Beware the Bourgeois Block

18th Fe. 2002

It's noon on a Monday, and we are on Florida Avenue, the main pedestrian shopping street of Buenos Aires, no different from London's Oxford Street, with its numerous McDonald's, Tower Records and Benettons. This busy street, normally full of bankers and business people making quick lunch time purchases, runs along the edge of the financial district. But today something is not quite normal. The rustle of shopping bags is drowned out by a deafening racket.

A crowd of about 200 people are beating the steel sheet metal that protects the entrance of a bank. They bang with hammers, ladles, monkey wrenches, one woman even removes her shoe to use as a tool. The entire facade of the building shudders under the fury of the raining vibration of the blows. The force of some of the tools manages to punch gaping holes straight through the metal, agile gloved hands prise the sheets apart. Suddenly the armor falls away and the crowd cheers.

A handful of people split off and invade a bank lobby across the street. Within a fraction of a second all six ATM machines are systematically smashed, shattered glass flies, and a woman sprays the word "chorros," or crooks, in huge letters on the marble wall. Nervous bank employees watch the scene from behind a glass door; an egg sails through the air and breaks against it. The bankers flinch, then turn away.

The crowd repeats the accusatory chant, "Ladrones, ladrones," or thieves, and then join in a longer chant, while jumping ecstatically up and down, waving portfolios and briefcases around. The chant translates loosely as "Whoever is

Que se vayan todos! — Out with them all!

Argentina's Popular Rebellion

Various Authors

2002

child in a sling does a swift trade in home baked pies. On one table Frederick Forsyth novels jostle for space with the Argentinean equivalent of Hello magazine and books about the Spanish Civil War. Huddled beside the stairs, an indigenous Bolivian family chat over wooden boxes of fresh vegetables. On the top floor a doctor in a pristine white coat offers to take our blood pressure, while a dentist demonstrates some procedure using a lurid pair of false teeth. People are having their haircut in one room while manicures and tarot readings are offered in another. There are classes in technical drawing as well as immigration advisement. Occasionally the trueque radio station (which "broadcasts" through a crackly PA system) announces new services being offered.

These barter clubs began in 1995, when the recession began to be felt. Since then they developed into a whole network and are now known as nodos, meaning nodes, or points of concentration. Currently there are several thousand nodos in existence throughout the country, with well over two million people taking part. For many of them it has become the only way of surviving the economic crisis.

As we leave the building we pass a stall holder with whom we spoke during the afternoon, a strikingly tall, elegantly dressed woman in her mid-forties. She waves good-bye, her dark eyes filled with resigned sadness, in sharp contrast to the overall conviviality of the place, and her lips silently form the words, "We are hungry."

Popular Economics

16th Feb. 2002

It is in the barter markets where another extraordinary example of necessity breeding ingenuity is enabling Argentineans to survive the crisis. We visit the Trueque La Estación, or The Station Exchange, that takes place twice a week in a four story community centre on the outskirts of the city, where we are shown around by Ana, a shy engineer wearing thick glasses. "The politicians have stolen everything from the people, they want to control everybody," she explains. "People come here because they don't want to be in the system."

The place is bustling; we can hardly move through the jovial throngs of people perusing the rows of tables offering goods and services. You can buy anything here, or rather, you can exchange anything here, from eggs to bumper stickers, miniskirts to spices, cucumbers to crocheted toilet roll holders, as long as you use the barter's own currency — small brightly colored notes which look a bit like Monopoly money.

The system is simple: people take their products to the market and sell them for barter credit. The vendor is then able to use this to purchase products they need in return. If you have nothing to exchange and want to participate, you must buy credits from a bank with cash. But most people have something to trade, if they are imaginative enough, and though these people are deeply lacking in cash, they have a surplus of imagination.

Piles of bric-a-brac cover some tables, while others have neat and ordered displays. A young woman sits behind a pile of underwear reading Nietzsche while a mother carrying her

Contents

Introduction 5

Argentina's New Forms of Struggle: Direct Democracy, Popular Assemblies & Self-Managment 8
The piquetero experience 9
The 19th and 20th of December 2001 11
The popular assemblies 12

Part 1 16

Routines and Rebellions 17

Economic Freefall 19

The Tin Pot Insurrection 22

Rivers of Sound 24

The Neighbourhoods Rise 26

Converging Currents 29

The Power of the Piqueteros 32

La Lucha es una Sola 36

Politics Without Parties 38

From Rebellion to Reconstruction 39

Popular Economics 42

Beware the Bourgeois Block 44

Predicting the Unpredictable 48

Watch this Space 51

Part 2 52

Returning to Rebellion 53

Capital Retreats 55

Social Creativity Advances 57

Killing Piqueteros 59

Beneath the Masks 60

The Strength of Sharing 64

Building Power 67

Pillars of the Movement 70

Transforming the Fences 72

A Post Script for the Global Anticapitalist Movement 77

no full-time officials. The officials work eight hours like everyone else and we do our union activity after hours. The decisions are all made at general assemblies of workers, not behind closed doors." Photographs of the occupied factory show workers laughing and joking as they pull tiles out of the kilns. In Ursula Le Guin's extraordinary novel, The Dispossessed, which is perhaps the most tangible and touching description of an anti-authoritarian society in the English language, the word for work and play are the same. It seems the workers of Zanón have begun to make this dream a reality.

Meanwhile, a mine in Río Turbío has been occupied, as well as a textile factory in Buenos Aires, which recently opened its doors for an International Women's Day festival. These worker-run endeavors are setting examples for Argentinean factories everywhere, and perhaps setting precedents on ways of doing business in the "new" Argentina. One manufacturer, who was on the verge of bankruptcy, called together his workers and told them that since he could no longer pay their salaries he would instead turn over blankets produced in the factory which the workers could either sell or take to the local barter markets, to exchange for other commodities. Perhaps he was worried by the example set at Zanón, or perhaps he is beginning to recognize the futility of continuing business as usual in such unusual times.

they even kind of plan in the riots. They know that when they squeeze a country and destroy its economy, you are going to get riots in the streets. And they say, 'well that's the "IMF riot"'. In other words, because you have riots, you lose. All the capital runs away from your country, and that gives the opportunity for the IMF to then add more conditions."

What the IMF doesn't expect and certainly doesn't want, is for people to take things into their own hands, for them to shift from resistance to reconstruction, from the desperation and rage of rioting to the joy of creating alternatives. As the economic crisis tears into the social fabric of Argentina, pushing more and more people to the edge, the tension between hope and despair becomes a conducive and creative space for change. Between laughter and tears exists the space of optimism, the space of radical social transformation.

For the workers of the Zanón ceramics factory in Neuque, it is this spirit of optimism that has enabled them to occupy their factory, one of Latin America's largest ceramics producers, for the last six months, running it with astounding results. The company stopped production last year, claiming that it was no longer profitable and that they could no longer pay the workers' salaries. Rather than join the growing ranks of Argentina's unemployed, the workers decided to occupy the factory and keep the production lines running themselves.

"We showed that with two days' worth of production, we were able to pay the wages of all the workers for that month," explained Godoy, one of the 326 workers involved in the occupation, thus exposing the realities of where the company profits were really going. The workers market the tiles at 60% of the previous prices and have organized a network of young vendors who sell them in the city. José Romero, a maintenance worker at the factory, adds, "This fight has opened our eyes to a lot of things."

Like so many in this movement, they are critical of hierarchical forms of organization. Godoy continues, "Now we have

Introduction

The neighbors had broken into and occupied the bank building as I arrived in Parque Lezama. Middle aged and scruffy young activists carried out debris, scrubbed windows and floors and hung banners with the name of their *assemblia popular* and another that said "we are nothing. We want to be everything."

This was my welcome to Buenos Aires this past July, where I worked with neighborhood assemblies and a "piquetero" group to make puppets and street theater, and visited family relatives.

Argentina's popular rebellion is the most all-encompassing insurrection in recent history. Like the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, it marks a break from past forms of struggle. Argentina is the first country to default on its "debt" due to a popular uprising — a serious challenge to global capital. And this society is more similar to most of North America than the indigenous communities of Chiapas. The two incredible and inspiring articles that follow give a taste and some explanation of the forms of struggle and the new society being created by the people of Argentina.

Before last year, my middle class Argentine relatives never expected their economy to collapse, to lose the majority of their life savings, to have bank accounts frozen, to suffer for a year with no job, or to work two full time jobs to keep the family housed and fed.

The Argentine economy was looted by the same banks, financial institutions, and corporations that drive the rest of the world's doomsday economy. Even without a collapse here in the US, corporate and government corruption is more visible than ever. Even before the Enron scandal, 72% in the US said corporations had too much power, according to a *Business Week* poll. While talking heads try interpreting the recent US elections, they avoid the obvious: the dramatic low turnout shows a crisis of representative democracy. The US has had to manipulate September 11, fabricate regular "alerts" to keep us terrorized, and engage in a constant war drive just to keep a

From Rebellion to Reconstruction

There has been a clear pattern of rebellion against the IMF across the world over the last decades. From Indonesia to Nigeria, and Ecuador to Morocco, people have vented their desperation and anger against austerity measures which have destroyed their livelihoods. Riots have erupted, sometimes the military is sent in, occasionally governments fall, but inevitably the IMF remains and austerity programs continue. Nothing changes, except for the growth of poverty and mistrust.

In the Buenos Aires Herald, we read a timely article about a new computer game called "Playing Minister" in which you replace the Brazilian economic minister, and are charged with keeping the country on an even keel in the face of emerging market crises, domestic bank collapses and currency devaluation. The game, according to its creator, is designed to "test your skills at juggling interest rates, controlling inflation, balancing budgets and managing debts." Apparently managing the accompanying health care crises and the food riots are not a part of the challenge when "Playing Minister."

During a recent interview, investigative journalist Greg Palast revealed how useful these riots are to the IMF. Palast relayed a conversation he had with Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank: "'…everywhere we go, every country we end up meddling in, we destroy their economy and they end up in flames', said Stiglitz. And he was saying that he questioned this and he got fired for it. But he was saying that

Politics Without Parties

16th Feb. 2002

We wake up the next morning to hear that the Pope has declared Argentina to be in a "pre-anarchic" situation. He seems to be following in the footsteps of President Duhalde, who in the first week of February said, "Argentina is on the brink of anarchy." Weeks later, the finance minister chimes in, telling a meeting of international bankers, "Either we have continuity or anarchy." Funny how that word gets thrown around whenever power begins to feel threatened.

It seems that they are using "anarchy" to conjure up the spectre of chaos, destruction, disobedience, nihilism, the collapse of law and order. It is doubtful they are using it to describe the authentic spirit of anarchism, which has spontaneously arisen on the street corners, and in the parks and squares of Argentina: the simple desire of people to live without rulers, remaining free to govern themselves.

What is so refreshing is that this spirit has developed so spontaneously, and that no one, except a few tired old politicos (and the state of course), is using the word anarchism. This is perhaps surprising, given that Argentina had the world's largest anarchist movement at the dawn of the twentieth century. But no one needs another "ism" from the 19th century, another word which imprisons and fixes meaning, another word that seduces some people into the clarity and comfort of a sectarian box, and leads others in front of a firing squad or a show trial. Labels lead so easily to fundamentalism, brands inevitably breed intolerance, delineating doctrines, defining dogma, limiting the possibility of change.

lid on things. The system is in permanent crisis and the global movement of movements is stronger and more connected than ever before in history.

