by their supposed reforms in the country's economic collapse and resulting extreme social hardship:

At an international rowing match, the Argentine team lost to the Japanese, coming in an hour after its rival. The Argentine Rowing Committee concluded that the problem was the team's composition. The Japanese had used 10 rowers and a coxswain, while the Argentines had 10 coxswains and a rower. The committee totally revamped the team for the next year to include 1 coxswain, 2 assistant coxswains, 7 section heads, and 1 rower while the Japanese team remained the same. This time the Argentines lost by two hours. The committee decided to introduce even more novel modifications, creating a vanguard team of 1 empowerment adviser, 1 downsizing supervisor, 1 procedures analyst, 1 technology expert, 1 controller, 1 timekeeper, 1 coxswain, 3 section heads, and 1 rower However, this time the Japanese, with the same team as before, came in three hours ahead of the Argentines. After intensive discussions the committee decided to punish the rower by withdrawing all bonuses and incentives and to hire a new rower next year through outsourcing so as not to be hampered by labor unions and inefficient labor contracts. Moreover, it concluded that the rower was reactive instead of proactive, was lazy, did not stick to the vision, objectives, strategy, and tactics of the new system, and was not a team player and that it was because of people like him that our nation was not progressing.

In contrast, the average Argentine worker felt that the nation was in a permanent state of crisis that was all the fault of neoliberal politicians and business leaders. The collapse of 2001 and the neoliberal restructuring that caused it, as well as some of the results, have been analyzed in the previous issue (January 2015). This issue's contributors discuss many of the social movements that emerged in response to the crisis in the following decade.

The crisis produced an upsurge of grassroots activism. Though it is undoubtedly true that activists of all political stripes contributed to the 2001 mobilization, it is also true that the general population had had enough of neoliberalism and the de la Rúa government. Many of the demonstrators were unemployed

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workers and youth from shantytowns. However, in Córdoba teachers, municipal employees, and light and power workers, in Rosario meatpackers, in La Plata shipyard workers, and in Buenos Aires bus drivers were at the forefront of the demonstrations. Most of them were spontaneous demonstrators going outside their organizations.

Immediately after de la Rúa resigned, most townships and city neighborhoods saw the emergence of *asambleas populares* (grassroots neighborhood assemblies). In these meetings, neighborhood residents gathered to protest, engage in politics, and try to deal with the crisis. Thousands of people turned out weekly in what was perhaps the best example of popular democracy in Argentine history. The main task of these assemblies was to guarantee people's survival; therefore they organized barter clubs, soup kitchens, community purchases, and even small-scale wheat milling for flour. They also petitioned and demonstrated under the slogan "¡Que se vayan todos!" (Throw all of them [politicians] out!). Since the assemblies were relatively spontaneous, they were also very heterogeneous. Some, such as the ones in the Buenos Aires neighborhoods of Almagro and Villa Crespo, gathered hundreds of people who met in the street, effectively blocking all traffic. These assemblies were well organized by representative committees and carried out extensive neighborhood action. Other assemblies were relatively small, only a few dozen persons. In addition, their concerns were also varied, responding almost mechanically to their class composition. For instance, the assemblies in the Greater Buenos Aires area were mostly working-class and thus concerned with unemployment and poverty. Those on the affluent north side of Buenos Aires or the Cerro de las Rosas in Córdoba City were mostly concerned with actions to recover bank deposits in U.S. dollars. By the end of 2001 the assemblies had formed regional coordinating bodies. For instance, the assemblies in the Buenos Aires area met on a weekly basis in the Parque Centenario. Delegates from 57 assemblies, representing thousands, participated weekly to air their thoughts, exchange ideas, and attempt to coordinate action.

