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Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

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To What Extent Were the New Social Movements that Emerged After the 2001 Political and Economic Crisis in Argentina a Success?

Introduction

Several new social movements found their expression in the Argentinian political and economic crisis of 2001, termed the 'Argentinazo' (Chatterton, 2005). The event consisted of a popular revolt in which people took to the streets armed with pots and pans to express their dismay of the establishment. National banks were stormed and the resignation of authorities demanded (Dinerstein, 2003). However, three years later North and Huber (2004) wrote that

Unfortunately, the action repertoire and new social theories developed [during the Argentinazo] seem inadequate for the large-scale change that will meet Argentina's problems. (North and Huber, 2004: 971)

To assess this observation I will focus on three specific social movements within the wider Argentinian social activism spectrum that also includes barter networks, *ahorrista* groups, and clubs *de deudores* (the latter groups focus on retaining the value of mortgages and saving accounts) (Dinerstein, 2003). I understand social movements as 'organized efforts by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect of society' (Scott and Marshall, 2009). In this respect it may be challenged whether the Argentinazo *itself* represented a social movement, because according to some, it constituted a multitude of *spontaneous* forces (Tedesco, 2003). In any case, the accomplishments of the protests are disputed. This essay outlines various interpretations of 'failure' and 'success' by focusing on the recuperated factories, neighbourhood assembly and piquetero- movements. To begin with, each individual movement's character and limitations are outlined, providing an insight into why the movements arguably failed to achieve large-scale change. The second part of this essay offers a revisionist interpretation in which the movements' successes will be demonstrated based upon an alternative approach informed by pragmatic as well as anarchist principles. The final section aims to arrive at a balanced judgement on which perspective is most significant.

When the Argentinazo was first reported, it was met with great enthusiasm by academics and social activists alike; attempts aimed at grasping the significance of the uprising ranged from 'a revival of the early 20th century European worker-councils', to a 'profound expression of the anti-globalization movement' (Vieta, 2006a: 1). While Argentina has a history of powerful working class organization, the Argentinazo was different because groups from different societal strata, who were not necessarily negating globalization, took to the streets (Dinerstein, 2003). Rather, the Argentinazo was an amalgam of various discontent groups of people that collectively expressed their outrage at the current situation (Tedesco, 2003). The initial enthusiasm for the Argentinazo and its constituent movements however, has faded. A Buenos Aires interviewee commented in 2006: 'I believe the movement was full of good intentions and it looked like many things were going to change, but in reality not much has changed' (La Tribu, 2006).

In order to understand why some believe that the Argentinazo and the associated social movements have failed, the

Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

Written by Justa Hopma

limitations of the three key movements mentioned above are outlined.

The Piquetero Movement

Piqueteros are named after the 'piquet', a blockade, which is their most visible activity (López, 2004). The movement began after 1995, when privatization policies caused the redundancy of millions of workers (López-Levy, 2003). The construction of barricades granted unemployed people, otherwise excluded from society, a voice and a new identity (Chatterton, 2005). Hopelessness and passivity normally associated with unemployment were transformed into direct action that rendered piqueteros visible. Additionally, it confronted the authorities with critical questions about piqueteros' socio-economic status as well as about the entire economic system. By physically obstructing flows of traffic in and out cities, society was forced to listen.

Subsequently, the piquetero movement has been suppressed as well as supported by the Argentinian government (Petras, 2005). These contradictory policies are the result of diversity within the movement which is presented below in table format.

Piquetero groups are treated differently by the state, according to their respective aims. While the CTA and CCC groups turn to the state for a solution of their problems, the MTDs see the state as having created and sustained problems (Khorasane, 2003).

Ponce (2007) writes that piquetero action has been very successful. He measures success in the number of work-plans or 'Jefes' (short for Jefes y Jefas de Hogar, the Argentinian social security plan) distributed by the government through Peronist / clientelist relationships. Ponce's piqueteros however, are those in the mainstream section of Table 1. He excludes the MTDs who regard engagement with the state and receiving work-plans through clientelist networks as a failure.

The reason for the MTDs desire for autonomy is further discussed on page 7-8. For now it suffices to note that piquetero 'success' is a relative concept, which may in fact conceal different objectives within the movement.

Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

Written by Justa Hopma

The Recuperated Factories Movement

Many Argentine factory-owners abandoned their businesses in 2001, due to the preceding economic malaise as well as the immediate crisis (Chatterton, 2005). Some workers though, decided to continue production without a formal boss. These recuperated factories, '*empresas recuperadas*' or '*factorias sin patron*', proved successful to a certain extent; they continued production and provided a source of employment in a neo-liberal economy, where previous owners failed to do so. However, the movement's position is unstable; problems of legal consolidation of factories' cooperative status persist and therefore it is difficult to achieve commercial competitiveness (Vieta, 2006b). Access to subsidies is limited, and private investors are discouraged from replacing outdated machinery for example, because of the uncertain legal status (Klein and Lewis, 2007).