Argentina offers a powerful model and a challenge. For me, the challenge includes:

- Can we innovate new forms of resistance that break out of the old, often marginal forms of protest?
- Can we go beyond our limiting labels and subcultures and find new language that opens people up to common sense revolutionary ideas? (John Holloway has noted that "the language [of the left — and I would add, of anarchism] is so worn out that they [the old words] become harmful for those who use them.")
- Can we develop the skills, ability to listen, and patience to make our groups and movements reflect the way we want our community and the world to be?
- Can we help catalyze a diverse popular movement that goes beyond issue politics to get to the roots of our problems and go beyond opposition to create positive alternatives?

— David Solnit, San Francisco, November 2002

Argentina's New Forms of Struggle: Direct Democracy, Popular Assemblies & Self-Managment

By Patricio McCabe

In the late 1990s in Argentina, a new form of struggle emerged from the unemployed workers (who make up 20% of the people while another 20% are underemployed). This expression of resistance came from the provinces to the capital of the country and consisted of blocking roads to claim a subsidy for unemployment. Blocking roads has its origin with the well-known workers' tactic called "piquete" (picket). It consisted of people preventing the entrance of scabs who were trying to break the strike. Its goal was to prevent production in support of the workers' demands. Not only is this blocking of circulation novel, but so is their organizational practice: direct democracy.

The first massive piquete happened in a province of southern Argentina, and the mass media pointed out that the government had difficulty finding a leader to negotiate with. To the question of who was responsible for the direct action, the piqueteros responded simply: All of us! Those in charge of negotiating were revolving and removable. Without leaders to corrupt, the negotiations became too complicated for the government. The piquetero movement was unfathomable to them.

it's an enormous social experiment that could well prove to be the first great popular rebellion against capitalism of the 21st century.

By four in the morning the square has emptied. The crowd has slowly melted away, returning to their neighborhoods, and the city is silent again. Clusters of young people sit around on the grass talking, drinking, smoking — it could have been any Friday night out, in any city, but for the people painting the plaza with the names of those killed in December, or the small group huddled over a mobile silk-screen printing press, taking turns printing dozens of t-shirts with the simple slogan yo decido, I decide.

La Lucha es una Sola

15th Feb. 2002

Tonight, we are privileged to watch the different currents of this struggle as they converge in the Plaza de Mayo. Suddenly there is a commotion in the corner of the square, which ripples through the crowd as all eyes turn to witness the arrival of the piqueteros, heroic, like a liberating army entering the city. Masked-up, tattooed, and fierce, each carries a stick of iron or of wood, which they hold together to form a cordon around themselves. They are greeted with an enormous cheer as they flow into the square with an energy and attitude which is forceful, raw, and urgent. Fireworks explode over the crowd as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo come forward to greet them, their small elderly faces framed in the white head scarf bearing the name of their disappeared children. Rising above the crowd are the royal blue and white flags of the Mothers on one side and the wooden clubs of the piqueteros on the other. Framed by their trademark symbols, they embrace, and the night resonates with the chant from the entire plaza, "Piquete y cacerolazo, la lucha es una sola," picket and cacerolazo, the struggle is the same.

What we are seeing tonight is an incredible coming together of differences, a convergence that crosses so many boundaries of class and culture. It seems that every social sector involved in this rebellion is beginning to work together, and support each other. Revolutionary epochs are always periods of convergence — they are moments when seemingly separate processes gather to form a socially explosive crisis. Argentina is explosive right now — anything could happen —

The methods of the piqueteros announce a major event in history. We define event as: that which emerges in the present without owing anything to the past; something that is not deduced from the imperative rules of the system; something that breaks everything previous and inaugurates the new.

The previous forms of struggle were run by the logic of representation. The union, the political parties, and the armed organizations were and are hierarchical organizations with well-known leaders. They are forms of organization similar to that of the state. The struggles of the 1960s and '70s are emblematic in this sense, and the heroic guerrilla commanders are examples of this manner of understanding politics. The state knows how to confront this logic. Instead, direct democracy is not easily assimilated to the forms of state and poses new problems. Along with the Berlin wall, a way of understanding politics also fell and the emergence of the Zapatismo in Mexico announces something different. The Zapatista event inaugurates a new world: "We fight for a new time of life."

The piquetero experience

Just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo invented a new form of being heard with their marches and claims, the unemployed had to alter the normalcy of a situation that ignored them by blocking roads, an expression that summarizes the wager of the piqueteros.

The piquetero experience reclaimed a good amount of union worker knowledge like the organization through assemblies, direct action, and the picket itself. But at the same time, it introduced a different way of inhabiting the neighborhood — in a collective manner — the basic forms of subsistence. It was necessary to be acquainted with the store owners of the neighborhood to obtain food and to know other neighbors to create clothes drives or to obtain materials for

the construction of childcare centers. Different from other more specific militant experiences that deal with particular problems, the piquetero activism aims to transform the totality of the conditions of life.

Some of the organizations of unemployed workers (which are not the majority but which are growing) are loyal to the direct democracy and distribute in assembly the obtained subsidies. They are autonomous from the State, the political parties, and the unions. In many ways, their approach to doing things is novel and powerful. What is obtained from the State by means of "piquetes" (road blocks) is distributed via an assembly. Autonomy is inherent in each of their undertakings.

They hold education workshops where a good amount of their people educate themselves. They also hold productive workshops where they take into account problems of health and nutrition. From these come their best known successes. With the few resources that they obtain, they have set up a network of pharmacies, a bakery, and cement brick factory.

The contrasts with the government initiatives are striking, and the example of the bread is symbolic in this sense. With all the resources of the richest municipality of the country, the government of Buenos Aires reduced the price of bread to 1,60 peso for a few days, which failed rapidly. Instead, the piqueteros of Coordinadora "Anibal Verón", with their scant resources, distribute the bread at 1 peso per kilo. This is a sample of how direct democracy allows life to be organized in a more efficient way than the corrupt capitalist administration. The potential of this movement is far from exhausted and many more are looking to the novelty of their actions. Of important note, most participants in this movement are extremely young and predominantly female.

"When people get angry, they rule with blood, fire, and sweat," explains a young piquetero, wearing a "Punk's Not Dead" t-shirt across his face as a mask. "We lost seven comrades in Plaza de Mayo. They had no political banner or ideology, they were only young Argentineans and wanted freedom. Then the government understood that people wanted to kick them out… Those that are up there in power are very worried that they can no longer order us around as before. Now people say 'enough.' We got together all social classes, from workers to unemployed, to say 'enough is enough', together with people that have $100,000 and that can't take it out of the bank, people that broke their backs working to save up, together with us that maybe don't even have any food to eat. We are all Argentineans, all under the same banner, and don't want this to happen again.." A young piquetera named Rosa puts it more succinctly: "When women no longer have the resources to feed their children, the government is coming down, no matter what type of government it is."

contaminated, bought off, corrupted, or otherwise tainted by power, and they have decided that the way around this is to develop radical horizontal structures.

The primary demands are usually the creation of some temporary state-funded jobs, and once these are secured, the piqueteros decide collectively who gets these jobs, based on need and time spent helping with blockades. If there are not enough to go around, they rotate the jobs and share the wages. Other demands normally follow: distribution of food parcels, liberation of some of the hundreds of jailed piqueteros, public investment in local infrastructure such as roads, health, education.

A friend shows us video footage of a passionate woman on last week's piquetero blockade of an oil refinery. She sits behind a barricade of burning tires, teeth missing beneath bright piercing eyes, and declares, "Yes this is dangerous, of course it is dangerous, but we need to fight, we cannot go home because no one is going to bring anything to our doorstep…jobs, food for our children, the schools that are now disappearing, the hospitals…you see, if I get hurt now and I go to hospital, they don't even have the bandages to help me. So if we stop the struggle, all the things will disappear…we have to keep struggling."

In some parts of Argentina, the piqueteros have created quasi-liberated zones, where their ability to mobilize is far more influential than anything the local government is able to do. In General Mosconi, formerly a rich oil town in the far north, which now suffers with a more than 40% unemployment rate, the movement has taken things into its own hands and is running over 300 different projects, including bakeries, organic gardens, clinics, and water purification.

What is extraordinary is that these radical actions, practiced by some of the most excluded and impoverished people in Argentina and using extremely militant tactics and imagery — burning barricades, blocked roads, masked-up demonstrators wielding clubs — have not alienated other sections of society. In fact, support comes from all across the movement.

The 19th and 20th of December 2001

Argentina made the news all over the world. For the first time, a mobilization toppled an elected government. The intolerable situation for broad sections of the population drove thousands of Argentines out to loot grocery stores in search of food. The governments response to the lootings was to declare a stage of siege that, among other things, suspended democratic liberties such as the right to gather and demonstrate on the street. The largest demonstration occurred on the day when the State declared a state of siege. With absolute spontaneity, people went out into the streets without any notice and with a slogan that no one had heard before: "que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo!" ("Out with them all, none should stay!").

There were signs that something might happen (though not in this manner). The politicians had been questioned greatly by a large portion of the population. During the parliamentary elections in October, the blank vote won throughout the whole country. This was an incident without precedent in any parliamentary democracy in the last few decades.

At midnight on the 19th, a crowd banging pots directed itself to the Plaza de Mayo (located in front of the house of government) to the shout of "everyone leave!" and remained shouting — not demanding anything specific but asking for everything. Once more, there were no leaders with whom to negotiate.

This was an insurrection without author; the incident became a fixture in Argentine life. The people were shaking off the terror instilled by the military dictatorship 25 years before. People did not go out for purely economic demands but with a directly political proposal and with an anti-state stance.

The only response that the State could articulate was a repression of absolutely peaceful demonstrations; in fact, the majority of the mobilization was made up of families with their children. At the height, there were about 40,000 people in the

Plaza de Mayo plus a few thousand more about the whole city. The repression evolved into a pitched battle with the crowd trying to recapture the plaza time after time until the police withdrew at dawn. However, the confrontations continued the next day and did not cease until the president resigned. The day ended with 30 dead in the whole country. The murders were committed with the same methods of the military dictatorship.

The pots did not quiet down, and the ruling class and the media tried to decode the message. The cacerolazos (a form of protest where people take to the streets banging pots and pans, or cacerolas) continued for months, and meanwhile, four more presidents fell, without possibility of closing the crisis.

The popular assemblies

The movement of the cacerolazo had its epicenter in the Federal Capital and with a strong component of the middle class. With the passing of the months, the neighbors that protested on the streets started to meet in assemblies. The spirit of those assemblies can be summarized in manifestos like the following transcript from a bulletin of the Nuñez-Saavedra assembly:

> What is your dream?
> Do you remember the 19th of December?
> That night you said, "enough of thieves."
> Yes, you shouted it. I heard you; we all heard you.
> We also heard you when you said,
> "I no longer want to be who I was.
> I don't want them to decide anymore for me.
> I don't believe in any political leaders anymore —
> Nor in judges, nor in union leaders, nor in bankers
> Nor big business men, nor policemen."
> I felt so much pride to see you and me.
> It's just that I did not expect so much of you, even

"We do it like this because it is the only way they acknowledge us. If we stood protesting on the sidewalk, they would trample all over us."

These tactics have proved extraordinarily successful. Whole families take part in the blockades, setting up collective kitchens and tents in the middle of the street. Many of the participants are young, and over 60% are women. Over the years this loosely federated autonomous movement has managed to secure thousands of temporary minimum wage jobs, food allowances, and other concessions from the state. The police are often unable to clear the pickets because of the popular support they receive. The highways often run beside shantytowns on the edges of the cities, and there is always a threat that any repression against the piqueteros would bring thousands of people streaming out of these areas onto the road in support, provoking much more serious confrontations.

