

From Economic Meltdown to Grassroots Rebellion

An eyewitness account

John Jordan
Jennifer Whitney

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 Rúa, panicked. De La Rúa 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 stood on their balconies banging saucepans and came 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.

The Neighborhoods Rise

Feb 15, 2002

Every Sunday there is an assembly of assemblies, an inter-neighborhood plenary in a park, attended by over 4,000 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 citywide 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 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 8 pm 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."

Popular Economics

Feb. 16, 2002

In the barter markets, another extraordinary example of necessity breeding ingenuity enables Argentines to survive the crisis. We visit the Trueque La Estacion (or The Station Exchange) that takes place twice a week in a community center on the outskirts of the city. 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.

Beware the Bourgeois Block

Feb. 18, 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 Benetton's. 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 pries 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" (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” (thieves) and then join in a longer chant, while jumping ecstatically up and down, waving portfolios and briefcases around. The longer chant translates loosely as “Whoever is 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.

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.

The ahorristas are the upper to lower middle class who have had their life savings frozen by the government-imposed corralito. 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, its 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.

Part Two by John Jordan

Killing Piqueteros

July 2, 2002

The Piquetero movement has been growing across the country and despite a media campaign of criminalization 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 organizers, Darrio Santillan and Maximilian 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, but it failed to break the movement and the response from every part of 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 apologize. 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.

Beneath the Masks

July 17, 2002

The bus drops us beside a dirt track which is dotted with perilous potholes filled with rubbish. We have arrived in Admiralte Brown, a huge sprawling neighborhood somewhere beyond the southern edges of Buenos Aires. 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 part of the larger Movimiento Trabajero Desocupado (MTD — Movement of Unemployed Workers).

A small, hand-painted sign marks the entrance to the MID 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 labeled: “MTD”, the right one: “CAPITALIST SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION.”

The workshop is about to begin.

“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 neighbors,” 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 3 am 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-organized 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 tracksuit 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 neighbors, 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 organized and discussing each point at length.

“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.

The murders and mass arrests of the 26th changed a lot for the Annibal Veron network: 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. They block the roads, demand a specific number of ‘plan trabajar’, 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.

But it’s the constructive aspects of the movement which they want to show to the world: the self-organization, the direct democracy and the numerous neighborhood 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.

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.

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