

Colectivo Situaciones

Causes and Happenstance (dilemmas of Argentina's new social protagonism) Research manuscript # 4

Translators introduction

This article was written by Colectivo Situaciones during the three-week time mediating between the first round of Argentina's last presidential elections and the runoff--respectively, April 27 and May 18th 2003. The two main contenders for the runoff were Carlos Menem and Néstor Kirchner, both from the Justicialista Party (Peronist). Menem, who had ruled the country for ten years during the 1990s, was notorious for a bold political style that combined populist rhetoric with the strictest adjustment policies the country has ever seen. He ended first in the first returns, with around 30%. The polls taken during the week prior to the runoff showed Kirchner, then governor of the sparsely populated province of Santa Cruz, had more than 60% of support. Menem, who rarely gets involved in battles he knows he is going to lose, dropped his candidacy.

What was at stake in this election was much more than the presidency. The election put to test the ruling classes' ability to reconstruct the centrality of the political sphere after one of the most enduring challenges it has faced in recent years. The night of December 19th, 2001, thousands of Argentineans occupied the streets, squares and public places of the major cities. Banging pots and pans they chanted "all of them out, not a single one should remain" in response to a state of siege declared by the government. The following day, after three dozen had died in street fights with the police, president Fernando de la Rúa resigned. The period opened by the revolt was of intense social creativity. Hundreds of popular assemblies were created across the country. The unemployed workers movement, whose force had been growing since 1997, acquired a new visibility. Many factories and businesses that had gone bankrupt were taken by their workers and began to run under their control. Several of these initiatives came together forming circuits of trade based in solidarity principles helping to provide the necessities of life for the millions who had been marginalized from an economy crippled by its servile obedience of the dictates of IMF inspectors. These and countless other examples of a new social protagonism that invests its efforts in decentred forms of politics and resistance were the real antagonist in the presidential elections of last April. Did Argentineans go from the "all of them out" to the "all of them back," as observers from the right, to socialdemocracy, and the orthodox left claim? Perhaps an answer to this question should start by considering how every move by new the government is a recognition that a threshold was crossed in December 2001 and a new era was opened from which there is no return.

Colectivo Situaciones is a collective of researcher-militants based in Buenos Aires. For the last three years, they have been working closely with unemployed workers, peasants, human rights

activists and many other instances of Argentina's new protagonism. They have collected this experience in several books, articles, and pamphlets, some of which are co-authored with the movements themselves. Their book *19th and 20th: Notes on the New Social Protagonism* is currently being translated into English. The collective's website is www.situaciones.org

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Causes and Happenstance

(dilemmas of Argentina's new social protagonism)

Research manuscript # 4

by Colectivo Situaciones

More than a year has passed since we published a book entitled *19 y 20: Apuntes para un nuevo protagonismo social*.¹ The effort of writing and editing those notes in a short few months - while the dynamic of events unfolded in the streets - gave place to a reflection whose style was determined by the vocation of writing on the spur of the moment.

Contrary to what is habitually taken for granted, that methodological premise stating that things are better seen at a distance is not entirely convincing. What the perspective of distance allows us to see should not claim for itself any superiority. Since, while it can aspire to a serenity that is usually scarce among those who have been affected by the unfolding of the events, those same affections are the ones that constitute the possible real of a situation. Hence the aspiration of what is written "in the heat of the moment" to register a complexity that might virtualize in the future, when possibilities that were not thinkable then are retroactively attributed.

The long year and a half between the insurrectional events of December 2001 and the presidential elections of April 2003 merits consideration. Many questions come up: how to understand, in light of the present phase of apparent institutional stabilization, the events of December 2001? What happened to the promise of a radical transformation of the country glimpsed at from the slogan "all of them out, not a single one should remain," when the electoral process clearly speaks of a notable participation of the citizenry in the elections and when the five principal candidates - all of them from the two main political parties for many decades - receive almost 95% of the votes? We cannot claim for ourselves the expertise, craft, and dedication of political analysts. Neither the preoccupations, nor the focus nor the assumptions that animate us are connected to those of such analyses. The word of the experts obtains its consistency from a certain capacity to manage information and dispose of a certain technical use of language. Yet politics is not what occurs in the world of pure facts waiting to be sanctioned by the experts, but is rather a matter that concerns the collective: the same "facts" are composed with the interpretations made of them, prolonging

¹ *19 and 20: Notes for a new social protagonism*, by the Colectivo Situaciones first published in Argentina in 2002 by De mano en mano (Tr.).

their power (*potencia*)² and turning the same readings into a field of disputes that, in turn, are offered to interpretations by others.