In August 2001, a nation-wide mobilization of piqueteros managed to shut down over 300 highways across the country. Over 100,000 unemployed workers participated and the economy was effectively paralyzed. Thousands were arrested and five killed, but the movement continued building momentum and has broken new ground in its use of non-hierarchical grassroots forms of organizing.

The spirit of autonomy and direct democracy that exists in the urban neighborhood assemblies, was practiced by the piqueteros years before, as they share a similar healthy distrust of all executive power. Each municipality has its own organization centered around the neighborhoods, and all decision of policy and strategy are decided at piquetero assemblies. If the government decides to negotiate during an action, the piqueteros do not delegate leaders to go off and meet with government officials, but instead, demand that the officials come to the blockades so the people can all discuss their demands, and collectively decide whether to accept or decline any forthcoming offers. Too often they have seen leaders and delegates

The Power of the Piqueteros

Born out of frustration with the corruption and constant political compromises of official unions and the failure of all political parties to represent them, the piqueteros (the term refers to their common tactic of road blockades) grew out of the excluded and impoverished communities in the provinces. They are predominantly unemployed workers who have been organizing autonomously in their suburban barrios, the neighborhood districts which are key to many Argentineans sense of place and identity.

Demanding jobs, food, education, and health care, they began taking direct action in the mid 1990s, blocking highways across the country. The action of blocking the flow of commodities was seen as the key way to disrupt economic activity; as they were unemployed, the option to strike was no longer available to them, but by blocking roads they could still have an enormously disruptive effect on the economic system. One of them explained, "We see that the way capitalism operates is through the circulation of goods. Obstructing the highways is the way to hurt the capitalist the most. Therefore, we who have nothing — our way to make them pay the costs and show that we will not give up and die for their ambitions, is to create difficulties by obstructing the large routes of distribution."

"We block the streets. We make that part of the streets ours. We use wood, tires, and petrol to burn," adds Alejandro enthusiastically. He is a young piquetero who sports the red and black bandanna of the MTD (Unemployed Worker's Movement) around his neck and carries the three foot wooden club that has become one of the symbols of this movement.

> less of me, you surprised me.
> Because of that, because YOU pushed me, I am walking to find a way,
> banging pots, thinking out loud in assemblies, with my neighbors.
> Where are we going? you ask
> Well, we are trying to create with the neighbors a democratic and assembly-based system from which our representatives can come forth. The majority express a firm refusal of political parties; there is no space for them in the assemblies
>
> (North Cacerola Bulletin of the Nuñez-Saavedra popular assembly)

Assemblies grew like mushrooms in each neighborhood of the capital, and then, they extended into the suburbs. It is calculated that around 200 assemblies brought together an average of 200 participants in their moments of greatest participation. The shared viewpoint is the rejection of all politician and the representation summed up in the slogan: "Out with them all!" The stage of deliberations gave way in time to the necessity to concretize tasks.

As in the piquetero movement, there are different political perspectives that coexist inside the movement of the popular assemblies. One sector of the assemblies in directed to put pressure on the government by means of marches and street demonstrations because it is understood that without the structure of the government, it won't be possible to achieve any lasting change. They gather strength with the objective of seizing power from the government, either by electoral means or direct action.

Another sector, instead, understands it is necessary to create a different kind of power because it believes that it is not possible to salvage anything from what already exists. In gen-

eral, they tend to redefine the public space. In this context, coffee shops, banks, and fields are being occupied with the objective of making cultural centers or organic gardens.

The public space is redefined as non-governmental. None of these practices is very well theorized. There is not yet a theory that allows these practices to be unified, but this does not deter things. In fact, the occupation of spaces is growing.

The reclaimed health care clinic might be a good example of this trend. The neighbors got this clinic back after the owners abandoned it many years ago, including expensive intensive care equipment. Two hundred and fifty doctors are presently volunteering. In the next few weeks, neighbors hope they will be able to offer free health care for the workers of the taken over factories.

In the workers' movement, similar experiences have emerged. With the crisis, a lot of capitalists abandoned their factories, and these have been re-appropriated by the workers who self-manage as cooperatives. Approximately 80 factories are in this situation, Textiles, cooling systems, ceramics — these are some of the productive lines with workers' self-management. Lately, there have been congresses of workers and unemployed workers to discuss the best way of taking charge of production.

The refusal to delegate to others the solutions to the problems in our lives is spreading to more sectors of the population, allowing levels of self-management previously unthinkable in this corner of the world. The process in completely open and its end result appears uncertain. Some questions remain without answers. How long will the Argentine ruling class and the US tolerate these experiments, especially in a context of increasing instability in the region? Will the resistance be able to transform itself into an alternative to government?

— Buenos Aires, Argentina July 2002

It's Latin Americanizing Argentina. Argentina is remembering where it is on the map."

Time after time when we asked people in their neighborhood meetings, or during cacerolazos, "Do you think that people here have participated in resistance movements in the past?" the answer was an emphatic no, often with the postscript that the near-complete loss of a generation through disappearance and exile meant that there were few people in the country with any prior experience of organizing much of anything.

Extraordinary to imagine, and contrary to everything we thought we knew, to find that a people with so little foundation, so little affinity for each other, coming from such a place of apathy and individualism, followed by outrage and despair, could so rapidly and intuitively develop forms of organization that are inherently disobedient, inherently directly democratic, and inherently utopian.

Although this scene in the Plaza de Mayo is repeated every Friday night, tonight's cacerolazo is special. For the first time, the piqueteros, or literally, picketers, will be joining the cacerolazo. The piqueteros are Argentina's militant movement of unemployed workers, who launched this social rebellion five years ago.

and show it to the world. The diversity of the crowd astonishes us — it seems that every walk of life is represented, and while we struggle to grasp the contradictions we perceive, we meet Pablo, a 30 year old employee of Bank Boston, who tells us, "By day I must work as a capitalist, but at night I'm a socialist. I've been a socialist for a long time, since my father was disappeared when I was six years old." His father was a university student of sociology, and was not particularly political, but was dumped in the Río Plata all the same at age 22, leaving behind an 18 year old wife and his six year old son.

It is this which is particularly poignant, the fact that every one of these people who is over thirty is living with some memory of the dictatorship, has lost some people from their immediate family, (or at least knows someone who did), they know how bad things can get, how disappearances serve to terrify a population in ways that we, with only prisons and courts as official deterrence, can't dream of. This popular collective memory seems to permeate every aspect of this rebellion. Although the continuity of the lineage of resistance has been severely damaged, people seem deeply committed to doing the hard work of rebuilding a movement that was, until recently, in shambles, a movement that was long lulled to sleep by fearful memories not yet dulled by the passage of time, lulled to sleep by neoliberal promises and privatized dreams, convinced that without following the "rules of the market," the country was sure to return to the dark days of dicatorship.

But not everyone is so sympathetic. "They had it coming," is a constant refrain from their Uruguayan neighbors, "They thought that they were European," and it's true that Buenos Aires feels much more like Paris than like São Paolo. However, the seemingly first-world status was propped up on credit and sustained by loans and a national refusal to recognize the symptoms of imminent collapse. Upon returning home, a Chicano activist tells us, "That's what's so important about the uprising.

Patricio is an activist and writer with Nuñez-Saavedra Popular Assembly in Buenos Aires.

Part 1

Converging Currents

15th Feb. 2002

The raging torrent of sound finally arrives at the packed Plaza de Mayo. The mouth of each avenue feeding into the square is flooded with thousands of people cheering the arrival of each assembly. Banner after banner passes by, some roughly painted and others carefully lettered , but each bearing the neighborhood's name and the time and place of the meeting.

The repetitive metallic rhythm fills the night. Some people grow bored of hitting their pots and start to bang on lampposts or railings, others pound on the barricade which splits the square in half, behind which stand a symbolic row of riot policemen protecting the Pink House. Singing of the movement's anthem breaks out periodically, rising above the sound of the saucepans, voices crying, "They all must go, not a single one should remain, Duhalde must go back up his mother's cunt," sung with equal ebullience by elderly women, youthful punks, unemployed refinery workers, and middle class bankers.

Young kids are busy covering the walls with graffiti; hardly a surface of this city remains that does not carry some phrase or slogan of resistance. The outline of a coffin is drawn with the word "politicians" inside; a ministry building proclaims "My saucepan is not bullet proof;" the closed shutters of a shop declare "Popular assemblies — go out into the streets and claim what is rightfully yours."

In the Plaza de Mayo, people are incredibly open, happy to talk with us, readily telling us stories, and repeatedly emphasizing how important it is that we document their struggle

nized pickets to prevent the authorities from closing down a baker who could not afford to pay his rent.

For many of the assembly participants, this is the first time they have been involved in any form of grassroots mobilization in their lives. By creating a space for people to listen to each other's problems and desires for change, the assemblies have enabled people to realize that their personal daily struggles are connected to other people's problems, and that all roads eventually lead to a similar source, whether it is the government, the banks, the IMF, or the entire economic system itself. An elderly shopkeeper, whose experience is representative of many participants, said "Never in my whole life did I give a shit for anyone else in my neighborhood. I was not interested in politics. But this time I realized that I have had enough and I needed to do something about it."

For radical change to occur, transformation has to take place in our minds as well as in social structures, and it is often on the tongue through the tool of language that one can trace some of the most radical shifts in consciousness. A beautiful illustration of this is that out of the experience of the assemblies, a new form of greeting has arisen. The traditional political leftist form of greeting in Latin American culture, compañero, or comrade, has been rejected in favor of a new form of address, vecino, or neighbor. It's a simple trick of the tongue, but one which signifies a major shift away from an authoritarian politics based on power and parties towards a participatory politics made up of people and places.

Routines and Rebellions

15th Feb. 2002

Your tickets are invalid," says the heavily lipsticked agent at the Varig airlines check-in counter in southern Brazil. Her eyes flick to the next person in line. We protest vehemently, as we've had no problem using the tickets. She is not impressed, and calls for her manager, who explains to us that Varig no longer recognizes the reciprocity of any tickets issued through Aerolineas Argentina. "They cannot be trusted now," she informs us gravely, showing us the memo announcing the new policy. "We no longer do business with them." This is our first experience of the rippling effects of the Argentinean financial crisis.

At the Aerolineas Argentina ticket counter, the agent is friendly, and seems a bit embarrassed. He books us tickets on the next flight to Buenos Aires. His demeanor suggests that of a man who does not know if he will have a job tomorrow. We board the plane, hoping that the massive layoffs and budget cuts have not reached air traffic control, aerospace engineering, safety inspection, and other related sectors. We arrive safely, get ourselves a cheap hotel, and bleary-eyed, head out for a coffee.

In the corner of the cafe a television with the volume down is tuned into the Cronica channel — a uniquely Argentinean phenomenon — non-stop live trashy "news," seemingly unedited, with unbelievably bad and erratic camera work, and featuring the same lone reporter who seems to pop up all over town at random. Our introduction to Cronica is "live and direct" scenes from the beach, complete with close-up shots of

thongs which zoom out and reveal beach volleyball games and languid sunbathers. There's a massive social rebellion going on in this country, and the news is live and direct from the beach!

After about 20 minutes of beach footage, it cuts to the news studio. Two "presenters" appear, in the form of shockingly pink-haired puppets! This is beyond ridiculous, here we are, desperate for news of the rebellion, and all we can get is puppet shows and thongs. After some "live and direct" from the local football team's practice, we finally are rewarded with images of people banging pots and pans while invading the lobby of a bank. We quickly drink up our coffee, ask the waiter how to get to the financial district, jump on a bus, and arrive there in minutes.

