

In the early months of 2002, while the mainstream media declared the movements dead and issues of economic globalization irrelevant in the face of the 'war on terror', something happened that no one expected. Through the movements' emails, websites and face-to-face gatherings, stories emerged from Argentina of politicians so universally hated they couldn't walk the streets safely, of angry middle class women smashing up banks, workers occupying factories and running them, seven million people using cash-free barter networks, ordinary people holding meetings to decide how to run their own neighbourhoods, and thousands of unemployed people blocking highways and demanding food and jobs.

Recession had struck Argentina in 1998. The only way the Argentinean government could pay the \$132 billion debt – some of which dated from the military dictatorship (1976-1983) was more cuts in social spending. Pensions, unemployment benefits, healthcare, and education all got slashed, yet jobs were disappearing and poverty growing exponentially.

In the mid-nineties, protests began to simmer across the country, but on 19-20 December 2002, they erupted onto the streets of urban centres with unprecedented ferocity. Following the declaration of a state of emergency in Buenos Aires, a million people from every class disobeyed the curfew and took to the streets, banging pots and pans and converging on the Presidential Palace. A cry rose up from the crowd, directed at the politicians, the bankers, the IMF: "Que se vayan todos," (out with them all) so that the people can decide the fate of their economically crippled country themselves. The despised government was ousted, three more were toppled within two weeks, and Argentina's popular rebellion spread to every corner of society.

Pots, Pans and Popular Power: the neighbourhood assemblies of Buenos Aires

by Ezequiel Adamovsky

Coming together

On 19 and 20 December, 2001, my life changed forever. Just as unexpected as any other milestone in history, rebellion caught us all in the middle of the banalities of everyday life – I was painting my flat. Late in the evening, my brother Pablo phoned and we chatted away about nothing in particular when he suddenly interrupted me, and asked, "I hear a funny noise – I don't what it is, but it sounds like pots banging. Can you hear it?" "No. That's strange," was my only answer, not paying much attention.

A moment later, I heard a similar banging near my home. The sound of the first *cacerolazo* [named after the saucepans] had scattered all across Buenos Aires, from downtown where Pablo lives all the way to my neighbourhood. I abruptly put the phone down and ran outside to find out what was going on. That was when I met those strangers for the first time: my own neighbours.

Then came the rebellion of 20 December, long hours of fighting with the police. The President was toppled from the government. Repression snatched the lives of seven protesters near the Plaza de Mayo, and 35 across the country. Fate determined this time that I would not be one of them.

During the following days, at the beginning of January 2002, a rumour – almost a legend – spread throughout the city, setting fire to our imagination. Groups of neighbours had begun meeting spontaneously in ‘neighbourhood assemblies’ on the street corners, in order to discuss their problems. “They are soviets!” screamed the panicked headlines of some conservative newspapers.

I looked for one near my house, and soon I joined the Cid Campeador Popular Assembly. Romina, aged 26 and with no previous political experience, had spent an entire week giving out leaflets to call for its first meeting. I arrived on time, but could hardly speak with anyone due to shyness. The images I remember from the first meetings are of chaos, disorder, people shouting at each other, arguing over the megaphone, interminable speeches of pure catharsis...

Gathered under a monument at a crossroads of the noisiest streets in the city, 80 neighbours were trying to come to an agreement to do something in the midst of our shipwrecked country. When I recall that scene today, I find it sweet and powerful at the same time.

Negotiating identities

There were people of all ages, sexes, and professions, with and without previous political experience. Many thought we would not last a single month together. What did we have in common? We were on our own, in a country devastated by capitalism. We yearned to decide for ourselves how to live, and no longer trusted any representative. It’s the only thing that we shared. Almost nothing. Almost everything. Since then, we have been negotiating our differences, searching for our own path, our own identities, recognizing ourselves and ‘contaminating’ each other reciprocally.

Who are we? Where to trace the line between what we want and don’t want? The questions hide, and travel with each step that we take. Like in one of the debates we had at the very beginning, “We have to be united; we’re all Argentineans, that’s what matters”, said Claudia, who had no political past. “That’s not what matters”, snapped back a group of Trotskyists, “We should first focus on whether we are with the workers or not.” As the debate heated up, Claudio said, “Our neighbour Francisco, who has just given a great speech, is from Uruguay. Does that make him a

>> **February 26** >> The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions leads massive strikes of more than 50,000 workers in 94 workplaces in the railway, power, and gas sectors against privatization. The President of the railway union is arrested. Lee Sang-young, head of the Confederation, states, “Public services are the property of the nation. It is not acceptable to sell people’s property without their permission or agreement”.