The left participated extensively in the assemblies. Many participants were unaffiliated former militants and activists, but there was also a strong presence of the organized left, including several Trotskyist organizations—the Partido Obrero (Worker Party—PO), the Movimiento al Socialismo, the Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas, and the Movimiento de los Trabajadores Socialistas (Socialist Workers' Movement—MST) as well as the Partido Comunista de Argentina (Argentine Communist Party—PCA) and nationalist left groups such as the Corriente Patria Libre. The nationalist right also had a strong presence: Colonel Mohammed Ali Seineldin's[1] group had cells in at least 24 assemblies in the city of Buenos Aires. The left's contribution to the assemblies got mixed reviews from the average neighborhood resident. On the one hand, there was broad recognition of the importance of leftists in organizing the neighborhoods and keeping the assemblies going. On the other hand, most residents seemed tired of the endless bickering and undemocratic attitudes of the different leftist parties. Sergio, an activist in the assembly of Liniers (Buenos Aires), reported:

> We are undergoing a crisis caused by two parties (the PO and the MST) who are trying to control the assemblies with their apparatus and therefore bring

> the struggle between apparatuses into the meetings. The result has been that ordinary neighborhood residents are not coming to the meetings any more .... In the last meeting in the Parque Centenario they even came to blows over where we should all commemorate May 1. Imagine: 15 assemblies wanted to go with the PO, 18 with the MST, and 24 repudiated them both.

To try to change this situation, the assemblies decided that only people actually living in the neighborhood could participate and only representatives with a mandate from an assembly could speak and vote in the regional coordinating bodies.

In addition to the assemblies there were many other movements. The best-known is the *piquetero* movement, which organized among the unemployed to obtain government aid. Its favorite tactics were blockading highways and massive mobilizations in front of supermarkets, forcing them to hand out food. This movement rapidly split into factions, including the Bloque Piquetero, headed by the PCA, the PO, and independents; the Corriente Clasista y Combativa (Classist and Combative Current—CCC), headed by the Maoist Partido Comunista Revolucionaria (Communist Revolutionary—PCR); groups led by Peronists such as Luis D'Elía; nationalist groups such as Barrios de Pie, led by the Corriente Patria Libre (Free Country Tendency); and a confederation of independent left organizations loosely grouped as the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados "Darío Santillán" (Darío Santillán Movement of Unemployed Workers). This political ferment is the context for this issue's engagement with a range of popular struggles. The first group of articles examines the labor movement.

The article by Cora Arias, Nicolás Diana Menéndez, and Paula Salgado, "The Double Confrontation of Grassroots Unionism in Argentina: Union Democratization and Defense of Working Conditions," deals with the case of the Buenos Aires subway employees and the emergence of a new, representative labor union after the 2001 crisis. Their approach posits a process of fragmentation and recomposition achieved by this workers' collective in the forms of resistance it developed and the characteristics of the new organization. They use John Womack's construct of "strategic power" to explain the rise of an alternative union movement among the city's subway workers and end with some reflections on memory and the significance of previous layoffs in terms of identity and perceptions over time.

With a certain logical continuity but from a different perspective, Fernando Scolnik's "Grassroots Labor Organizations in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, 2003–2007" delves into the complexities of the Buenos Aires labor movement after the 2001 crisis. Scolnik focuses primarily on challenges to the traditional union structures and the rise of alternative rank-and-file organizations. He examines the experiences of a new type of classism[2] in Kraft-Terrabusi and Coca Cola and links these new movements to the development of workers' control in factories such as Jabón Federal. One of the more interesting insights of these two articles is that the transformations brought about by the crisis have meant changes in the formal structure of labor unions and the rise of a new generation of worker activists.

In a related analysis, the article by Gonzalo Pérez Alvarez, "Continiuity and Rupture in the Labor and *Piquetero* Movements in Argentine Patagonia,

1990–2011," studies the *piquetero* movement of a region of Argentina that suffered a profound transformation of its social and economic structure in the 1990s. He argues that the development of this movement of the unemployed revealed both continuity and change in organizational traditions in the region. It presented a challenge to traditional union models that locked workers into corporativism.

Rank-and-file workers and the unemployed were not the only ones to develop new and alternative organizational models. Julieta Haidar, in "Interpreting Argentine Business Unionism," discusses the "institutionalist and corporativist interpretations of the business unionism strategy adopted by some unions when faced with the 1990s market reforms." She argues that traditional analytic tools are insufficient for an understanding of these Argentine developments because they consider unions interest groups, play down the context of capitalist restructuring, and fail to account for the novelty of the strategy. These limitations can be overcome, she suggests, by reviving some ideas from Marxist analysis, such as the classist nature of unions and their participation in the historical dynamic of a capitalist social formation.