Financial districts look much the same all over the world, whether in the City of London, New York, or Frankfurt, but here in Buenos Aires there is one major difference — huge corrugated sheets of steel cover many of the bank headquarters, especially the foreign ones, like Citibank, HSBC, and Lloyds. Gone are the grand entrance halls; the prestigious shiny surfaces of glass and marble are hidden behind blank facades of grey steel, and the only access is through tiny doors cut into the sheet metal, through which suited figures pass, heads bowed, entering these fortresses as if banking has become a secretive, clandestine activity.

The strong smell of wet paint hangs in the air, fresh graffiti covers the steel shuttering and walls, saying "ladrones," or thieves. The action can't be far away. We split up and scout the area, listening for the clang of metal upon metal, the ineffable noise that has become the soundtrack to this rebellion, but hear nothing, find nothing. It seems that we are too late.

discussing how to take back control of their lives. Every now and then a car would pass by and beep its horn in support, and this was all happening between 8pm and midnight on a Wednesday evening!

It all seemed so normal, and yet was perhaps the most extraordinary radical political event I'd ever witnessed — ordinary people seriously discussing self-management, spontaneously understanding direct democracy and beginning to put it into practice in their own neighborhoods. Multiply this by 200 in this city alone, and you have the makings of an irresistible popular rebellion, a grassroots uprising which is rejecting centralized political power. As Roli, an accountant from the Almagro assembly said: "People reject the political parties. To get out of this crisis requires real politics. These meetings of common people on the street are the fundamental form of doing politics."

Outside of the weekly meetings, the assemblies meet in smaller committees, each one dedicated to a different local issue or problem. Committees of health are common — with many local hospital budgets slashed, there is an urgent need to develop alternatives to the collapsing welfare system. Some are suggesting that people who own their own homes withhold their property tax, and instead give that money to the local hospitals. Many assemblies also have alternative media committees, as there is a widespread critique of the mainstream media's representation of the rebellion. It took a large cacerolazo outside their head offices to get them to cover the uprising more accurately. However, the spirit of distrust for any enormous corporate entity remains at large, and local assemblies are beginning to print their own news sheets, broadcast updates on local radio stations, and put up web sites.

In addition to the innumerable meetings and the weekly cacerolazo, the assemblies also organize local street parties and actions. In one neighborhood, for example, the assembly orga-

The Neighbourhoods Rise

Every week people make this pilgrimage, from every corner of Buenos Aires, some of them coming as far as seven kilometres. They walk with their asembleas populares, the neighborhood meetings which have spontaneously sprouted up over the last few months in over 200 different neighborhoods in the city, and throughout the surrounding provinces. These assemblies are rapidly becoming autonomous centres of community participation. Most meet weekly (the more ambitious, twice a week!), and all meet outside — in squares, parks, and even on street corners.

Every Sunday there is an assembly of assemblies, an interneighborhood plenary in a park, attended by over 4000 people and often running for more than 4 hours. Spokespeople from rich, poor, and middle class districts attend to report back on the work and proposals of their local assemblies, share ideas, and debate strategy for the following week's city-wide mobilizations.

The local assemblies are open to almost anyone, although one assembly has banned bankers and party activists, and others have banned the media. Some assemblies have as many as 200 people participating, others are much smaller. One of the assemblies we attended had about 40 people present, ranging from two mothers sitting on the sidewalk while breast feeding, to a lawyer in a suit, to a skinny hippie in batik flares, to an elderly taxi driver, to a dreadlocked bike messenger, to a nursing student. It was a whole slice of Argentinean society standing in a circle on a street corner under the orange glow of sodium lights, passing around a brand new megaphone and

Economic Freefall

We've arrived on a Friday. Every Friday night since mid-December last year, there has been a massive cacerolazo in Buenos Aires, when the people converge in the political center of the city, the Plaza de Mayo, and create an enormous racket by banging on cacerolas, or saucepans. These huge cacerolazos developed spontaneously on the 19th of December 2001, the day when the uprising exploded, after smoldering in the provinces for several years, and now involving just about every sector of Argentinean society.

Argentina suffered two and a half decades of International Monetary Fund-(IMF) backed "free-market reforms," which meant privatizing everything: water, telephone systems, postal services, railways, electricity — you name it — even the zoo was privatized. When the Asian and Russian markets crashed in 1998, foreign investment dried up in the so-called "emerging markets." Argentina was hit badly, a major recession struck, and foreign lenders asked for their money back, on time.

According to the IMF, the only way the Argentinean government could repay the $132 billion debt, some of which dated from the military dictatorship, was by making more cuts in social spending, especially as many people, sick of political corruption, had stopped paying their taxes. Pensions, unemployment benefits, health care, and education all were cut drastically, and all state employees had their salaries slashed by 13%. It was the same old story repeated across the world — as countries are forced into deeper and deeper debt, the IMF

strip mines their economies for the benefit of foreign banks and bond traders.

In fact, it was the bond markets, unsatisfied with the pace of the austerity plans, who proved to be even harsher task masters than the IMF. Unlike the IMF, they never bothered to send delegations to negotiate, they simply jacked up interest rates on debt issuances, in some instances from 9% to 14% in a fortnight.

Now, after four years of recession, one out of every five Argentineans is unemployed, and some economists say this could soon double. 40% of the population is now living below the poverty line, and another 2000 people fall below it every day. Hospitals are running out of basic supplies like bandages and syringes, schools are shutting down because teachers aren't being paid, child mortality and hunger is on the rise, and this is all occurring in what once was one of the wealthiest countries in the world, for decades considered the great success story of neoliberal development in the "developing" world, the star pupil of the "Washington Consensus," and the main advocate for free trade in the region.

As the recession worsened, Argentinean stock plummeted, and the unpopular austerity measures became increasingly vicious. Protests spread further across the country. Things climaxed in December 2001 when, grasping for straws, the government decided to try a complicated re negotiation of its debt repayments. Fearful that the entire economic house of cards was going to come tumbling down and that the currency would be devalued, thus wiping out their life savings, the middle classes panicked and withdrew about $135 billion from their bank accounts.

Fearing that a run on the banks would sink the economy, the detested finance minister, Domingo Cavallo, announced sweeping restrictions limiting the amount of money Argentineans could withdraw from their accounts. Known as the corralito, these measures included a monthly limit of $1000 on

tunes instead of dull political chanting; often they include the key slogan of this movement: que se vayan todos, they all must go, meaning that the ENTIRE political class goes, every politician from every party, the supreme court, the IMF, the multinational corporations, the banks — everyone out so the people can decide the fate of this economically crippled country themselves.

Our friend Eva tells us that the movement has lost some of its momentum over the last few weeks. We admit to being surprised by how small this crowd is — having imagined the cacerolazos to be enormous. But as we're thinking this, we reach a crossroads. To our right we see another crowd, perhaps twice as big as ours, coming towards us, waving and cheering. We continue for a few more blocks, and on the next street corner another stream of people flows out from the underground station, singing and jumping up and down as it merges with our group, another junction and yet more people come towards us.

We began as 50, grew to a hundred or more, then we were two hundred, then five, then a thousand, two thousand, perhaps more. Rivers of people pouring into each other, growing bigger and bigger, rising to a roaring, banging torrent as we near the final destination, the Plaza de Mayo, where the presidential palace, the Pink House, stands protected behind police lines and barricades.

Rivers of Sound

15th Feb. 2002

Our friends tell us to meet them for tonight's cacerolazo in the cafe of the Popular University of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. The place is an enormous social centre, right opposite the national congress building, and is run by the well-known mothers of the disappeared, whose courageous actions brought to the attention of the world the mass disappearances during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983.

Surrounded by shelves crammed with books, journals, and newspapers documenting radical Latin American political struggles, we drink the quintessential Argentinean drink of health and friendship, yerba mate, an extraordinary herbal infusion that increases energy and mental alertness and is believed to contain all of the vitamins necessary to sustain life. The warm drink is served in a gourd with a silver straw and is passed around and shared between friends. No political meeting in Argentina is complete without mate, and some of us wonder whether this seemingly innocuous green twiggy tea is the secret ingredient behind this country's inspirational rebellion.

Night falls, and before long we begin to hear the repetitive rhythm of pot-and-pan banging drift across the square. A small crowd of around fifty people has congregated in the street — they are young, old, rich, poor, smartly dressed, scruffy, but all are armed with spoons, forks, and a whole variety of metal objects to hit: cooking pots, lids, kettles, Coke cans, car parts, biscuit tins, iron bars, baking trays, car keys. The rhythm is high pitched and monotonous, and above it people sing catchy

cash withdrawals in addition to caps on off-shore transfers. With all the facets of the crisis interlocking, the economy was effectively paralyzed.

The IMF freaked out, due to the banking restrictions and the debt repayment plan, which would severely impact foreign banks, as they own 40% of Argentina's debt. They refused to lend any more money, and within weeks Argentina defaulted on its loans, the first time a country had done so in years. From this moment the economy was in free fall. On the 13th of December, a general strike called by major unions brought the country to a grinding halt for 24 hours. Six days later the popular rebellion exploded into the streets, where it remains today.

The Tin Pot Insurrection

December the 19th was the turning point, the day when the Argentinean people said "enough!" The stage was set the day before, when people began looting shops and supermarkets so they could feed their families. The president, Fernando De La Rua, panicked. Twelve years ago, major looting toppled the government, and now, within the Argentinean collective memory, looting is linked to the collapse of regimes. De La Rua declared a state of emergency, suspending all constitutional rights, and banning meetings of more than three people. That was the last straw. Not only did it bring back traumatic memories of the seven year military dictatorship which killed over 30,000 people, but also it meant that the state was taking away the last shred of dignity from a hungry and desperate population — their freedom.

On the evening of December 19th, our friend Ezequiel was on the phone with his brother who lives on the other side of Buenos Aires. They were casually chatting, when his brother suddenly said, "Hang on, can you hear that noise?" Ezequiel strained to hear a kind of clanging sound coming through the receiver." Yes, I can hear something on your side of the city but nothing here." They continued talking, and then Ezequiel paused, and said, "Wait, now I can hear something in my neighborhood, the same sound…" He ran to the window.

People were standing on their balconies banging saucepans, were coming out onto the sidewalks banging pots; like a virulent virus of hope, the cacerolazo, which began as a response to the state of emergency, had infected the entire city. Before the president's televised announcement of the state of emergency was over, people were in the streets disobeying it. Over a million people took part in Buenos Aires alone, banging their pots and pans and demanding an end to neoliberal policies and corrupt governments. That night the finance minister resigned, and over the next 24 hours of street protest, plainclothes policemen killed seven demonstrators in the city, while 15 more were killed in the provinces. The president resigned shortly thereafter, and was evacuated from the presidential palace by helicopter.

Within a fortnight four more governments fell. Argentina was now set on a major high-speed collision course, with the needs and desires of its people on one side, and the demands of the IMF, the inept government, and global capitalism on the other.

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Que se vayan todos! — Out with them all!
Argentina's Popular Rebellion
2002

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not jumping is a banker, whoever is not jumping is a thief…" When this dies down, everyone casually exits the lobby and moves on to the next bank, less than fifty yards up the street.

These kind of tactics have become archetypes of contemporary protest: the shattered glass, graffiti smeared across bank walls, the corporate symbols of capital destroyed. Images like these have been imbedded in our imagination over the past few years, placed there by the mega-machine of mainstream media in its attempt to divide, discredit, and attack the growing anti-capitalist movement, which is increasingly referred to as "terrorist thugs", "violent anarchists," and "mindless mob." From London to Genoa, via Seattle, Prague, and Québec City, it has been the same story, the same images, the same rituals of symbolic destruction, played out over and over again; a high drama which effectively sells newspapers when splashed across the front page, and which serves to distract from the real issues at hand. However, here in Buenos Aires, things are very, very, different.