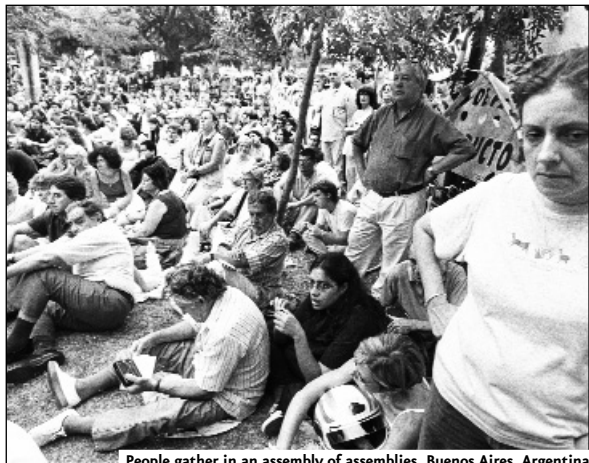
>> **March** >> The month sees mass demonstrations of workers and farmers across China, protesting against cuts in benefits and subsidies. For two weeks, 50,000 people gather daily at the Daqing oil field in Heilongjiang province. In industrial Liaoyang, 600 workers block the highway to the provincial capital, and are dispersed violently by police at midnight. Another 1,000 lay siege to city hall, demanding unpaid wages and the release of four

detained labour leaders. Smaller demonstrations take place in Beijing, and across the province of Sichuan, as the country moves towards neoliberalism.

>> **March 7-13** >> In Fortaleza, Brazil, over 40 finance ministers and presidents from three Latin American countries meet with businessmen and diplomats to discuss the policies of the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB). Large parts of the city are cordoned off to prevent

foreigner to our assembly?” That day we learned that what unites us is much more than nationality.

I can recall another story of reciprocal ‘contamination’, when we co-ordinated a joint meeting with gay and lesbian collectives. After two hours of discussion, Raúl stood and acknowledged with great emotion, “I am 75 years old and my education is old-fashioned. But today I’ve realized that those kids are human beings and do not deserve to be discriminated against.” As it turned out, a 19 year old member of one of the gay groups, Rodrigo, happened to live in our neighbourhood, and he joined our assembly that very day.



People gather in an assembly of assemblies. Buenos Aires, Argentina

Empowering ourselves

Many complain that assemblies lack clear “political content” or a “revolutionary programme” to “take power”. I am all the time more convinced that our content is present in our form, and that our ‘programme’ is to build a world in the image and likeness of the assembly, where everybody can make their own decisions. Nothing more, nothing less. Our assembly is a laboratory where a new world is being built every day, where we learn to decide and participate, rather than delegating and obeying. Isn’t that a revolution, after all?

Stella Maris and Jackie are for me two of the most inspiring examples of empowerment. Neither of them had any previous political experience to draw upon. Stella Maris, age 41, was suspicious at first of “those who spoke of politics in the assembly”. For her, *politics* (especially left wing politics) was a dirty word. Now, a year later, she identifies herself as anticapitalist, and defends the ‘horizontality’ of the assembly with tooth and claw. She never misses a chance to tell her story to whoever will listen: “I was born into politics in this assembly,” she says with pride.

Jackie is 19 and for five months she silently observed every meeting. One day, she timidly began to speak, and she spoke well. One year later, nobody could stop her.

Stella Maris and Jackie today are fundamental parts of our assembly.

A new world in our neighbourhood

In July, our assembly took a risky move. After some weeks of careful planning, we decided to occupy an abandoned three-

story building, an old branch of a now bankrupted bank.

It had become the thing to do for assemblies to occupy places illegally, and we didn't want to be left behind. So one Sunday morning, in front of some astonished onlookers, we broke into the building. Did we really need to have that building? In retrospect, probably not. Mostly, what we wanted was to disobey, the sensation of being beyond the law, an action that would mark us as brothers and sisters in rebellion.

Today in that 'reclaimed' building is a café, a community kitchen, classes in theatre, tango, and popular education, tutoring for the students, and cultural activities. Indymedia has an office there too. The only condition we put on using the space is that it be used for participatory and non-profit activities. In a few months, the 'home' of our assembly has transformed into a truly social centre, open to the neighbourhood. For assembly-goers, this means new challenges, for example, providing security 24 hours a day to protect the building, but it also means the opportunity to grow as an assembly and deepen our work.

With the opening of this autonomous space in the heart of the city, organized by rules which differ from those of

capitalism, we faced one of the first direct conflicts with the state and the corporations. Two months after our occupation, police raided the building and charged nine assembly-goers with 'trespassing'. The plaintiff is Banco Comafi, a bank long connected with money laundering (called "the gold Mafia"), and government corruption. It is said that the real owner is Emilio Massera, one of the main leaders of the last military dictatorship.

The struggle of the assembly against the monolith of corruption is to me a powerful symbol of resistance of the oppressed in this country against the aggression of capitalism. Banco Comafi epitomizes economic exploitation, financial speculation, corruption, and state terrorism – the major calamities of recent decades. Will David defeat Goliath this time?

Facing contradictions

However, antagonism is not only external. It is not all a bed of roses in the life of the assembly. For example, an unresolved conflict exists between independent assembly-goers and those who belong to political parties. The former

protests, and many buses carrying protesters are turned back. Nevertheless, various actions take place including a public assembly in a poor community which will be evicted due to an IDB project which will widen their street and replace their homes with fancy hotels.