What follows, then, is a reading done "in the heat of the moment": this text was conceived between the first electoral return and the announcement of the official resignation by Menem, that is to say, between April 27 and May 13. The intention is to examine the events that transpired between December 2001 and May 2003, a lapse of time that separates and communicates the outbreak of an economic and political crisis without precedents and the emergence of a new social protagonism (piquetero movements, assemblies, barter clubs, factories occupied by their workers, etc.) with the pretended normalization whose point of realization should have been the presidential elections. The intensity of this period - no less than its complexity - has remained beclouded by those who have proclaimed that the results of the elections constitute the death of the movement of counterpower and the erasure of that which opened with the events of December.

I. The surprise (rupture, de-stitution and visibility)

The insurrection of December surprised everyone. The very notion of "insurrection" had to be adapted to the novel character of the events. In fact, during many months the revolt demanded the intelligence of every one of us who was surprised by its occurrence. What was this unexpected event telling us? Each one prioritized one aspect. According to some, the cause of all that happened had to be found in a Buenos Aires' Peronist conspiracy against the weak government of the time. Others believed they could see behind the strings that move the marionettes the implacable organization of certain proven revolutionaries. There were even some who scorned all that happened, attributing it to a middle class whose savings in dollars had been seized. Be that as it may, the most probable is that all these versions are at once as truthful as they are insufficient to give account of the effective dynamic of what occurred.

The insurrection of December had a de-stituent³ character. Its overwhelming efficacy consisted - precisely - in its revocatory power. The cacerolas⁴ and the slogans covered all the urban space. The ant-like presence of human bodies, the occupation of the city, and the saturation with noises that not only did not transmit any message, but rather impeded that anything could really be said. The conditions of institutional elaboration of social demands were radically interrupted. And when they could speak they insisted: "All of them out, not a single one should remain." The closure of the space and conditions of communication with the political system rendered evident the rupture of the political mediations, revealed the impotence of the party and governmental institutions, and opened an interrogation (festive and anguishing) over the collective future of the Argentines.

² In Spanish there are two words for power, *poder* and *potencia*, whose origin can be traced, respectively, to the Latin words *potestas* and *potentia*. In general, *poder* refers to transcendent forms of power, such as state power, and *potencia* refers to power that exists in the sphere of immanent, concrete experience. To maintain this distinction we will indicate it between brackets when the original term used is *potencia* (Tr.).

³ We have chosen to use the expression de-stituent as a translation of the Spanish word *destituyente*, which makes reference to the power that unseats a regime, in order to preserve the resonances that indicate a power opposite to that which institutes or that which is part of a constitutive process. We use the hyphen to avoid confusion with the English word destitution, which carries connotations of impoverishment (Tr.).

⁴ Loud banging on saucepans or cacerolas by large crowds has been a common practice in the recent uprisings in Argentina (Tr.).

The insurrection unleashed a rupture with multiple effects. One on side - and from the beginning it became evident that the irruption of the street multitude in the city disturbed in a conclusive manner the functioning of powers. Not only were the powers of the state, the repressive forces, and the government functionaries affected by the unexpected irruption of an important segment of the population, but the effects of such alteration were registered in evident movements in the economy, in forms of inhabiting the city, in business decisions, in the relationship with banks, in the communication policy of the large media, in the field of the social sciences, in the form in which politicians, militants, a good part of the artistic and cultural field, etcetera, conducted themselves. The combination of default, devaluation, and political crisis turned the country into no man's territory, where the daily demonstrations joined defrauded ahorristas⁵ with piqueteros⁶ and caceroleros⁷ together with audacious tourists who came to learn at low price about the becomings of the "Argentine revolution."