For one thing, it was impossible to tell the demonstrators from the passersby. Men in suits and ties with briefcases in one hand and hammers in the other, women with gold bracelets, hand bags, and high heels sharing cans of spray paint, anonymous suits on their lunch break joining the fracas and then melting back into the crowd. Walking through the pedestrian zone was astonishing — not only was it impossible to tell who was who, but also, businesses remained open, leaving their doors and windows open, fearless of looting or damage, as it was perfectly clear that the targets were the banks and nothing but the banks. Even McDonald's, usually having the honor of being the first to lose its windows, left their door open, solely guarded by the customary single private security guard.

Another major difference is that this is not the black bloc — in fact there are no hooded sweatshirts to be seen. No one is masked, although one woman covers her face with a news-

paper and large sunglasses, understandable if you've survived the disappearance of 30,000 of your fellow citizens. The spirit of "militant" (and often, macho) clandestinity is completely absent. It is broad daylight — while the bank is being trashed, shoppers are buying tennis shoes next door, and the handful of police, unable to do anything, stand idly, watching sheepishly. This is the most open, accountable, and disciplined property damage (one can hardly call it a riot when the police don't fight back) that we've ever witnessed. It's also probably the most surreal. If one must call these people a bloc, and why not, as they move and act as one, maybe "bourgeois bloc" would suit them best.

The ahorristas, or savers, hold their demonstrations three times a week. On the day we followed them, 17 banks were "visited." Before meeting them, it was difficult to imagine women with shopping bags and high heels kicking at corporate windows, huge lipstick grins spreading as they watched the glass shatter into thousands of pieces. That day they also surrounded every armored security van transporting cash from bank to bank that they came upon and covered each one in graffiti, while men in pin striped suits proceeded to unscrew the wheel nuts and others pried open the hood, tearing out wires from the running engines. Soccer moms jumped up and down on top of the vans, smashing anything that could be broken, side mirrors, headlights, license plates, windshield wipers and antennae. For three hours on a Monday afternoon, our understanding of the world was turned on its head, all our preconceptions and stereotypes melted away. "This could be my mom," we kept thinking.

The ahorristas are the upper to lower middle class who have had their life savings frozen by the government-imposed corralito. Dressed in shirts and ties, pumps and designer sunglasses, they just don't seem the sort who would be smashing up corporate property. They are architects, computer programmers, doctors, housewives, accountants, and even

bank employees, one of whom, dressed in a business suit and holding a wrench and a metal bowl, explained, “It’s not just the banks who are thieves, it’s the government with the corporations. They confiscated the money we had in the bank. They stole it.” She pauses, and then shakes her fist. “I am very angry!”

And yet the ahorristas are not simply the selfish petit bourgeoisie, worried only about their own money. Their struggle has broken out of the enclosure of self-interest, and has begun to encompass a critique of much of the social system. They have publicly allied themselves to the piqueteros and many take part in the assemblies . “A lot more than just the government must change here,” says Carlos, a computer programmer, who has painted slogans all over his suit. His words echo those of the piquetero, Alejandro: “Us, the piqueteros, and all the people who are fighting, are struggling for social change. We do not believe in the capitalist neoliberal system anymore.”

Predicting the Unpredictable

The repudiation of the politicians and the economic elites is complete," says José Luis Coraggio, the rector of a university in Buenos Aires who is active in the movement. "None of them who are recognized can walk the streets without being insulted or spat upon. It is impossible to predict what will happen. Next month, or next week, Duhalde could be deposed, we could be in a state of chaos, or we could be building a new country that breaks with neoliberal and capitalist orthodoxy."

Breaking with capitalist orthodoxy is what the IMF and the supporters of global capitalism most fear. Last year Fidel Castro caused a diplomatic storm when he accused Argentina of "licking the Yankee boot." Currently that boot is held over Argentina's face and will undoubtedly start kicking if the government does not find a way to please the demands of global capital, and get back to the business of licking again.

However, the government is between a rock and a hard place — even if it had an iota of legitimacy within Argentinean society, which it clearly doesn't, it could not possibly please both the hopes of the citizens and the demands of capital as enforced by the IMF. So what can it do?

Traditional remedies seem worthless, as the country's currency is steadily plummeting in value on the foreign exchange markets. People are queuing outside money changing shops for hours, desperate to change their pesos into dollars, before their cash becomes worthless. The government, in yet another desperate attempt to appear in control, put restrictions on the exchange rate, but this further infuriated the IMF because it is another artificial control of the markets. In response, Doug

Smith, a Wall Street analyst, said, "The only thing that's going to stop this is for them to come up with some announcements that are credible and get the IMF behind them instead of trying to put Band-Aids on every situation." Yet there are no credible announcements to be made, and the wounds are too deep for Band-Aids.

A certain kind of language has become common currency recently. The head of the IMF, Horst Koehler, has declared that "… without pain, [Argentina] won't get out of this crisis." President Bush called on Argentina to make some "tough calls" before even thinking of the much-desired financial aid, and President Duhalde himself said that things are going to get a lot worse before they get better.

Is this tough talk laying the groundwork for a military coup? After all, Argentina has had its fair share of these over the last century. But given the residual illegitimacy of the military, stemming from the decades of dictatorships, it seems that this option is unlikely, and besides, no one wants to take power and inherit the current situation, not even the military. In fact, it seems that there may be dissent their ranks — one officer told reporters, "Even if the situation turns to anarchy or civil war, if they ask me to intervene, my principal concern will be making sure my orders will be obeyed by my men."

More likely than another coup, or CIA-funded force invading to "restore order" (common practice in Latin American history), another form of outside intervention will be attempted. "Somebody has to run the country with a tight grip," write two professors of economics in a Financial Times article brilliantly entitled, "Argentina cannot be trusted." The article goes on to suggest that Argentina "must surrender its sovereignty on all financial issues," it must accept "…radical reform and foreign, hands-on control and supervision of fiscal spending, money printing, and tax administration," preferably from a "…board of foreign central bankers," from "…small disinterested countries." To phrase it another way, it would be like Belgian, Danish, and

Swiss bankers coming in to run the British Central Bank and Inland Revenue Service.

Despite shocking poll results saying that 47% of the population agrees that large parts of Argentina's government should be entrusted to international experts, there is such distrust in banks that it seems unlikely that the arrival of more foreign bankers will calm people's nerves. As Enrique Garcia, president of the Andean Development Bank, said recently, "People in the streets feel that instead of being part of the solution, the banking sector is part of the problem."

The spirit on the streets and in the assemblies is that people can govern themselves. Another poll showed that one in three people had attended an assembly, and that 35% say the assemblies constitute "a new form of political organization." The spirit of direct democracy and self-organization has never felt as strong as it did as we watched the assemblies unfold in the long, warm Buenos Aires evenings. President Duhalde may say, "It is impossible to govern with assemblies," and believe that "the democratic way to organize and participate is through voting," but the people of Argentina have taught themselves through practice the real meaning of democracy, and the vacuous words of politicians now fall on deaf ears.

One evening, after attending his local assembly, a middle aged man who was active in the resistance against the military dictatorship, turned to us, and said in a soft, confident voice, "In the last month we have achieved more than we did in forty years. In four short weeks we have given ourselves enough hope to last us another forty years."

So a choice does exist, despite the government's blind adherence to the demands of the IMF. Argentina can choose between sovereignty and occupation, between the local desire of people and the global demands of capital, between democracy and empire, between life and money, between hope and despair.

minister of economy resigned. In an emergency press conference, Duhalde declared "Banks will have to open again and God knows what will happen then. Banks cannot be closed permanently. It would be absurd to think of a capitalist system without banks."

It may be absurd to think of a capitalist system without banks, but it is equally absurd to believe in the continuation of the present global system. Perhaps the most realistic thing to imagine at the beginning of this already war-torn century, is a system free of capitalism, one without banks, without poverty, without despair, a system whose currency is creativity and hope, a system that rewards cooperation rather than competition, a system that values the will of the people over the rule of the market. One day we may look back at the absurdity of the present and remember how the people of Argentina inspired us to demand the impossible, and invited us to build new worlds which spread outwards from our own neighborhoods.

John Jordan and Jennifer Whitney, May Day 2002

John Jordan is an artist, activist, and writer; he worked with London Reclaim the Streets (1995–2001) and has just given up the security of a teaching job to immerse himself in the popular rebellion in Argentina.

Jennifer Whitney is an activist, writer, and musician who spends much of her life traveling and attempting to ensure that the process of destroying capitalism is fun and creative. She works with the Black Cross Health Collective in Portland and drums with the Infernal Noise Brigade, a radical marching band based in Seattle

There is a joke currently circulating the Japanese banking community, that goes: "What's the difference between Japan and Argentina ?" "About eighteen months." These bankers well know that the economic situation in Argentina will occur elsewhere, and that it is inevitable that the tug of war between people's desires for a better life and the demands of global capital will result in explosions across the planet. A recent report by the World Development Movement documents 77 separate incidents of civil unrest in 23 countries, all relating to IMF protests, and all occurring in the year 2001. From Angola to Nepal to Columbia to Turkey, the same cracks are appearing in the neoliberal "logic," and people are resisting. A dozen countries are poised to be the "next Argentina," and some of them may be a lot closer to home than we ever imagined.

We need to be prepared, not only to resist, but to find ways to rebuild our societies when the economic crisis hits. If the popular rebellion in Argentina succeeds, it could show the world that people are able to live through severe economic crisis and come out the other side, not merely having survived, but stronger, and happier for struggling for new ways of living.

As this goes to print, the economic crisis in Argentina continues to spiral out of control. Having succeeded in winning legal battles against the government (setting legal precedent that ricochets around the globe) and recovering their savings from banks, thousands of depositors are withdrawing their money from the banking system as fast as they can. In recent days a judge has sent a police contingent and a locksmith to a branch of HSBC to recover a claimant's savings, while the vault of a branch of Banco Provincia was opened with the aid of a blowtorch. With the banking system about to go belly up, the government decided to close all banks for an "indefinite holiday." When the IMF refused again to loan more money and the Argentinean congress threw out a bill that proposed converting the frozen bank savings into IOU government bonds, the new

Watch this Space

15th Feb. 2002

When we first landed in Buenos Aires, we were immediately searching for signs of the insurrection. Would this airport feel any different from any other? Would the streets be clogged with traffic, or with crowds? Was the garbage still being collected and the mail delivered? Never having been in a country in the midst of a mass social rebellion, we wondered what would appear different in everyday life.

Riding into the city, we got our first clue. The barren stretches of highway that link cities with airports, so similar all over the world, are always flanked by rows of large billboards, advertising the staples of international business — Visa cards, mobile phones, hotels, airlines. This was true on this sterile strip of land, but something was different.

Over half the billboards were completely bare, with huge white spaces where adverts would have been. There was something really beautiful about them, as they stood enormous in their emptiness, drained of the poisonous images of consumption, yet seductive in their nothingness, freed from commerce, and filled with possibility. They somehow stood for the space of change that this country is undergoing, they spoke of the pause, the blank sheet of paper waiting to be filled; they were the space from which a society could begin to imagine something different, the space from which people could begin to put dreams into action.

Part 2

ance of seeing its desires and aspirations being lived on a daily basis. The Zapatista autonomous municipalities in Chiapas are a kind of model, but are firmly rooted in indigenous culture, are small enclaves within a larger state, and are largely unexportable. Argentina, however, is an entire society undergoing transformation. It is a model that is much easier for the movements, especially those of the global North, to imagine occurring at home.