The cooperative movement was initially hailed as a successful alternative to capitalism, because in a cooperative workers control the means of production. This label has implications however. The issue of 'purity', which revolves around the question whether cooperatives should trade with non-cooperatives has been given much attention (Blair, 2008). From an ideological perspective, theorist Gibson-Graham answers this question negatively and writes: 'When power is identified with what is ruthless and dominating, it becomes something the left must distance itself from, lest it be co-opted or compromised' (Gibson-Graham, 2006:5-6). Like many others, Gibson-Graham regards recuperated businesses as an alternative to capitalism, which consciously emerged out of a rejection of neo-liberalism expressed in the Argentinazo. Within this framework, factories' attempts to maintain old, non-cooperative buyer networks are regarded as failures.

The problem is that only some cooperatives subscribe to this idea (Chatterton, 2005). For many, the occupation of factories was done for reasons of survival and the accompanying democratic re-organization of their factories was a by-product. Accordingly, many people inside the Argentinian movement criticized the leftist anti-capitalist perspective. Research group Colectivo Situaciones for example, maintains that 'the academic theorist 'objectifies' from outside and constitutes his or her object, by attributing values to it' (López, 2004: unpaginated). For the anti-capitalist view this means that trading with non-cooperatives is given a negative value. This idea however, finds its source *outside* the immediate topic of study: the Argentinian cooperatives. Following this logic through, the anti-capitalist assessment of failure is based upon outside values and thus does not make sense in the immediate Argentine context. Unfortunately, even when supply networks to non-cooperatives exist, the *empresas recuperadas* still function at the margins of the economy and as such have not altered the economic structure of Argentina (Petras, 2004; Vieta 2006b).

The Neighbourhood Assembly Movement

When the institutions of representative politics failed, people decided to organize neighbourhood assemblies to solve their problems. Soon however the *asambleas* were subject to infiltration policies. Leftist groups came in and attempted to organize the movement in a way that would promote the Left's agenda, instead of focusing on the problems put forward in the assembly (Sitrin, 2006). People who came together to solve immediate problems, such as frozen bank accounts (the '*corralito*' imposition), '*felt talked at, patronised or manipulated*' and left the movement (North and Huber, 2004: 967).

Attempts at organization alienated some people, but others argued that a *lack* of organization was the main failure of the assemblies as well as the other social movements:

The middle class assemblies initially drew hundreds of neighbors to all-inclusive marathon discussions, which eventually exhausted their participants without leading to any formal organization, specific program or even city-wide coordination. (Petras, 2004:15)

Supporters of this perspective maintain that the failure to organize and expand the movement across Argentina by a strong leadership is the reason for its current weakness and demise. The absence of a counter-force to the state prevented the large-scale change cited in the introductory quote from happening (Klein, 2003; Petras, 2004).

Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

Written by Justa Hopma

Thus far insight into the limitations of the new social movements has been offered and a case for its failure to achieve large-scale change has been presented. Below however, an alternative analysis of the *success* of the new social movements is given. This interpretation focuses on socio-economic identity and community life. Parts draw on pragmatic ideas that activists brought forward themselves. Other sections are informed by anarchist theory which is limitedly represented within the literature in general (López, 2004) and within the literature covering the Argentinazo in particular.

Socio-economic Identity

There are many reasons why the social movements discussed can be regarded as successful. Specifically, they have provided people with more opportunities than they had before. López argues that the protests associated with the Argentinazo were so significant because they attacked *and changed* structures of social exclusion. Passive identities, based on 'a lack': people without work, workers without control over their work or citizens without a say in the running of their lives were transformed into 'active' identities with potential for agency. Through this transformation, the boundaries between who is outside and who is inside society were shifted (López, 2004). These changes are important because they have the potential to fundamentally alter society and promote future change. Historical examples of such change include the empowerment of women through anarchist and Montenero campaigns (Munck, 1987). In this respect it is important to note that eight out of ten piqueteros are female (López-Levy, 2003).

Moreover, the acquisition of work-plans through the trade unions that work with the government involves the re-creation of hierarchical relationships that do nothing to fundamentally change the piqueteros position in society. For this reason, 'success' in the form of work-plans is regarded as failure because it sustains dependency. Instead, autonomy is regarded as real success by the MTD piqueteros. In this sense, piquetero action is direct action as anarchists understood it: action that can be used to create a free society (Walters, 2002).

