

Table of Contents

Autonomism in Argentina in a new Governmentality 1

Autonomism in Argentina in a new Governmentality

By Graciela Monteagudo

This essay from interactivist.net goes into detail on many issues behind what went wrong in Argentina and tries to answer the question: 'how did the Argentinean people manage to avoid making a revolution?' This is an interesting update on many of the issues raised in Mute issue 25 <http://www.metamute.org/en/node/411>

Last summer in Mexico, a friend asked me how did the Argentinean people manage to avoid making a revolution? I had just come back from spending time among the social movements there. My answer was grim: cannibalism. The social movements have historically been unable to get together and overcome their differences to create an alternative to capitalism. That is true —but, as another friend gently reminded me later, there is Peronism to take into account.

Nestor Kirchner, a leftist Peronist back in the seventies, could be defined today as the monster child of the December 2001 insurrection. On December 19th and 20th, masses of people protested neoliberal politics. Although they were not able to create powerful decentralized popular structures, the rebellion signaled and created consciousness about the responsibility of the IMF'S structural adjustment for the economic and social crisis. The mass of people that fell under the poverty line (from 10 percent in 1975 to fifty percent in 2002) and the twenty six percent unemployment made the crisis of poverty self-evident, but the explosion of political activity in the months following the uprising created consciousness about the deep causes of the social disaster. Kirchner responded to that clamor. Attempting to offer an institutional solution to those issues he strengthened the State by co-opting the popular organizations and offering what appeared as practical solutions.

Throughout the Carlos Menem years (late eighties-early nineties) the country's resources were sold at wholesale prices to multinational corporations. These corporations immediately downsized their personnel, in some cases leaving 95% of them jobless. This, combined with an IMF policy of "opening the borders" to cheap imports, produced the highest rate of unemployment Argentina had ever experienced. It turned Argentina, a rich country by South American standards, into a poor, deeply dependent nation. The IMF poster child of the nineties collapsed.

Throughout the nineties, the unemployed workers developed strategies to call attention to their plight. Massive road blockades and direct actions spawned a non-hierarchical, horizontally led movement. Fernando De La Rúa, following Menem's presidency, was elected on a platform that promised to change the economic situation. However, his administration followed exactly the same pattern. The December 2001 mass mobilizations and direct actions spawned by the confiscation of the middle classes savings and declaration of the stage of siege by De La Rúa, brought his government down. After two short lived Congress appointed presidencies, Eduardo Duhalde's ended in the Massacre of the Pueyrredon Bridge in Buenos Aires, where hundreds of unemployed workers were injured and two were assassinated by the police —just outside the once proud city of Buenos Aires.

This repression was directed at the Coordinadora Anibal Verón, an autonomist front of MTD's (unemployed workers organizations) that enjoyed massive support of the middle class popular assembly movement. For many of us, this massacre signaled the end of an interesting process that opened mid nineties with the massive road blockades in the interior of the country.

Following the Pueyrredon Massacre the Coordinadora Anibal Veron disbanded and less than a year later nothing was left of it, except for smaller groups of unemployed workers —most of them back to more traditional ways of centralizing power.

The popular assembly movement, suffering under the attacks of the traditional Marxist parties and their own organizing dynamics —at once too open and too sectarian, became smaller and unable to establish the kind of organization that would preserve the autonomy of the different groups involved and distribute power in a egalitarian manner.

Ezequiel Adamovsky (1), an Argentinean activist and academic, sees a number of reasons for the decline of the assemblies. The very openness of their structure became a problem, as anybody could just walk in once and have the same decision power as those who had been organizing in the assembly for a long time. Another issue was the sectarian culture of the Argentine left, which manifested itself strongly in the assemblies. Most assemblies opted for voting, and used it to silence minority dissent. The traditional Marxist parties contributed in no small measure to the diminishing number of neighbors by staging brutal and in some cases even physical attacks on those who had little political experience or simply thought differently. However, the direct democracy and direct action practices established by the assemblies became a vital experience for many activists, who are now engaged in other meaningful activities.