However, the movement in Argentina is in danger of isolation; without the security and the mutual inspiration of international solidarity, it will suffer greatly. The mainstream press has mostly ignored the situation since the December riots, and most people we met felt that the world was unaware of their plight. For once, no one was chanting "the whole world is watching," because of course, it is in the interest of capitalism's defense team to ensure that we don't get to watch, don't get to see what's really going on. Although many anticapitalists worldwide have said "Thank god for Argentina," as we've had our hopes rekindled in the dark days post 9–11, most of the people on the streets of Argentina have no idea that they've provided such widespread optimism.

If Chiapas was the place from which the seeds of the first round of this movement blew, then Argentina could well be where those seeds land, begin to sprout, and put down roots. We need to find creative ways to support and learn from the rebellion there as we did with the Zapatistas. Some solidarity actions have been taken — the Argentinean embassy in London was occupied and an anarchist flag hung out front, cacerolazos have taken place from Seattle to Sao Paolo, Rome to Nairobi. A chant directed against the World Economic Forum when they met in New York, proclaimed, "They are Enron, we are Argentina!" But much more could be done, more stories could be exchanged, actions coordinated, and visits to the laboratory undertaken.

what is most incredible is that the form of the uprising arose spontaneously, it was not imposed or suggested by activists, but rather, created by ordinary people from the ground up, resulting in a truly popular rebellion that is taking place every day, every week, and including every sort of person imaginable.

Argentina has become a living laboratory of struggle, a place where the popular politics of the future are being invented. In the face of poverty and economic meltdown, people have found enough hope to continue resisting, and have mustered sufficient creativity to begin building alternatives to the despair of capitalism. The global movements can learn much in this laboratory. In many ways it is comparable with the social revolutions of Spain in 1936, of France in May 1968, and more recently, in southern Mexico, with the 1994 uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) — all rebellions which inspired, then and now, millions around the world.

It was a spirit of innovative solidarity that sparked a transformation of the practice of politics, and led us into the first stage of this new evolution of people's movements. The Zapatistas sowed the seeds for creating "rebellions which listen" to local needs and demands, and which are therefore particular to each place, and activists from around the world responded, not only through traditional forms of international solidarity as practiced during the 1970-80s, particularly by Central American solidarity groups, but also through applying the spirit of Zapatismo by "listening" at home.

This network of listening that has occurred between many different cultures has been a cornerstone for the first round of this global movement, as it wove together its multiple differences, forming a powerful fabric of struggle. The second round needs to maintain these networks that nurture mutual inspiration flowing, because no revolution can succeed without hope. But the global anticapitalist movement also needs the reassur-

Returning to Rebellion

2 July. 2002

I arrived back in Argentina the day after the surprise announcement that early elections are going to be held in March next year. "I'm not going to vote, why condemn your candidate to hell? No one can govern this country," exclaims my friend Anabella on the way home from the airport.

It's true — no one in their right mind would want to take on the presidency of a country in such crisis. It's difficult for any politician to appear in public without being hounded by angry citizens, making campaigning a difficult task. General elections in most countries tend towards farce, George W Bush's Florida coup being the most memorable recent example. But in a situation where the hatred for politicians is so endemic that the ex-finance minister, Domingo Cavallo has to employed a decoy in a mask, Argentina's elections are set to be pure burlesque.

Voting is compulsory in Argentina, unless you are 500km from your home on polling day. During the elections of 1999 an anticapitalist group took several hundred people 501km outside of Buenos Aires, to hold debates about direct democracy and register with an extremely perplexed local police force the fact that they weren't going to vote. In last October's congressional elections, a record 22 per cent cast blank votes or abstained — many put pictures of Osama Bin Laden in their voting envelopes. Recent polls have revealed that 63 per cent of Argentineans don't believe in representative democracy. This time around many more will abstain. But breaking the law is commonplace now — even the middle classes, or what's left of them, are regularly refusing to pay taxes, or electricity bills.

There are three serious candidates who are neck a neck in the polls. One of them is a fascinating political paradox — Luis Zamora. Zamora is an ex-Trotskyite who has rejected his political past and has set up a social movement called "Self-determination and Freedom" which is influenced by Zapatismo and Autonomist ideas.

His movement is using the public space opened up by the election process, mainstream media debates and so on, to bring to light the rejection of representation and highlight other forms of power such as the assembleas and direct democracy. When asked what he will do if he is elected, Zamora says he wouldn't last a day and that he doesn't want to be president anyway. "Go self-determine yourself," he says. "Take care of yourself, take it in your own hands, if you don't take it in your own hands, nothing is going to change."

He describes what is happening in Argentina as "a revolution in the heads of millions", a process where the entire country is rethinking representative politics, discovering horizontal ways of organizing and beginning to realise a situation where the "population is doing politics" rather than the politicians. "The population is finding that it is facing itself," he explains, "its culture is to always look above, this is the culture that we all have. This is why this moment is so passionate and beautiful, because it is rethinking this."

Only in Argentina could one have a presidential candidate who does not want to be president and says things like: "the motto of the 'anti-globalization movement' that the resistance to capital be as international as capital itself, is showing a way, that the resistance to the barbarism of capitalism that is today globalized, be global."

police van in Genoa, "We Are Winning," may actually be true. The "crisis of legitimacy" expands exponentially almost daily. Corporations and institutions such as the World Bank and the G8 are constantly trying to appease the growing global uprising, with empty promises of environmental sustainability and poverty reduction.

On May Day, 2002 a new book is being launched by academics who lament, "Today there is an anticapitalist orthodoxy that goes beyond a latent hostility to big business. Its a well-organized critique of capitalism." The book argues that we must "start standing up for capitalism" because it's "the best thing that ever happened to the world," and that "if we want to change the world then we should do it through business," and treat capitalism as a "hero, not a villain." Perhaps a few hours on the streets of Argentina, or a chat with former employees of Enron would show them the true villainy and absurdity of capitalism.

With mainstream commentators falling over themselves to declare that capitalism is good for us and will save the world, it seems clear that the first round of this movement has been a victory. There has been a "…nearly complete collapse of the prevailing economic theory," according to economist James K. Galbraith. But the next round will be the hardest. It will involve applying our critiques and principles to our everyday lives; it will be a stage of working close to home. A stage where mass conflict on the streets is balanced (but not entirely replaced) with creating alternatives to capitalism in our neighborhoods, our towns and cities, our bioregions. This is exactly where Argentina can show us an inspiring way to move forward.

The situation in Argentina contains many elements of the anticapitalist movements: the practice of direct action, self-management and direct democracy; the belief in the power of diversity, decentralization, and solidarity; the convergence of radically different social sectors; the rejection of the state, multinational corporations, and financial institutions. Yet,

fences defended by thousands of riot police. Seeing them on the defensive, having to justify their existence, gave the movements an extraordinary sense of hope.

By identifying the underlying global problem as capitalism, and by developing extraordinary international networks of inspiration in very short amounts of time, it felt almost as though history were speeding up, that perhaps we could succeed in the next phase, the process of imagining and constructing worlds which exist beyond greed and competition. Then, history did what it does best, surprising us all on September 11th when the twin towers were brought down, and it seemed for a while that everything had changed.

Suddenly hope was replaced by the politics of despair and fear. Demonstrations were called off, funding was pulled, and mass backpedaling and distancing occurred within the movement itself. Commentators immediately declared anticapitalism dead. The editor of The Guardian wrote "since September 11th, there is no appetite for [antiglobalization], no interest, and the issues that were all-consuming a few months ago seem irrelevant now." Others suggested that the movement was somehow linked to the terrorists. Clare Short, the UK development minister, stated that the movement's demands were very similar to those of Al-Qaida.

September the 11th forced a reappraisal among activists, particularly in the global North. It challenged us all to take a deep breath, put our rhetoric into practice, and think strategically, and fast. Then three months later, history seemed to resume its accelerated speed, when Argentina erupted, followed closely by the collapse of Enron. It seemed that despite the blindly nationalist, racist, and indefinite "war on terror" to distract the world, neoliberalism was continuing to disintegrate.

Perhaps the biggest challenge the global movements face now is to realize that the first round is over, and that the slogan first sprayed on a building in Seattle and last seen on a burning

Capital Retreats

One of the most visible changes in Buenos Aires since we were last here is the number of "cartoneras". These are the poor who collect paper and cardboard from the streets for recycling. In February we saw a few of them. Now on nearly every block of the city there are groups of cartoneras scouring the waste bins and bags of rubbish with their bare hands to find scraps of paper or cardboard to sell to recycling companies. As darkness falls the streets are filled with small groups of them pushing shopping trolleys loaded up with enormous white bags bulging with paper. In the morning they are gone. All that remains are trails of rubbish spilling from the bin bags that have been opened.

Over half the country's population has now fallen below the poverty line. Hunger continues to spread to places where it was previously unheard of and unemployment is so endemic that there is a now a popular TV game show where contestants compete for a job. Sony and Time Warner are currently trying to outbid each other in an effort to buy the show and take it worldwide.

Banking restrictions remain, and the ahorristas continue to pressurise the courts and attack banks to get their savings back. Now they even have a leader, a trashy TV comedian turned political activist. Banks are still protected by steel sheeting. But the repeated visits of the ahorristas armed with their hammers and kitchen utensils have left thousands of dents and marks on the steel, vivid traces of continuing rituals of resistance.

The Red Global del Trueque, the barter network, is expanding all the time. It now has 7 million people participating in

it, credits are even accepted on some railway lines and many families rely on it for 90 per cent of their needs.

Businesses are closing down everyday. In many cases the directors, unable to pay debts, simply disappear. This happened to some of the factories that are now being self-managed by the workers. They literally came into work one morning to find no managers and after waiting several days for the management to turn up, decided to run the factories themselves.

A book written by participants in the neighbourhood assemblies was being printed at a well-known self-managed printing firm in Buenos Aires when the police arrived to evict the building. A call went out to the local assembly, and literally as the book was coming off the presses they were forcing the police away and securing the building. Across Argentina, capital and the state is in retreat. The spaces that it leaves wide open are rapidly being filled by a multitude of creative social endeavours.

A Post Script for the Global Anticapitalist Movement

Argentina's crisis is fast emerging as a sort of economic Rorschach test, used by economists and theoreticians of all ideological persuasions to prove their point," says the Financial Times. "Opponents of the 'Washington Consensus' say Argentina's experience shows the perils of following the recipes of the IMF. Supporters of free markets say Argentina's experience shows the danger of not opening up [the economy] enough."

Argentina may well prove to be the crisis which irrevocably splits the ever-widening crack in the neoliberal armor, especially if things continue to unravel in other parts of Latin America. Recent events in Venezuela, and the possibility of left wing gains in this year's Brazilian presidential elections, point to a shift away from the "Washington Consensus" across much of the region.

The last decade has seen the increasing delegitimazation of the neoliberal model, as a movement of movements has sprung up on every continent, challenging the seemingly unstoppable expansion of capital. From Chiapas to Genoa, Seattle to Porto Alegre, Bangalore to Soweto, people have occupied the streets, taken direct action, practiced models of self-organization, and celebrated a radical spirit of autonomy, diversity, and interdependence. The movements seemed unstoppable, as mass mobilizations got bigger, more diverse populations converged, and the World Bank, WTO, IMF, and G8 were forced to meet on mountain tops, protected by repressive regimes, or behind

by the seams, a nowhere-land, a wasteland of wasted lives and wasted futures and yet here there is a spirit of creativity and struggle that is so strong, so solid and so irresistible.