In her article "Reconsidering Social Movement Unionism in Postcrisis Argentina," Ayşe Serdar covers the origins, development, and stagnation of the alternative labor federation the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentine Workers' Central—CTA). This federation arose out of the failure of the more traditional unionism to confront the neoliberal market reforms of the 1990s. Applying political process theory, Serdar argues that it is not necessarily expanding political opportunities but the communal perception of a threat that generates social movements. She goes on to discuss the problems of the CTA after 2001 and compares it with alternative union movements in the 1970s.

All of the above raises the question how representative (and useful) labor unions are and whether, after 10 years of high rates of unemployment and state subsidies, the unemployed remain workers (as opposed to joining the "lumpenproletariat"). What seems to be clear is that the vibrant Argentine labor union culture described by James Petras (1986) has been destroyed. What has come to replace it? Undoubtedly there is a working-class culture, and perhaps Julieta Haidar is correct that our traditional tools for analysis are insufficient to understand what are clearly new and rapidly changing phenomena. For instance, a conclusion arising from Serdar's piece is that while social movement unionism seems like a good option for organizing, more in tune with the times, the fact that the CTA has not transcended the state employee sector and remains a relatively small federation suggests that other policies might be a better fit for Argentina's labor reality.

In "Neighborhood and People's Assemblies in the City of Buenos Aires: An Update," Sebastian Mauro and Federico M. Rossi cogently summarize the complex issues surrounding two case studis treated as a paradigmatic example. Perhaps most interesting is that both assemblies retained their political identities over time. Unusually for authors of this kind of piece, Mauro and Rossi accept the role of anarchist and Trotskyist activists in the Argentine popular movement, though they sometimes overestimate their influence. This is interesting in terms of the evolution of the assembly movement over time.

The articles by Navé Wald and Patricia Collado both deal with struggles and modes of resistance in peripheral, nonurban regions of Argentina. Wald's "In

Search of Alternatives: Peasant Initiatives for a Different Development in North Argentina" examines the Movimiento de Campesinos de Santiago del Estero–Vía Campesina (Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero–Via Campesina—MOCASE). He offers a definition of "peasant" in Argentina and its differences from those in other areas of Latin America. He presents a cogent explanation of complex issues such as the splits within the movement and examines the MOCASE's collective communal economic ventures for capitalizing on peasant production of raw materials, producing products that combine indigenous and modern knowledge. In addition to explaining the difficulties of a movement that struggles for peasant rights in one of the poorest provinces of Argentina, Wald discusses its success in making members aware of their needs and interests.

Patricia Collado's "Social Conflict in Argentina: Land, Water, Work" deals with the struggles over land, water, and the environment over the past decade. She discusses the dialectic between mining interests and community environmental groups (termed "citizens") in Patagonia and Mendoza and explains quite objectively (in spite of her critical position) the different policies and strategies of the mining interests. She goes on to examine the role of the labor unions in these issues, clearly explaining different positions and perspectives. She concludes that "the 2001 crisis opened up a process of social mobilization that made possible a challenge to the direction of various changes produced by neoliberalism." This is interesting, but is it so? Or are these struggles the result of desperation caused by an unresponsive state? Are they a new phenomenon or merely a response to the destruction of what have been considered traditional forms of life and accepted rights? E. P. Thompson (1991) has suggested that the defense of customs and tradition can take revolutionary forms in challenging capitalist innovation and new forms of exploitation. Alternatively, as Richard Hofstadter (1955) suggested for popular movements in the nineteenth-century United States, they may be merely "dysfunctional."

Perhaps we can suggest some conclusions. In 2002, a large sector of the left believed that Argentina was in a prerevolutionary situation. They compared the assemblies to the 1917 soviets and were convinced that people's anger over the economic situation was opening the way for an anticapitalist consciousness. They considered their analysis confirmed by the spectacular growth in left party membership over the next few years. Unfortunately, this analysis did not bear close scrutiny. The popular movement in Argentina remained fragmented, and though highly combative it never gave rise to alternatives that had electoral appeal for broad segments of the population. Throughout the 2001 crisis, the working class did not participate as such and the unions were silent, while the middle class seemed concerned with maintaining its standard of living more than with rolling back neoliberalism. The assembly movement (at least in its efforts to form coordinating bodies) discussed the possibility of forming a political movement or an organization that might challenge the establishment and express its views as did the unemployed movement, but this did not go beyond discussion. The unemployed seemed to be the most combative sector, and yet their main concern was dealing with immediate hunger and poverty, rarely making the linkages between daily misery and unbridled capitalism. There was a noticeable lack of critique of neoliberalism among many of