The problems the MTDs encountered shared in some of the internal dynamic problems of the popular assemblies, but had issues of their own that partially explain their crisis. Argentina's economic recovery had an important impact on the unemployed organizations. When these groups came together to struggle for a place in society, unemployment was at twenty six percent. Today, with a stronger economy and unemployment at approximately twelve percent, the micro-enterprises that kept them working together are floundering.

The current leadership of the movements argues that it was a mistake to accept government unemployment subsidies and financial support for their micro enterprises. Although this seemed inevitable given the reality of hunger and malnourishment of their members as well as acute needs for machinery and equipment for their enterprises, the management of these plans introduced State sponsored practices that deeply affected the organizational practices of the MTDs since they have had to comply with rules and regulations that contradict non-hierarchical practices that the movements aimed at.

As in any other movement, the MTDs have members with different levels of political sophistication. Outside of the always denied but ever present leadership, many unemployed workers are people who expect problems to be solved for them, in line with the Peronist tradition of hierarchical organizing and clientelism.

Many unemployed workers are women and men who do not feel comfortable speaking in public. It appears quite natural for a more charismatic and educated member of the organization to speak in their names internationally and locally. It also feels normal to many unemployed Argentinean workers to rely on a companion@ who specializes in negotiating agreements with different organizations including the government. In every MTD there are middle and lower-middle-class men and women who have attended college, which is free in Argentina. There, they received a formal education in social sciences. More importantly they might have become active members of their student union or even active militants in one of the many party-controlled student organizations. Most of the traditional Marxist parties provide intensive education for their members, not only on a theoretical level, but also on practical issues such as how to organize a campaign. These educated members took on leadership roles in the MTDs following their disillusionment with centralized parties. Rejecting a formal structure

that everybody felt would limit political freedom, it fell naturally on their laps to speak, negotiate and make decisions for others. The lack of structure, just like Jo Freeman (2) warned us many years ago, allowed for those who were powerful to become even more powerful.

In email exchanges and conversations with Argentinean autonomists, some have reminded me that autonomist movements have failed in other parts of the world where Peronism is absent as a political discourse. However, non-hierarchical organizing and rotation of tasks and responsibilities seemed to work better in the Zapatista communities, where the indigenous people who serve in the Juntas de Buen Gobierno rotate weekly. It also seems to work better because the indigenous of Chiapas live in total poverty with hardly any possibilities of employment outside of their coops. However, Marcos overpowering voice in the national and international arena, seems to signal an important limit to their non-hierarchical organizing.

At this point, I need to distinguish –with Argentinean intellectual Mabel Thwaites Rey (3) —three levels of autonomism: working-class autonomy regarding capital, autonomy regarding the State and finally, autonomy regarding trade unions and political parties.

Using these categories of analysis, we can characterize the MTDs as relatively autonomous in the second sense (although they receive welfare plans they manage them according to their own criteria) and in the third sense (they are very much in opposition to political parties and trade unions).

The popular assemblies were autonomous in both these categories too. A third important autonomous movement are the factories under workers control, which can be defined as autonomous in the first sense –working class autonomy from capitalist practices. However, the movements that coordinate the recovered factories in Argentina are not opposed to political parties or trade unions. They not only receive subsidies from the State, but they believe the State should be more generous in their support.

I distinguish three different movements here: the National Movement of Recovered Enterprises, the National Movement of Recovered Factories and the workers of the Zanon tile factory in the South of Argentina. Although these three are quite different in their approach to internal organization and politics, they can be applied to the categories mentioned earlier.

In a sharp contrast with the assembly and the piquetero movement, the recovered factories have managed to continue working together in their working spaces. The movements that group them have split but the factories continue producing together, even in cases when tensions are so high that workers have stopped talking to each other. What keeps them together, is not ideology but their concrete reality: leaving the factory, with moderately good salaries, would mean going back to unemployment or low paying jobs in the informal market. As mentioned before, unemployment is today at approximately 12%. Almost half of the working population is still working in the informal market, that is to say, with no benefits and job stability.