The piqueteros know that you gain nothing by winning power. They don't want to take over the crumbling centre, they want to bring down all fences, and reclaim the edges, bringing life that's worth living back into their community. "We are building power, not taking it," is how Martin described it.

Whenever I asked people what had changed in their lives since they became involved in the MTD, they told me that the loneliness and isolation of unemployment and poverty had disappeared. They spoke of the power of togetherness and community. Tanya said to me, "The biggest change was the relationship with other people in the neighbourhood, the development of friendship and the possibility of sharing… When you're on a road block and you have nothing to eat, the people next to you share their food. Now I feel I'm living in a large family, my neighbours are my family."

The fear and mistrust sown by the military dictatorship destroyed connections between people and since then the dictatorship of the markets has built even more fences and separations, but the fences erected between people are now being pulled down by the strength of sharing.

When I asked Tanya, weather she was aware of any past examples of self-management and autonomy — the Diggers, the Paris Commune etc, she replied: "No, I don't know these things. All I know is that I have lived here, in the neighbourhood, all my life and I see that people don't have proper homes, or food to put on their table, or streets that aren't muddy tracks — and I don't know what name to give to what we are doing here, all I can call it is "social change ."

John Jordan, Higham, Kent, 27 Aug. 2002

Some individuals names have been changed

Social Creativity Advances

It's mid-winter here, although you can hardly call it winter — it feels more like a mild British spring. But partly due to the cold weather, the out door assembleas have grown smaller and many have decided to take over buildings, turning them into neighbourhood social centres which provide a permanent presence and meeting space. All kind of buildings are being occupied, and the idea is spreading rapidly.

In the Villa Urquiza neighbourhood they have occupied an old pizzeria. They serve a free meal everyday and free tea to Cartoneras who use the local station to return in the early hours of the morning to their homes in the sprawling suburbs. A large board in the street outside acts as a community notice board, where people can advertise any local jobs going, or share skills and neighbourhood information.

Several banks have been occupied. In Parque Lezama Sur, the assembly has occupied the abandoned Banco de Mayo. When I visited, there were children using the enormous steel door of the bank vault as a goal for a wild indoor game of football. In one corner people were cooking soup and a 'protest art' workshop was taking place in the main lobby. Videos being shown in one of the back rooms, showed the day the space was occupied, local people, young and old, forcing open the doors of the bank and rapidly transforming a space of private commerce into a collective space of cooperation and creativity. Bunches of wires from the banks old computer network hang down from the ceiling and someone had attached the banks mouse mats to all of them. Printed on the mats the banks

corporate slogan announced: “ Banco de Mayo, changing for you.”

bread on occupied land is an act that is so filled with meaning, and symbolism, that few would miss its significance.

Don Quixote ,the 16th century tale of the delusional old man who thinks he is a knight errant travelling across Spain to right all wrongs, fighting windmills he believes to be giants, with Sancho Panza at his side, an illiterate but shrewd peasant primarily interested in eating and drinking, illustrates these false dichotomies perfectly. The differences between imagination and realism, fiction and reality are shown to be illusions throughout the book.

“Don Quixote is the best book of political theory,” says Subcommandante Marcos, and apparently the book is always at his side. The most effective political practices are those that dissolve dichotomies and play with paradox. Zapatismo is a wonderful example of a practise where the beauty of symbols and the necessity of survival merge.

In Martin’s laugh and parting words I see someone with a profound vision. An insurrectionary imagination that sees the poetry in a roaring bread oven, recognises the beauty in the fences coming down, and ultimately understands that from all this comes dignity. Dignity which all of us need more than any loaf of bread.

And when I look around me, in this landscape of deprivation I realise that the most beautiful thing here is exactly that, it is peoples dignity. Dignity that battles against exclusion. Dignity that is just as powerful and as beautiful as any colour, or poem, or song.

Those who live in Admiralte Brown have been forced to the edges of a system that only cares about the centre, only cares about those who can produce, who can contribute to the monster of economic growth that is choking the planet. Many have talked about the energy and creativity of the global movement of movements coming from the seams of society, erupting from the margins, from those who are without — the lesses — the landless, jobless, paperless, homeless. Here we are surrounded

the FTAA is abolished, because it's too much risk with no direct reward," he explained. "When you do an action with a pragmatic end, even if you fail the first time, then the next time you try harder. No one would be willing to risk so much for an abstraction."

This same dichotomy came up again the following day when I am shown the indoor bakery. On the wall are beautiful ceramic tiles, a blast of colour amongst the dusty greys and browns of Admiralte Brown. "How beautiful," I say.

"Yes," says Astor, "a ceramicist made them for us and gave us a furnace too."

"Great," I think, imagining the piqueteros making tiles and giving their houses some brightness.

"But we are trying to work out how to transform the furnace into a bread oven — we don't need tiles." He takes a deep intake of breath. "Trouble is it burns too hot."

I don't remember who it was who asked the provocative question, "What is more beautiful? The paintings of the Sistine chapel, or the sight of carts in the morning bringing bread to the poor?". My answer was always the later, yet I always want to resist the reduction of political acts to those of necessity. From my position of priveledge having never experienced the reality of poverty, it is easy to critique the politics of utilitarianism, feeling it determines limits of change before these limits are even known, that it strangles the spontaneity and creativity of radical action, that it dulls the imagination of a better future.

With these conflicts swirling around my head I say goodbye to Martin. "When I come back to Argentina I'll be able to speak good Spanish." I promise him. "Great," he laughs, "then you will be able to read Don Quixote."

Don Quixote — how could I forget! Suddenly his parting comment dissolves the false dichotomy that had muddled my thinking. It's not a choice between bread OR beauty. The dichotomy between imagination and reason, bread and roses doesn't exist. If your hungry bread IS beautiful and baking

Killing Piqueteros

The Piquetero movement has been growing across the country and despite a media campaign of criminalisation and warnings from the president that the government was no longer going to tolerate any more road blocks, a large mobilization took place on the 26th of June cutting some major arteries into Buenos Aires. After dispersing the crowd with teargas, rubber and real bullets, the police hunted piqueteros throughout the city, often firing from the back of cruising pick up trucks. What followed was the cold blooded murder of two organisers, Darrio Santillán and Maximiliano Costequi, both in their early twenties and both from the most radical piquetero network. Darrio was shot in the back at close range while he was helping Maxi who had been shot in the chest . By the end of the day 160 people had been arrested and over a hundred injured. It seems that the whole thing was set up as a stage managed confrontation by the state, but it failed to break the movement and the response from every part the popular rebellion was incredible. Thirty thousand took to the streets in support of the piqueteros, and within days the president went on TV to apologise. The head of the secret service, the minister of justice and the chief of Buenos Aires Police were forced to resign and the police officers involved in the operation were put in jail. Days later Duhalde announced the early elections, brought forward by nearly a year, a clear sign that he is hanging onto power by his finger tips and that in Argentina it is people in the streets who are making politics.

Beneath the Masks

17th July 2002

The bus drops us beside a dirt track which is dotted with perilous pot holes filled with rubbish. The sulphurous smell of raw sewage rises from shallow channels of grey water that run alongside. We have arrived in Admiralte Brown, a huge sprawling neighbourhood somewhere beyond the southern edges of Buenos Aires. It feels like a hybrid of shanty town, wasteland and a crumbling soviet housing estate, a place where hope is in short supply and jobs are even fewer — unemployment runs at over 80 per cent here. Yet this is a stronghold of one of the most radical groups of Piqueteros, part of the Annibal Veron network that was targeted on the 26th of June when Dario and Maxi were murdered. This network is itself is part of the larger Movimento Trabajero Desocupado (MTD — Movement of Unemployed Workers).

A small, hand-painted sign marks the entrance to the MTD bakery. We pick our way through a pile of bicycles parked in the passageway which leads to a courtyard where about twenty people are sitting in a circle taking part in a workshop. Most are in their early twenties — some a lot younger, a few a lot older. Despite the occasional barking dogs, the gusts of wind, crowing cocks and small children running between the chairs, the participants seem intensely focused as Lola, the energetic young piquetero facilitator, hands out strips of paper. Stuck on the rough concrete wall in front of them is a large sheet of flip-chart paper divided into two columns, the left labelled: "MTD", the right one: "CAPITALIST SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION".

and land by capital. It was the 18th century philosopher, Jean-Jaques Rousseau who said of the first man who enclosed a piece of land as his own, "If only someone had pulled up the stakes and cried to his fellows: 'You are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody!"

Unfortunately no one cried out then, but stakes have been pulled and fences been falling for hundreds of years — from the 16th Century Diggers to the assaults on the security fences during the actions against Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) in Quebec and G8 in Genoa.

The image of fences being pulled down and the posts being turned into something practical strikes me as a beautiful metaphor for the transformation of the enclosures of capital into creative autonomous tools of social revolution. A transformation which involves people beginning to build the life that they want and preparing to defend it rather than simply protesting against what they don't want.

Most of my life has been an attempt at finding a space where poetic acts and pragmatic solutions merge, a space between the imagination of art and the social transformation of activism, between utilitarianism and utopia, symbols and survival.

But I realise that it is perhaps a luxury to dwell on the beauty of metaphors when faced with hunger. Here fences were torn down and were transformed by people, most of whom had never even heard of Quebec, Genoa, or the Diggers, but who simply knew how to make the best use of a redundant fence.

Earlier, Martin had illustrated some of the difference between the symbolic nature of protest and the pragmatic nature of social revolution. He told me that they had once used a banner against the FTAA during a road block, but that they couldn't do an action against the FTTA itself. He re-emphasised the fact that the road blocks are specific tools to get specific demands. "You couldn't do one to demand that

Transforming the Fences

After the assembly, Martin takes us across a football pitch that has probably never seen grass and whose goals are so rusty that they seem to have been bent by the wind that blasts across this place. He shows us the "Copa de Leche", the project which distributes milk to children. It is in a squatted building next to an occupied plot of land.

They took the fences down that surrounded the land. All that remains of them are a few broken concrete posts. The rest have been cut up and used to build a brand new oven for baking bread. The old fence posts are literally what makes up the base of a huge roaring outdoor oven standing on the edge of this deserted football pitch and surrounded by newly dug vegetable plots. On the side of the oven one could just make out the words 'Cambio Social' — social change — roughly painted there the day before by young piqueteros, trying out their paint brushes during the puppet-making workshop.

Two huge guys are stoking the fire and as we arrive we see them pull out a tray of freshly baked bread. Their faces erupt with pleasure as they set eyes on the steaming loaves, the first batch ever to come out of the oven. They pass them to an elderly woman who takes them into the building, only to return a few seconds later scowling and handing them back, saying they haven't been cooked enough, that the dough inside is still raw. The men hang their heads with bruised pride and hastily stuff the tray back into the oven.

Fences coming down has been one of the most powerful images of emancipatory movements throughout history, a perfect practise and metaphor for challenging the enclosure of life

The workshop is about to begin. As if on cue Astor bounces into the courtyard carrying a basket of warm doughnuts which he passes around. Astor works in the collective bakery. Short and stocky, dressed in bright colours — and occasionally nicknamed 'monkey' — his wide face continuously beams a cheeky smile. He sits down munching a doughnut and joins the workshop.

"What's the difference between a bakery here and a bakery in the capitalist system?" asks Lola. "Who are we producing for here?"

"We produce for our neighbours," pipes up Yvette, a grey-haired woman in her fifties, her brown face furrowed like a deeply ploughed field, "and to teach ourselves to do new things, to learn to produce for ourselves".

"For whom do the bakers work in a capitalist system?" Lola continues.

"For the managers, for a corporation," replies Maria, who sports a silver ring in her nose.