the unemployed organizations with the possible exception of those led by Trotskyists and Maoists, and even then it is questionable how much their critiques have taken root among the rank and file of the CCC or the PO. The Marxist left did envision political "fronts" led by the respective parties, while many Peronist activists sought to link the movement to various sectors of the Partido Justicialista. Both leftists and Peronist activists were quite successful in forming alliances with the various unemployed organizations. An exception remains the Frente Popular Darío Santillán, which remained a mostly autonomous social movement.

Perhaps the most innovative political alternative emerged in the southern province of Neuquén, where the workers of the recovered Zanon ceramic tile factory created the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores (Left and Workers' Front—FIT), which established rotation among FIT candidates serving in elected office (the elected candidate resigning after a year in office, allowing the next candidate to take office in turn), terms of office ratified in public meetings, a cap on the salaries of elected officials limited to the wages of skilled workers, and other democratic and egalitarian practices. This became part of the electoral program of the Trotskyist national FIT coalition and is perhaps one of the reasons for its 1.5 million votes in 2013. And yet it did not come out of the assemblies, which in all but a few places disappeared as the economic situation improved. Thus, although the state was in crisis and the government was clearly not in control of the situation, the bourgeoisie was still able to impose its will in terms of economic policy. The challenge that the bourgeoisie felt came from a chaotic situation in which the state was clearly not functioning and politicians seemed afraid of popular mobilization. Perhaps we could say, in Gramscian terms, that Argentina was facing an organic crisis.

On a popular level the main issue was whether electoral democracy had failed. Argentina had had elected governments for the past 18 years after half a century of military dictatorships. However, opinion polls claimed that most Argentines felt that the *demos* had little or no influence on those who governed. Electoral turnout remained relatively high, especially in comparison with that of other nations, but the percentage of voters had been dropping steadily for two decades, from a high of 92 percent in the 1980s to 70 percent in 2013, with a sizable percentage casting blank or void ballots (meaning "none of the above"). Election results show that most people have not turned their backs on electoral democracy and that the vote has combined with social movements in an attempt to generate alternatives. The assemblies and the unemployed movement revealed new possibilities for Argentine democracy. And yet none of these possibilities has come to fruition and consolidated into a political movement "from below." Why is a matter for speculation. For some, social movements like the assemblies were tools for survival rather than for political action; for others, the problem is that they "lacked leadership," and still others believe that they became institutionalized and co-opted by government subsidies and by the new political movement associated with Néstor Kirchner. Perhaps what should really be examined is not whether these developments had the possibility of becoming consolidated into a viable popular alternative but whether they were merely transitional or rather represent deeper social changes and tendencies. Is there a type of political anomie in Argentina? Or is it true that, as Carlos

Menem said, "There always have been and always will be poor people"? If this is so, then the ideas set forth by Juan Carlos Portantiero (1973) and Guillermo O'Donnell (1972) have to be reconsidered. Perhaps the state is weaker than O'Donnell thought while the bourgeoisie is a lot stronger, and perhaps the "organic crisis" studied by Portantiero over 40 years ago is not a crisis but the norm.

By 2003 it seemed that Perón's take on Argentine politics had become prophetic. The journalist Tomás Eloy Martínez (1985) recalled that once upon a time a foreign ambassador asked Perón to describe Argentine politics. Perón thought about it for a while and then, with a huge smile on his face, said: "Well, my friend, in Argentina, 30 percent are *radicals* [members of the Unión Cívica Radical, a center-right party founded in the 1890s], another 30 percent are conservatives, 20 percent are Socialists, 10 percent Communists, and there are 10 percent who really do not care about politics." "But that is 100 percent," responded the surprised ambassador. "What about the Peronists?" "Oh, no, we are all Peronists," said Perón, laughing.