Another consequence of the rupture of December 2001 was the visibilization of a heterogeneous set of forms of social protagonism that arose in dissimilar periods and in relation to different problematics and that, until December, were hardly known, taken into account, and valorized. The root of the new protagonism has to do, of course, with peripheral capitalism in crisis. But the new protagonism is not a mere reaction. The power (potencia) of Argentina's current events takes root, precisely, in the emergence of these subjectivities that have, for many years, experienced⁸ new modalities of sociability in various spheres of their existence.

Although today it seems evident, by those days of December the then vigorous piquetero movement was practically unknown. Despite the fact that their existence built upon many years of struggle in all the territory of the country, only few months earlier had they become widely known because of their coordinated roadblocks. But in those roadblocks they were harassed, and the very parties of the left - that despised them for years - desperately came to construct their own piquetero movements only a few short months before the insurrection. The initiatives of various piquetero organizations in their respective territories - linked to food, health, housing, education, recreation, etc. remained, for a long time, totally unknown for a significant part of the population. Almost as unknown as the piqueteros were different nodes, networks, and circuits of barter that came to bind millions of people in the hardest moments of the crisis. After many years of development, their extension came to be so large that it was even accepted that the currency of some of the networks could count as valid currency for the payment of municipal taxes. The figure of the *prosumer*⁹ had not been appreciated as the subjective experience that sought to combine in the same space productive capacities and consumer satisfaction, displacing financial,

⁵ Literally "savers". Argentines who had money in banks found themselves facing a government imposed one thousand dollar per month limit on cash withdrawals. This limit, known as the *corralito*, has sparked actions by ahorristas, people demanding access to their money (Tr.).

⁶ *Piquetero* literally means picketer. Unemployed people in Argentina have staged pickets that block roads and thus disrupt the flow of commodities, in order to demand that their needs be met (Tr.).

⁷ A *cacerolero* is a demonstrator wielding a cacerola as a noisemaker. Unlike *piqueteros*, who come from the least privileged sectors of the population, *caceroleros* were mostly workers with jobs, professionals, students, small business owners, and, more generally citizens identified as members of the "middle class" (Tr.).

⁸ In the usage given here, the Spanish verb *experimentar* connotes both experiment and experience (Tr.).

⁹ *Producer + consumer*. The barter clubs were, as originally conceived, spaces to exchange goods and services that had to be produced by the people who were trading them. (Tr.)

bureaucratic, and commercial mediations. The same can be said of the succession of businesses occupied by their workers (large numbers of factories, workshops, printing shops, bars, etc.) in various cities throughout the country after they were embezzled by the owners. These were the object of attention for the institutional left only when it believed it had found there the resurgence of an absent working class subject.

All these experiences to which we could add, among others, that of the *escraches* initiated by the group H.I.J.O.S.¹⁰ against the unpunished genocide of the last dictatorship, or the struggles carried out by the *Mapuches*¹¹ in the Argentine south and the organization of *campesino* initiatives in the north of the country, as with the case of the Movement of *Campesinos* of Santiago del Estero - were more or less known, but remained in relative isolation. The events of December provoked a visibilization as well as a mutual relation and, in some way, a generalization - between them and with those that rose up massively to participate or to know those initiatives. A third virtue of the rupture had to do with the multitudinous emergence of hundreds of assemblies in the urban centers of the country. As thousands of neighbors met to elaborate - in a collective manner - what happened in December, they discovered a space of politicization in the light of the expansion of the new social protagonism. The de-stitution of the political institutionality and of the parties as instruments of management or transformation of reality placed before the assembly members the dilemma of elucidating new modalities of instituting collective life and attending immediate necessities. From the beginning, the assemblies - born after the 20th of December - became crossed with such tensions as whether to privilege the space of the neighborhood, experimenting there with initiatives linked to the territory, or whether, on the contrary, to try to sustain the revocatory political capacity of the *cacerolas*, while they debated what to do with the parties of the left that sought to coopt the neighbors' meetings toward the orientations of their own apparatuses.