"The people working in bakeries are people like us," says Astor, "but they have to work long hours, often up to 3am in the morning when the dough goes in the ovens, they work their bodies to the bone."

Miguel, slouched in the corner and wearing an Iron Maiden sweat shirt, butts in: "And yet the people who work hardest get the least reward, they work in subhuman conditions, earn nothing and continue to work. But we produce so that everyone can live better." For a moment the group falls into contemplative silence.

Each strip of paper that Lola handed out has a statement written on it about either the self-organised collective "MTD" form of production or capitalist forms of production. The idea is they attach their strip of paper on the appropriate column of the flip chart and explain why they think it should go there.

A glum looking guy with long shaggy hair in a polyester black and red Nike track-suit stands up first. He reads out his strip of paper.

"The most important aim is to make profits." He shakes his head.

"In the capitalist system, they don't care about peoples health or nature, to them all that is interesting is to make money. We produce for the needs of our neighbours, we all need a little bit of each other, we need each other."

Yvette is next. "Only one person makes decisions." She slaps the strip onto the "capitalist" column. "We decide things together here, and the money we make we share between all of us…"

One by one they all take turns, standing up, eloquently explaining the ways the different systems are organised and discussing each point at length.

Suddenly two cats start to fight in the tree that overhangs the courtyard. Tanya, a punky 21 year old who wears a chain and padlock around her neck, and is in charge of the piqeteros Security, throws a stone at the screaming cats, who scamper across the roof tops.

The workshop winds down with a long discussion about the problems of working collectively. They discuss the issue of some people in the groups who didn't participate in the process of contributing part of their income to the collective and how the assemblea after much discussion decided to expel them. Then one young woman explains how she is confused about how to manage her handicraft work group in a non-capitalist way. "We work five days making things, it takes so much time, materials are expensive, we have to pay for travel to the markets at weekends to sell stuff. It's so difficult." She worries that she is falling into capitalist ways by selling things so far away from the neighbourhood, things that people don't really 'need'. The group comforts her, telling her that there are different ways of producing things, that some compromises al-

Astor's mother had joined the movement before him. He had a job selling loans for new cars, and every time he saw his elderly mother on TV, masked up and blocking the highways, he would cringe with embarrassment. But now no one buys cars and the job disappeared. So one day he went to the piquetero assembly out of curiosity, and he saw how women, many of them elderly, many of whom had never had the possibility to make decisions or express important things about their lives, were able to put up their hand and talk freely and people would listen to them. They would propose good ideas and then they would then go into the streets for their children's sake. Astor has three children and soon he realised that he had to join the movement too.

Pillars of the Movement

After lunch we go to one of the two weekly MTD assemblies which are happening simultaneously in Admiralte Brown that afternoon. Besides piles of burnt plastic and a ruined wall with a circle A and the words "False Euphoria" graffitied onto it, a group of 70 or more people stand in a makeshift circle. Raising their voices against the cold biting wind, they openly discuss the problems of the last week, share information and make plans for the following days.

A key event will be next week's commemoration of the June repression. Activists from the United States, part of Art and Revolution, one of the key groups involved in the Direct Action Network that Shut down the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in 1999 in Seattle, have been working with the piqueteros here over the last few days building giant puppets out of cardboard for the commemoration events. A young woman proudly presents her puppet, attached to a long stick which she holds high in the air.

It's mostly women who do the speaking at the assemblea. Earlier, Anna had told to me how woman are the ones who are hit hardest by unemployment. When there is no food to put on the table, no clothes to dress the children in, it is they who are at the sharp end of poverty. Often the men feel rejected and are paralysed by the loss of identity which follows unemployment and in many cases it has been the women who have been the first to get out of the home into the streets to take part in piquetes. "Women's struggle is the pillar of the movement," she tells me.

ways have to be made, and suggesting that she tries selling stuff at the craft fair run by the social movement the Madres de Placa de Mayo.

"Do these principles we have been talking about really happen in the MTD ?" asks Lola, provocatively. Her extraordinary facilitation had meant everyone in the group has contributed to the debates.

"When we work together there are always some problems, not everyone is used to common work." says Yvette.

"We are so used to a capitalist work system," exclaims Maria. "My father worked in a capitalist system, so did his father — we are all so used to being told what to do. For many people it's difficult to have any initiative, they just wait to be given orders. And you know what?" she continues, grinning. "We still have some authoritarians in our group ! I'm not going to name names." Everyone bursts into laughter.

As I sit there witnessing this extraordinary workshop, I try to imagine a similar group of young unemployed people in my own country, Britain, on a crumbling housing estate at 9.30 on a weekday morning. I wonder if they could ever have such an engaged and keenly developed critique of the system that had excluded and marginalized them so utterly from society.

The Strength of Sharing

Martin is in his thirties, short, with dark piercing eyes and sharp features. He founded the Admiralte Brown piqueteros group with Dario. Inspired by the nearby Solano group, one day they put up posters around the neighbourhood advertising a piquetero assembly. That was two and a half years ago — things are now very different. The group now has two sections within Admiralte Brown which meet in four different assemblies, with over 200 participants. The national Piquetero movements have become the key energy behind the popular rebellion that has spread across Argentina and Dario is dead, shot by the police three weeks ago.

Martin is the main person showing us around and introducing us to people here. His commitment, like everyone in the group, to non-hierarchical organising is total. He seems to have a leadership role that is not about coercion or command but about networking and storytelling. He displays a potent humility yet has a charismatic confidence which enables him to make connections between people, and he has a great knack for telling inspiring tales.

As we walk through the sprawling district, he lists the different activities that they have self-organised: "We have a group building sewage systems and another that helps people who only have tin roofs on their houses to put proper roofs on. There is a press group which produces our own media and makes links with the outside media. We have the 'Copa de Leche' (cup of milk) which provides a glass of milk to children every day. There's the bakery you just saw, and we're building

But it's the constructive aspects of the movement which they want to show to the world: the self organisation, the direct democracy and the numerous neighbourhood projects, the bakery, the ropero and so on. As in many protest movements it is these constructive elements which are so difficult to make visible. The powerful current in our culture which obscures constructive, creative situations with the spectacle of conflict and confrontation runs deep.

The murders were less than 20 days ago, and yet no one seems paralysed by despair: "If another companero had been killed, Dario would have kept up the struggle, in fact he would have worked even harder… we have to continue to fight for food and projects — if we give up, we will have nothing," says Tanya.

at individuals at close range came out. Two enormous demonstrations of support with people from every social strata have taken place since then and the piquetero movement itself is continuing to grow rapidly. "Since the 26th, links to the neighbourhood Assemblies movement have grown, they realise that we are not that different from them" explained Anna, one of the editors of the local MTD news letter.

The murders and mass arrests of the 26th changed a lot for the Annibal Verron network: "None of us are born MTD activists, we have to become one, we are a new movement," Maria explained to me, "since the deaths we have two priorities — to change the way we organise so as to dismantle the fear of repression that is growing and to have food for everyone in the movementî. A big debate is taking place about the role of masking up during actions, and it seems a decision has been made to stop wearing masks for the time being.

The challenge is to present the movement as unemployed workers, first, piqueteros, second. The piquete is just a tactic — though an amazingly successful one. "Direct action gets the goods," was the slogan of the Wobblies at the turn of the 20th century, and for the piqueteros that is certainly true. They block the roads, demand a specific number of 'plan trabajor', the unemployed subsidies, and more often than not get them from the local government — about 40 pounds a month per person. They have also used the tactic to back various demands, including getting food from supermarkets.

Last Christmas they picketed eight blocks, closing down six supermarkets in one go. They demanded food for the neighbourhood's Christmas dinner. Lines of supermarket workers, who had been threatened with losing their jobs if they did not comply, protected the supermarkets behind a line of shopping trolleys and security guards. Eventually the Piqueteros convinced the management that it would be cheaper for them to give them food than to remain closed for the entire day.

vegetable gardens and a library. What we are about to see is the Ropero, the common clothes store."

Another wooden sign welcomes us to the MTD Ropero. We walk into a small room where half a dozen women are sitting around a table. Behind them a set of shelves has a few clothes folded on it. One woman is sewing by hand.

They greet us warmly and sweet mate is handed around by the Griselda, who shows us her red swollen fingers: "We mend all the clothes by hand," she says, "it hurts my fingers so much, we have no sewing machines."

She explains the function of the ropero. Its role is to distribute clothing to families who can't afford them. MTD people hand out explanatory leaflets, especially on the other side of the neighbourhood which is marginally better off but suffers just as much unemployment. People who have old clothes bring them here, where they are cleaned and mended. Then, twice a month, the Ropero is open for people from the whole neighbourhood to come and take clothes for free.

"How do you avoid people taking more than their fare share?" I ask. "We have simple rules: no more than 3 clothes per person, and we have a book where we write down who has taken what clothes," she says, showing us a neatly written ledger with a dedication to Maxi and Dario written on the inside page. "But the other day a mother came who has ten children, and we didn't have enough to give them all clothes they needed," she sighs.

A collection of objects are stuck to the walls of the room. There is a faded picture of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, a gaudy plastic clock, and next to it a press cutting with the large headline 'AUTOGESTION', a beautiful word that has no direct equivalent in English but means autonomous self-organising, self-management. Beneath it is a hand-written sheet of paper that explains some of the points of principle of the movement. Listed under the "Criteria for work" are such things as: "Don't be a tourist in your groups, don't just sit

and watch"; "Respect others"; "Give voluntary money to the common funds, especially if you get a Plan (unemployment subsidies)" and "Go to the assemblies". Another column explains the criteria for assemblies, including "Give priority to those who don't speak"; "Don't be authoritarian"; "Don't speak for others", and finally, "Criticise , don't complain". Griselda points out the back copies of the Aldmiralte Brown MTD photocopied newsletter also pinned to the wall, telling us that many of the women here cannot read and that every week when the newsletter comes out she reads it to them.

A woman at the end of the table holds up a pair of child's trousers she is working on, pointing to a large rip at the knees. "We don't have any material to make a patch, so we are cutting off the legs and turning them into shorts," she explains.

She then picks out a pair of Nike trousers from the shelf to show us what good condition some of the clothes that she mends are in. As she shows them to us, I wonder about the journey these trousers must have made, from the hands of a sweatshop worker in East Asia, via ships and shops, to Argentina, where they were bought, worn, donated and then mended by another hand, finaly to be given away as part of the project of an anticapitalist movement of unemployed workers.

Building Power

We are invited to have lunch with some of the people who work on the newsletter. They live on the other side of Admiralte Brown where small concrete houses give way to row after row of identical grey apartment blocks.

Over lunch in a small flat which doubles up as the newsletter office, we talk about global networks of resistance and swap stories of struggle and tactical tips. I tell them about the very different kind of roadblocks that I had been involved in with Reclaim the Streets in London. They tell me about the "Queen of the Piquete" fashion show that was put on by queer piqueteros during a road block. The extraordinary image of drag queens dancing through barricades of burning tyres is a hard one to shake.

The next day someone tells me that Carla, the large woman in her late fifties who cooked us lunch is in fact the same person who appears in the middle of the double page spread of the first edition (and this edition) of our Argentina report, pictured sitting in front of burning tyres on blockaded motorway, masked up and wearing mirror shades!

These kind of apocalyptic images are, the overriding public image of the piqueteros. Leading up to the murders of the 26th of July, the mainstream media were manufacturing stories of violence including rumours that some piqueteros were preparing for armed uprisings inspired by leftist guerillas. On the day itself, minutes after the deaths the media reported the police statements which said that the deaths were the result of rivalry between different Piquetero groups, something they had to retract as soon as pictures of the police shooting directly