Though the story is probably not true, the fact is that Peronism seems to be everything to everyone. And yet, if all are Peronists, then this probably means that it has a protean quality of being something to everyone without any ideological coherence. What does this mean? The small-town mayor (*intendente*) of Pilar, Córdoba, won his first election as a *radical* (UCR). Once elected he became a supporter of the Kirchners (*radical K*) and then flirted with the neoliberals of the Propuesta Republicana (Republican Proposal), later to join the Kirchners and finally to become a firm and principled supporter of the traditional and anti-Kirchner Peronist governor of Córdoba Province, José Manuel de la Sota. The key thing that has to be explained is that, throughout this political hopscotch, he never lost the support of the local electorate. The same seems to be true on a national level: voting patterns oscillate widely from one election to the next, as do the allegiances of politicians. What does this suggest about party loyalties and electoral democracy? Did the electorate remain "loyal" because it shared the mayor's proposals? Because he retained control of government patronage? Out of fear of possible retribution? Or perhaps because, as some polls suggest, "all politicians are the same"?

What the above suggests is that one result of the 2001 debacle is that democratic politics have given way to a clientelistic pragmatism. Far from "all being Peronist," it is possible that "all are possibilists" and that political opportunism has increased to levels that were unthinkable two decades ago. And yet underneath this possibilism there are other changes. The left has once again grown electorally and organizationally. The Trotskyist FIT received almost a million and a half votes in 2013, and its presence in the student and the unemployed movement and in labor unions is increasing significantly.[3] The Socialist candidate, Hermes Binner, received almost 17 percent of the vote in 2011 in a coalition with *radicales* and progressive Peronists. Even more important, electoral support for what can be described as neoliberal candidates has also been growing: they regularly win elections in the city of Buenos Aires, as well as in the provinces of Córdoba and Mendoza and dozens of townships, representing about one-third of the electorate.

In fact, the results and significances of the Kirchner- Fernández presidencies are complex and controversial. Is this a new political movement expressing the

transformations brought about by the 2001 crisis, or is it a new edition of Peronism? Did the Kirchners represent a move to the left or the rise of a conservative populist coalition? What were the results of the crisis in terms of governance and popular legitimacy? Are the Kirchners part of the progressive movement that seems to have swept the Southern Cone of Latin America or, as Uruguayan President José "Pepe" Mujica has implied, is what they have "just discourse"? Cristina Kirchner herself has repeatedly stated that she is no leftist, but the question remains whether the Kirchners are Peronists. Their policies have little in common with those of the 1946 Perón government, and they are not a mere continuation of those of Carlos Menem. Juan Domingo Perón used to say that in government "you signal a left turn and then go right." Menem insisted that he was "bringing Peronism up to date." Perhaps Kirchnerism is another form of neo-Peronism.

Most of this issue's contributors suggest that Argentine democracy may have drifted away from electoral politics toward movements such as the community environmental groups that Collado studies, the social movement unionism discussed by Serdar, the women's rights movement analyzed by Lopreite, and the rank-and-file labor movement treated by Scolnik and by Arias, Diana Menéndez, and Salgado. While this popular protest did not involve a challenge to the state, one cannot help but think that in coming to replace the state it has effectively challenged it.

All of the above is suggestive of the questions that the contributors to this issue are grappling with. Underlying each piece there is controversy and vigorous debate as to the causes, significance, and changes brought about by the Argentine crisis and by the political movement spawned by Néstor Kirchner. Analysts have yet to reach a conclusive consensus about these developments during the past decade. This collection seeks to advance the ongoing debate.

NOTES

1. An Argentine colonel who participated in two failed uprisings against the democratically elected governments of Raúl Alfonsín and Carlos Menem in 1988 and 1990, Seineldín rose to prominence during the 1982 Falklands War against the United Kingdom. Seineldín became a member of the Carapintadas (Painted Faces), a group within the Argentine army. The Carapintadas demanded that the Argentine government halt legal proceedings against army officers accused of human rights abuses during the dirty war that occurred during the military dictatorship of 1976–1983. Seineldín was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the 1990 mutiny, but he was pardoned by then-President Eduardo Duhalde in 2003. He died in 2009. He headed the Partido Popular de la Reconstrucción, an extreme-right-wing nationalist political party.

2. Classism was a rank-and-file, antibureaucratic, socialist tendency that arose in the late 1960s.

3. For the first time ever the 350,000-member student federation of the Universidad de Buenos Aires is led by Trotskyists; the left heads many of the unemployed movement organizations, and left-led rank-and-file challenges have emerged in many unions.

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