Strictly speaking, all the possibilities were unfolded: there were those who dedicated themselves to the political conjuncture, or to every type of initiative linked to the neighborhood, and even those who remained trapped in the networks of the parties of the left, in addition to different combinations between these variants. The assemblies protagonized - during 2002 - the creation of popular eateries, solidarity actions with the *cartoneros*¹², confluences with the *piquetero* movements, inter-assembly experiments, demonstrations, *escraches*, and, in some cases, fulfilled a very rich experience of politicization for their members.

¹⁰ H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio - Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence) is a human rights organization created by the children of those "disappeared" and murdered by the 1976-1983 dictatorship. An *escrache* consists in demonstrating in front of the house of former torturers in order to expose their ongoing impunity, occupying public space with colourful signs, graffiti, and street artists (Tr.).

¹¹ The *Mapuche* are an indigenous people living in the province of Neuquen in southern Argentina (as well as in the neighbouring region of Chile). Many *Mapuche* communities have been expelled from their homes as part of land seizures designed to facilitate the exploitation of the natural gas and petroleum deposits. *Mapuche* in the Loma de Lata region have been found to have high concentrations of heavy metals in their blood due to water and ground contamination linked to natural resource exploitation. (Tr.)

¹² *Cartoneros* - literally "cardboard men" - make their living picking through trash, sifting for recyclable and resaleable materials. The Argentinean government estimates there may be as many as 40,000 *cartoneros* combing the streets of Buenos Aires on any given night. (Tr.)

On the side of the events that generated the rupture one might point out a whole set of precedents that operated decisively in its unleashing: experiences of struggle - like those we just described - whose origins can be found in an accumulation of discontents and unsatisfied demands; overlapping memories of lost struggles and frustrated hopes; the helplessness of millions of people by the crude effects of neoliberalism.

But perhaps it is fitting to speak of a second type of historicity, linked to a certain capacity to read the changes operated in the forms of social reproduction and in the efficacy of political mediations that in some way regulated social co-existence. In this manner, the rejection of politicians, for example, is not only related to a corporative or neoliberal vision of the world, incredulous of collective actions, but also feeds into an ensemble of frustrations derived from the promises of the democratic re-opening from 1983 to the end of 2001.

II. Phenomenology of an apparent reconstruction

The arrival of the government of Eduardo Duhalde, in January 2002, set in motion the delicate process of reconstructing statality after the rupture of December. Until that moment, we witnessed a pathetic succession of presidents elected by the legislative assembly to finish the term of the unseated Alianza president, De la Rúa. The arrival of Duhalde implied, in the first place, a hiatus in this crazy dynamic.

The primary objective of the Duhalde government consisted in calming spirits and preventing more deaths. In second place, it reorganized - in time - the conditions of the new scheme for reassigning resources, and restituted the link with the financial system.

The declaration of default by the prior government of Rodríguez Saa was followed by the devaluation of the peso - that is to say, the end of the peso/dollar convertibility - and the immediate upsetting of prices, the debasement of products, the suspension of services, the breaking of all contracts in dollars (debts, deposits, etc.) The growth of poverty and indigence followed in geometric proportions.

As an effect of this end of the rules of the game in the total absence of a power capable of proposing new regulations, the summer of 2002 was a generalized chaos in which, as usually happens, the main benefits were for those who possessed more resources to confront the situation: the banks (compensated by the state for the pesification), the large debtors in dollars whose debts were pesified, the large land owners and agrarian producers, and the transnational export consortia for whom the high dollar is a source of enrichment.

The political landscape fragmented around three large blocs. On one side, those who openly promoted dollarization, entry into the FTAA, and the use of the armed forces as an instance for controlling social conflict (Menem and López Murphy being the visible faces of the project). On the other side, the pesification-devaluation bloc, in power through Duhalde (and now the recently elected government of Néstor Kirchner). Finally, the heterogeneous bloc of the forces of the center left, left, alternative unionism, and the more consolidated expressions of struggle that pronounced themselves for a new form of taking political decisions and producing and distributing wealth.