These internal struggles suggest a way of explaining how unemployed workers organizations and popular assemblies fell apart or undergo deep structural crisis. However, the single issue that brought this movement down was the reorganization of Peronism under Nestor Kirchner.

A new governmentality

In Chavez, Morales and Kirchner, some, like the Colectivo Situaciones (4), identify a different governmentality. In his conference on governmentality (5), Michel Foucault proposes that we look into the series security-population-government to identify the works of power in society. If the mid-nineties had more emphasis on the security (repression) term of these trilogy, we can observe now a definite change in Argentina when we compare the Kirchner administration with mid nineties neoliberal adjustment, high unemployment, population plunging under the poverty line and brutal

repression in the streets of the social protest. Today's policies of milder repression, social control through welfare for those who support the government, and better living conditions for the middle classes seem to point to an emphasis on government policies towards the population more than the straight out repression (security) of the nineties.

In this new governmentality there would be some room for autonomist projects, if the movements were able to unify and work together independently. So far, the tendency doesn't seem to go that way. On the contrary, the movements have fractured. In the case of the unemployed workers organizations, the fracture is also evidence of more employment opportunities as a result of a reactivation of the economy. Since the autonomist enterprises that most of the movements were never able to generate living wages, many people opted for low paying jobs, abandoning the organizations.

Is the Argentinean economy better or worse than before Kirchner? It depends... If we compare it to the dark days of the 2001/2002 economic collapse, it's better. But if we compare it to the days before the crisis, it's worse. According to economist and union organizer Claudio Lozano (6), in 1998 there were 10 million poor people, today there are 15 million. In 1998, unemployment was 11% and today it's 12%. It is a known fact that after an economic crisis some level of recovery is to be expected, but the population is in worse economic shape today than it was before the crisis. Today, the gap between those who have and those who have not is 31 times bigger than it was 10 years ago. Again, according to Lozano, there is no effort on the side of the government to distribute wealth in a healthier manner. For him, the economic model tends to export "cheap nature" in the world market, favoring mainly those with capacity to export, as in the case of the landowners who are exporting transgenic soy, with dire consequences for the countryside population and environment, which unfortunately I cannot go into here.

Kirchner's cooptation of social movements has worked wonders in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, what used to be "the industrial belt", now home of perpetually high unemployment rates. An important sector of the piquetero (unemployed workers) movement supports the government and is happy to receive much more financial support than other unemployed organizations. The streets are quieter. As for the middle classes, they've seen positive changes in the human rights policies. These policies were meant to hold military personnel accountable for their involvement in the disappearances of the late seventies and early eighties. These policies have had no effect on the trigger-happy police of the poor neighborhoods of Argentina where 2,000 people were killed by police in 2005.

Today, Kirchner is enacting what some define as a mixture of an attenuated version of neoliberal economics with traditional Peronism: price control, cooptation of social initiatives by the government (many social programs created by unemployed workers organizations are now funded and controlled by the government) and repression to those who fall out of this deal. Unemployed and unionized workers in different cities of Argentina have suffered serious persecution, repression, incarceration and even torture. Kirchner, who sent the National Guard to control the conflict in Las Heras, Santa Cruz, the province he comes from, mentioned that there had been excesses in dealing with the social protest—an interesting Freudian slip of the tongue. The military dictatorship of the 70's characterized the 30,000 disappearances as excesses in their holy struggle towards a Western civilization against communism.

Imprints of autonomism in organizations and movements

There is a deep social trend in Argentina towards non-hierarchical, horizontal organizing, evident in every mass reaction to social catastrophes as in the disco Republica de Cromagnon's fire where over 190 young people died. Last year, when women organized to protest a rape wave in their neighborhood, they organized just like the family and friends of the Cromagnon victims did, through direct democracy assemblies, committees to work on tasks (as opposed to one person taking on certain

responsibilities) and a strong opposition to political parties to participate in their mobilizations. To raise attention to their situation, these women marched through the streets of their town, outside of Buenos Aires, brandishing knives and closed fists, reminding everybody that they had to carry a knife to defend themselves whenever they came back or left home. Their families and friends also established a self-organized neighborhood watch during several weeks.