>> **March 15** >> Despite the closing of borders and a simultaneous football match across town between Madrid and Barcelona, 400,000-500,000 people take to the

streets of Barcelona, Spain to protest the EU summit. Promoting over 25 decentralized actions, organizers explain, "We didn't want the terrain they were preparing for us, the direct confrontation where we had to lose". Three activists leap onto the football pitch and chain themselves to the goalposts, halting the game until they are removed and arrested. Speaking of the need to remain flexible, one protester says, "We are not afraid. The entire

police strategy is based on creating a state of exception, where people stay inside their houses, and an activist elite confronts 10,000 police. Given this reality, the movement should go back to using its creativity and decentralization. Achieving, through that, a more complete visualization of the resistances, of their diversity, beyond the framework of a medieval joust, which is what the police are proposing." >> **March 19** >> The construction site of a new

reproach the latter for using the assembly to benefit their parties; the latter respond with accusations of McCarthyism. Mutual hostility sometimes seriously compromises our ability to function, and so far we haven't found a way to resolve this problem.

Other kinds of contradictions have become apparent – for example, generation gaps. We are also struggling with deep-rooted class prejudices. Cohabitation in the reclaimed building with unemployed and homeless assembly-goers has generated conflict and friction. The distribution of 'political' and 'domestic' tasks always leads to problems.

Such conflicts are reflected on the nick-names people give each other. Some independents call party-members "the central committee", while some unemployed folks call middle-class people "the managers". In humour, as everyone knows, there always is a bit of truth.

Building coalitions

There is a permanent concern in the assembly movement: how to go beyond our neighbourhood and take part in a more general political life? How can we coordinate with other assemblies and social movements without recreating hierarchies? Between October and December 2002, our assembly helped to organize a political action that may offer some clues to solve this dilemma. After an internal debate, we launched a call to action addressed to all assemblies and popular movements. The idea was to organize a direct action against the places and symbols of economic power on the anniversary of rebellion.

Over 45 different groups responded to the call and in a completely horizontal way we organized a blockade of the Central Bank, the stock exchange, and other financial institutions. Our objective was to warn that the owners of banks, businesses, and large corporations were also included in our call, "*que se vayan todos*," (out with them all) as they are responsible for the devastation of our country. Moreover, we wanted to show that assemblies can take their own political initiatives and that coordinated actions can be organized in a horizontal way.

Taking part in the blockades – called urban *piquete*, in honour of the *piqueteros*' struggles – were several assemblies, *piquetero* organizations, radical trade unions, political parties, artists' collectives, gay and lesbian groups, associations of *ahorristas* [savers – the middle class whose savings was decimated with the collapse of the economy], global resistance collectives, students, environmentalists, and human rights associations. It was the first time that such a multiplicity of social movements converged as one coalition in Argentina.

But I think the greatest achievement of the urban *piquete* can be summed up in the words of 19 year old Marian, a member of our assembly: "In the urban *piquete* I felt that I was the real protagonist." And that is what it is all about.

My neighbourhood assembly is one year old

One year after that first time I participated in my assembly, I feel, as Jaime said one day, that "I can no longer think of

my life without the assembly". The geography of my neighbourhood has completely changed for me, as has my sense of what is important and what isn't, and how I use my free time. Even my mood fluctuates with the assembly: if the meeting is full of conflict one week, my distress lasts until the next; if it is marvelous, I feel euphoric.

I have not the slightest idea of our future. I like to think that, without knowing it, we are participating in the birth of a new global era of emancipatory struggles. I like to imagine that one day the whole world will be like our assembly's building: a place to meet as equals, a place to live in freedom, to listen and to be heard, to be the protagonists of our own lives.

The future, without exception, always bears a question mark. Maybe assemblies will disappear, or maybe they will grow in number and in quality. Maybe we will end up sick of them, or maybe we will end up with the world which makes us sick. What I am certain of is that, even if we disappear, the legend of the assemblies will remain in the collective memory. The mark of this intense experience of participation, horizontality, and autonomy cannot be deleted.

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English translation by Romina Propato

Resources: Updated information about Argentina's popular rebellion: www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/aggp/free/imf/argentina/index.htm

McDonald's in Voronezh, Romania is blockaded. For six days, activists prevent work from taking place in the former public park by sitting on diggers and pulling down fences, until the police break up the blockade and construction resumes.

>> **March 21** >> In South Africa, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (who illegally reconnect people's electricity if they are cut off due to non-payment) and the

Anti-Privatization Forum stage a protest to demand that cut-offs of service for those too poor to pay are stopped. According to the Government's Human Sciences Research Council, nearly ten million South Africans have had their power disconnected, and over two million have been evicted from their homes because they cannot afford their water or electric bills.

>> **March 24** >> Egypt's Palestinian solidarity movement

organizes 450 people to join a second caravan to the border town of Aarish, carrying over 90 tonnes of food and medicine. When the Egyptian security prevent them from entering the town, they occupy the streets. Three months later, a third caravan brings 150 tonnes of food and 600,000 Egyptian pounds worth of medicine, and organizes a public conference about Palestine in Aarish.

>> **March 28-30** >> Backed by a Korean drum group, and