Duhalde's arrival in office was possible fundamentally for three reasons: (a) the breakdown of the pact of domination installed by Carlos Menem in which hegemony corresponded to the nucleus of privatized businesses and the transnational financial sector; (b) the strength of Buenos Aires Peronism,¹³ whose level of organization and of penetration in the most impoverished strata of the population allowed it to avoid the generalization of the conflict by means of distributing some two million of social plans¹⁴ of about 50 dollars monthly; (c) because in front of the breakdown of the political powers this party capital allowed the Buenos Aires Peronism to impose itself with ease as the ultimate guarantor of the remains of the political system.

The main contribution of the Duhalde government had as its fundamental merit the fact of surviving the game of crossed pressures and, particularly, the constant threat of the cacerolas. In this respect it is fitting to recall Duhalde's phrase as he just assumed the presidency (having actually lost in the presidential elections against De la Rúa): "with assemblies one cannot govern." The second period of the recomposition of the political system occurred at the beginning of the second semester and revolved around three aspects: (a) the arrival of the minister of the economy Lavagna, and his serene politics of compatibilization of interests together with the first harvest Duhalde collected for that mere fact of "enduring" that permitted to calm down the inflation of the dollar and produce a moderate growth of the benefited economic sectors; (b) the distribution of social plans oiled the political apparatuses, which by means of the networks of clientelism achieved the consolidation of a certain social tranquility; (c) the increasing repression in the neighborhoods, which found its highest point in the massacre of Puente Pueyrredon the 26th of June, 2002.¹⁵

It was precisely the scandal provoked by this massacre that obligated then president Eduardo Duhalde to set a date for the succession of the next government, at the time that admitted the impossibility of normalizing the situation in the predicted time frame, circumstances that explain the anticipation of the elections' dates.

¹³ Peronism is the name given to the movement founded by Juan Domingo Perón in the late 1940s. During its complex history, the features of Peronism that have remained constant have been its populism, pragmatism, and dependence on strong leaders. After the expulsion of De la Rúa by the revolt of December 2001, Partido Justicialista, Peronism's official party structure, was almost unanimously supported by the political establishment as the most secure means to reestablish institutional continuity. Peronist senator Eduardo Duhalde was appointed provisional president in January 2002 after three members of his party failed to form a sustainable government. During the 1990s, when he was the governor of Buenos Aires, Duhalde consolidated a powerful network of support in that province whose visible side includes the exchange of votes for assistance plans and political favours. Journalistic investigations have revealed that these networks also include connections with organized crime and the provincial police of Buenos Aires. Duhalde openly put this political machine (or what was left of it after the downfall of representative politics) to work for Nestor Kirchner's electoral campaign. (Tr.)

¹⁴ In the late 1990s, Argentina's federal government created monthly subsidies for unemployed workers specially designed to appease the rising wave of roadblocks and uprisings of single-company towns such as Cutral-có, Tartagal, Mosconi, and Ledesma. These subsidies became known as "Planes Trabajar" (Work Plans) and are administered in different ways by piquetero organizations. During the Duhalde administration, the subsidies changed name to "Planes Jefes y Jefas de Hogar" (Head of Household Plans). The subsidies have also been extensively used by the networks of clientelism of political apparatuses. (Tr.)

¹⁵ On June 26, 2002, police attacked a group of piqueteros conducting a roadblock on the Puente Pueyrredon bridge. Police shot and killed two protesters, injured ninety, and arrested over one hundred, sparking massive demonstrations in response. (Tr.)