These are just a few of the almost daily instances of self-organization in the Argentinean social movements today. However, the leadership that emerged out of the road blockade of the 90s and the mass 2001-2002 mobilizations and popular assemblies, has little if nothing to do with these actions and in some cases short-lived organizations.

Despite the fact that the MTDs and the popular assembly model have experienced serious internal problems which, combined with a political situation that is shifting organizations back to top-to-bottom models, horizontalism has had a profound and lasting impact on these society. In my view, the practices that characterized the 2001 insurrection have shifted the organizing strategies to a less hierarchical conception —perhaps also more inclusive of women in leadership roles. My fieldwork and research will focus on this thesis, which has not been explored thoroughly yet.

The Zanon factory and the delegates of the Subway system are interesting examples to consider. Most of the prominent organizers in both spaces are either part or were part of traditional Marxist parties. The organizations they belong to are organized through central committees, empowered over the grassroots cells. Decisions are made through democratic centralism. However, when these same people organize the factories or working spaces, we see that their practices tend toward horizontality. Both Subway delegates and Zanon function through assemblies that vote to decide matters of importance. The parallel cannot be drawn to every aspect of their practice, because their situations are radically different, the Subway delegates working for a privatized multinational/national corporation and the Zanon workers operating an eight-million-dollar factory expropriated from a neglectful owner.

Everybody gets paid the same salary at the Zanon factory, where new workers are incorporated as full working members with the same salary and benefits as those of the original group that took over the factory. This is not the case in some of the other recovered factories, new workers are sometimes hired on contract basis or a limited time —the renewal of their contracts pending on an assessment of their work by the core members. In one case at least, temp workers are hired, getting paid by piecemeal with no benefits or job stability.

An important example of these new horizontal trends in organizing today is the well-publicized conflict over the paper mills in a border town in Uruguay. Hundreds of neighbors and green activists sustained a blockade of three bridges that communicate Uruguay and Argentina during six months. They organized through assemblies and non-hierarchically. They kept a critical distance from the Governor, a progressive, who is supportive of their claims. Finally, mid-March, the paper mills agreed to postpone the construction of the mill until the Kirchner and Tabaré governments can reach an agreement.

Looking at the history of insurrectionary movements in Argentina, it seems as if the dynamics of the struggle produce, nurture and then destroy activists and organizers. A quieter time follows, capital advances over labor and the social movements become marginal voices. Later, a new movement emerges, produces its leadership and then this one also fades away. However, just as the tide retreats, a lasting imprint remains. The late sixties and seventies produced a movement with a strong male oriented vertical leadership, a tendency to guerrilla warfare, and was crushed by the military dictatorship. Under the exterminating machine of State terrorism, along with the guerrilla went the anti-bureaucratic union organizers. Studies indicate that these organizers were the true targets of the

military repression, constituting about 80% of those listed as disappeared by the dictatorship. Liberating the scene from pesky strike organizers, the US supported dictatorship open the way to the neo-liberal structural adjustment of the nineties. This time, the new wave left behind the guerrilla male-dominated hierarchical style of organizing. Today, although confused by this new governmentality embodied in the Kirchner administration and the crisis of the autonomist organizers, the Argentinean masses are still struggling for social change under the banners of horizontalism and non-hierarchy.

1. Adamovsky, Ezequiel. "El movimiento asambleario en Argentina: Balance de una experiencia", en revista El Rodaballo (Buenos Aires), no. 15, invierno 2004, pp. 12-20
2. Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", Berkeley Journal of Sociology, 1970 (pp. 1-8)
3. Mabel Thwaites Rey La Autonomía como mito y como posibilidad, in www.argenpress.info • Friday May 23, 2003
4. <http://www.situaciones.org> 5. Foucault, Michel [1979] (1991). Governmentality. In, The Foucault Effect. Rabinow and Rose, Eds. U. of Chicago, p. 87
6. Interview to Claudio Lozano in www.lavaca.org