



Que Se Vayan Todos

Argentina's Popular Uprising



*An eyewitness account of
the financial meltdown and
ongoing grassroots rebellion*

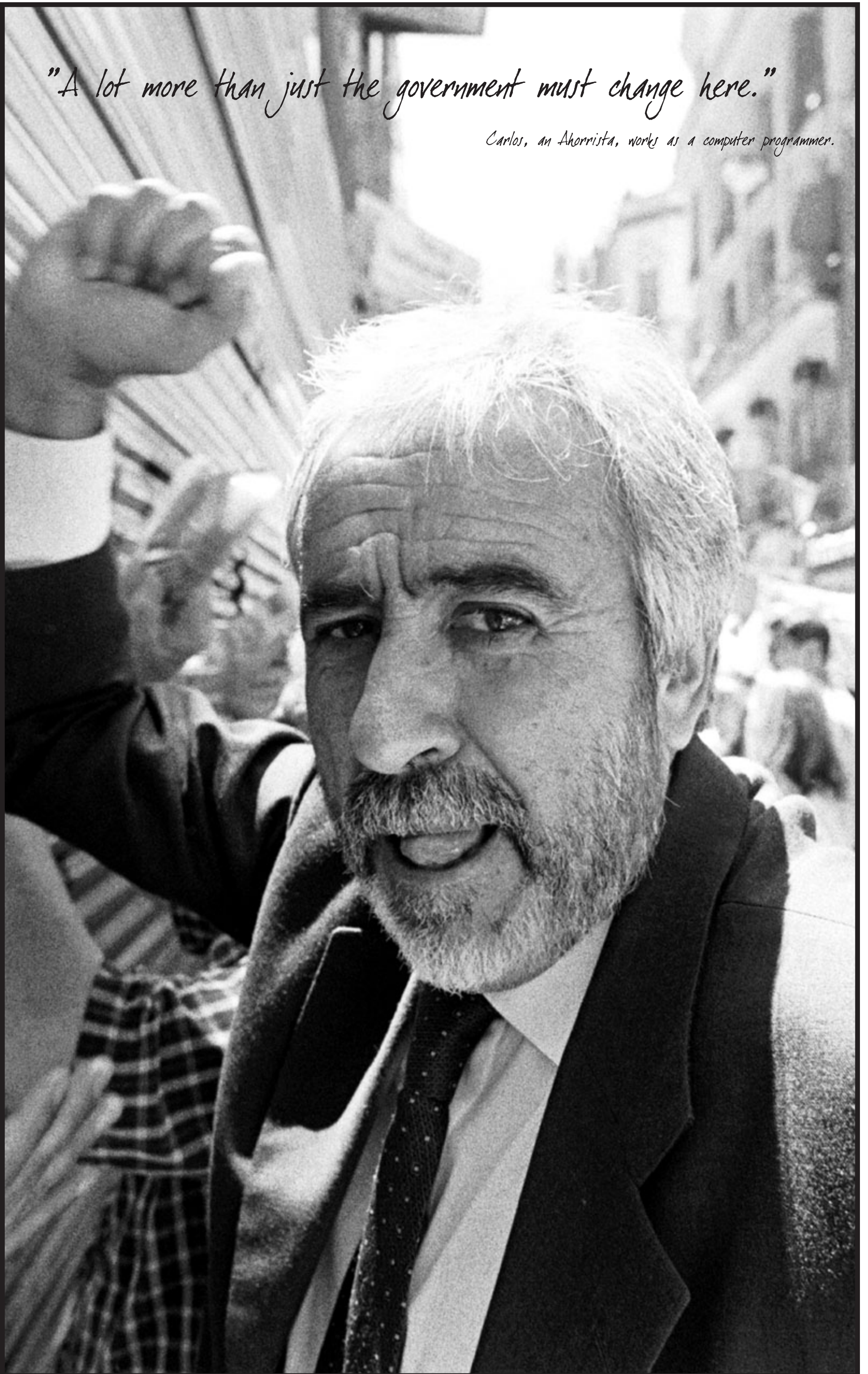


"All the people who are fighting are struggling for social change. We do not believe in the capitalist neoliberal system anymore."

Allejandro, a piquetero, lives in a shantytown.

"A lot more than just the government must change here."

Carlos, an Ahornista, works as a computer programmer.



Routines and Rebellions

15 Feb. 2002 Your tickets are invalid," says the heavily lip-sticked 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.

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 sup-

plies 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 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 Rúa, 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 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 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.

Rivers of Sound

15 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 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.

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 *assembleas 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 inter-neighborhood 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 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 organized 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.

Converging Currents

15 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 shut-



ters 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 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 dictatorship.

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 Paulo. 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. 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.

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 Argentines 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. "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 high-

ways 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 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.

"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 Argentines 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 Argentines, 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."

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 - 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.

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 politicians (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.

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 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 Neuquén, 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 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.

Popular Economics

16 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 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."

Beware the Bourgeois Block

18 Feb. 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. 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 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 anticapitalist 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 newspaper and large sunglasses, understand-

able 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 *aborristas*, 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 *aborristas* 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 *aborristas* 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-

The repudiation of the politicians and the economic elites is complete...None of them who are recognised can walk the streets without being insulted or spat upon.

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.

Watch This Space

15 Feb. 2002 **W**hen 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.

John Jordan & Jennifer Whitney, Portland, Oregon, May Day 2002

Que Se Vayan Todos...



Argentinian solidarity demo at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, February, 2002.

A Postscript 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 delegitimization 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 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 imme-

diately 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 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, 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 reassurance 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.

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 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.

Resources & Credits

www.argentina.indymedia.org

Argentina's own independent media centre, mostly in Spanish, a great source of information straight from the streets.

www.americas.org/country/argentina

Loads of links to excellent English language news and analysis about the crisis.

www.ft.com/argentina

The Financial Times, always the best coverage of struggles in the global South! Why? Because they affect investment ...

www.buenosairesherald.com

Argentina's English language daily paper on line. Good for up to the minute news.

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For more copies contact:

artactivism@gn.apc.org

For similar inspiration in print check out the forthcoming book "**We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism**" published by Verso at the end of 2002.

www.weareeverywhere.org



*"Utopia is on the horizon: when I
walk two steps, it takes two steps back.
I walk ten steps and it is ten steps
further away. What is utopia for?
It is for this, for walking."*

Eduardo Galeano