Community Life

Workers', piqueteros' and assembleistas' efforts predominantly focus on local communities because they function according a logic of 'horizontalidad' (horizontalism), which is 'a relationship – a way of relating to one another in a directly democratic way' (Enzinna, 2006: unpaginated). This presupposes the negation of hierarchy and authority, a core anarchist idea. The absence of authority however, need not lead to chaos as is exemplified by the Argentinian social movements. Based upon horizontalism, the organizations did not powerfully organize themselves on a national scale, as would be necessary for taking political power (Petras, 2004). This does not mean that the need for constructive change is not recognized. The difficulty however is to create this from scratch: 'To transform the rejection [of the state], 'the que se vayan todos', into constructive practices of new sociability and *new* forms of organization ... was really difficult' (Sitrin, 2006: 41). Autonomy as a concept is important within horizontalism because existing party structures 'reproduce the very thing [hierarchical relationships] they claim to be critical of' (Sitrin, 2004: 46). Horizontalism emerged because the representative system of organization proved to have failed and the political Left did not provide a truly different alternative (Dinerstein, 2003). Anarchist theory however, maintains that horizontalism is not merely a *pragmatic* way of doing things differently; it is a *better* way of doing things. Without leaders to follow, citizens need to make up their own minds which will render decision-making more complex and less efficient. The 'end-product' however, will be 'much closer to the needs and feelings of the people' (Walters, 2002:38).

Conclusion

Where does this leave the argument? When failures to organize are not unambiguously failures, and new autonomous identities obtained at the cost of forfeiting monetary relief plans carry with them the potential for future change, what conclusions can possibly be drawn when evaluating the success of social movements?

Holloway (2005) would argue that the movements have been very successful. For him the action of 'doing things differently' itself represents power; a liberating power to act, which works towards societal change because it creates

Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

Written by Justa Hopma

'anti-power': the dissolution of power-over' [the negative form of power that implies suppressing other people] (Holloway, 2005:36). Horizontalism amounts to such anti-power.

Laclau (1991) also reasserts that

Increasing the freeing of human beings through a more assertive image of their capacities, increasing social responsibility through the consciousness of the historicity of Being – is the most important radical political possibility that contemporary thought is opening up to us. (Laclau, 1991: quoted in Gibson-Graham, 2006: 97-98)

In this sense, the social movements have been and indeed still are very successful; their creation of 'anti-power' continues to assert positive identities and increase social responsibility through local, collective projects. Additionally, the social movements, irrespective of their 'failure' or 'success', provided people with a coping mechanism in traumatic times. In 2008 people throughout the world experienced similar stresses when basic food prices increased rapidly due to the global financial crisis, but responded with violent riots (Davis, 2008). In Argentina, a country with a brutal military history, violence was limited (Chatterton, 2005), which should be regarded as a remarkable success in itself.

Perhaps most significantly however, the Argentinazo and its associated movements made visible that creative reactions to crises exist:

Power and social theory exist in such symbiosis that power is the lens through which theory sees the world, the headphone through which it hears the world: to ask for a theory of anti-power is to try to see the invisible, to hear the inaudible. (Holloway, 2005: 22)

The crisis and social coping mechanisms that transformed people's lives were not merely made visible however. The communication of their message regionally and internationally, also testifies to their significance.

In 2005 a regional conference of empresas recuperadas was organized in Caracas, where plans for a \$50 million fund to support recuperated factories were proposed (Vieta, 2008). Moreover, international examples that resonate with the horizontalist message of also exist. In December 2008, workers from a Chicago-based window and doors factory took direct action and occupied the plant in response to a management decision denying them \$1.5 million in owed wages (Sustar, 2008). Additionally, a picket was organized at the doors of the local Bank of America (Sustar, 2008). In November 2008, Iceland was the first Western country to receive an IMF loan in 30 years (BBC, 2008). This sparked protests not dissimilar to the Argentinazo. The photograph below was accompanied by the comments of an Icelandic citizen that expressed the wish for organizing society differently:

Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

Written by Justa Hopma

Figure 1: Riots in Iceland showing banners protesting against the IMF and unrestrained capitalism. Source: BBC News Channel

"The political parties have been practically inactive for the last 15-20 years. People are now discovering that we need means to struggle... The politicians and others, they won't notice the interests of the people and the will of the people unless they activate themselves and organize themselves" (BBC News Channel)

The current [2009] experience of financial and political crisis shows that the quest for different ways of organization at various scales is a pressing issue. For this reason it cannot be argued that the new social movements that emerged after the 2001 failed, since they *started* the process of this quest, as well as providing immediate benefits, however small, to the people and communities involved in them. If other countries can draw lessons from the Argentinian experience, this will be another factor contradicting the Argentinazo's failure to affect large-scale change.

This essay was limited by its word count and did not explore the failure of past autonomous projects and organizations. The historical decline of anarchist projects in Argentina could inform the present-day challenges discussed in this essay and is suggested as a topic for further study.

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Argentina's 2001 Economic Crisis and the Success of New Social Movements

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