The anticipation of the dates influenced, then, the three virtuous tendencies on the basis of which the government proceeded to carry out its program of reconstruction of a minimum of institutionality: (a) the consolidation of the dollar price, and even its reduction, and the inevitable even impetuous recuperation of an economy that did not stop falling for almost 4 consecutive years. This point was enormously relevant since the ability of the government in this aspect allowed it to achieve - as a triumph - an agreement with the IMF and a feeling of progressive exit from the crisis, at the time that it committed the next government - among other things - to obtain an enormous fiscal surplus for the payment of the external debt; (b) the opening of an electoral dynamic, even over the remains of the political parties, and in conditions frankly unfavorable for the candidates, none of whom had even a low level of popularity - the Radical Civic Union¹⁶ and the Frepaso¹⁷ (both making up the Alianza) have virtually disappeared; and Duhalde himself prevented the Peronists from presenting one single candidate, forcing the three internal lines to present themselves in separate lists. And (c) increasing levels of repression of the experiences of counterpower: on one side, the persecution of young piquetero leaders in the neighborhoods, many times at the hands of armed groups without uniforms, and the reactivation, on the other side, of the judicial apparatus, which in a few months ordered - before the first electoral return - the eviction of factories occupied by their workers (the test case but not the only case being that of the workers of Brukman¹⁸) and of tens of occupations (some of them by neighborhood assemblies), as well as the detention of important piquetero leaders from Salta.

The last months before the elections many began to perceive with worry that the fragmentation of the political system could come to generate an unforeseen eventuality: the return of Menem. In effect, the slogan "all of them out, not a single one should remain" seemed, then, to have remained obstructed in its own paradoxical nature: given that someone was going to stay, it could be that the candidate to remain would be precisely the one whose insensitivity with respect to the processes of social rebellion was most evident.

The possibility that Menem could return, sustained by a by no means negligible percentage of the population - some 20% of the electorate suddenly turned into a frightening factor for a large majority. One should add that before the elections at least two circumstances took place whose structure anticipated the dynamic that would become visible with the elections.

In the first place was the American, English, Polish, Spanish, etc. invasion of Iraq. On one hand, the concentrated military power decided and executed a war that was scandalous no less for its intentions than for its effects. But in parallel a gigantic movement against the invasion unfolded. Both phenomena were able to coexist without mutually affecting each other: each one developed in a parallel path.

¹⁶ The Union Civica Radical (UCR) is a centrist political party lead by De la Rúa. (Tr.)

¹⁷ The Frente Pais Solidario or National Solidarity Front is a coalition of five political parties. In 1999 Frepaso made a coalition (the Alianza) with the UCR in order to challenge the electoral power of the Peronist Partido Justicialista. (Tr.)

¹⁸ Brukman is a coat factory which was occupied and operated by workers from December 2001 to April 2003. The Brukman workers were forcibly evicted by police because, in the words of an Argentinean federal judge "life and physical integrity have no supremacy over economic interests." (Tr.)

In second place, less than a week before the election, a demonstration of some ten thousand people gathered in support of the workers of the recently evicted recuperated factory of Brukman was savagely repressed. At only days from the election repression materialized in the downtown core of the city of Buenos Aires, with a savagery radically incompatible with any consideration about the civil rights that were, supposedly, being restored with the elections of April 27th. And so, the first electoral return comes about in the midst of this climate. In the previous days, the communication media won over the space of public discussion with polls that gave as the winner Carlos Menem and as possible second place the pure neoliberal candidate - former leader of the UCR - Ricardo López Murphy.

The result of the first electoral return turned out to be a relative surprise: something less than 80% of the electorate voted. The number of blank and nullified votes was not significant. The list headed by Menem returned first with 24% of the vote. The official list came after with 22%. López Murphy was third, followed by the Peronist Rodríguez Saá, and falling behind him, Elisa Carrió - also former leader of the UCR but of the center left tendency.

The parties of the traditional left, all together, received less than 3% of the votes. After the first electoral return two effects clearly appeared: on one side, the politicians obtained a place in the public sphere almost exclusively by means of the communication media, and, on the other side, the polls rapidly forecasted that Nestor Kirchner would demolish Carlos Menem with some 70% against some 20%.

Kirchner's performance in the first return reaped a good part of its scarce votes thanks to the Buenos Aires apparatus that Duhalde leads, in a way that only in the second return the official candidate was going to benefit from the support of an anti-Menemist electorate that in the first return split its vote among the other three candidates.

Of the three weeks that separated the election of April 27th from the election that should have been conducted Sunday the 18th of May, the first two were characterized by massive support for Kirchner by leaders of almost every party. Even the support received by Menem in the first return began to migrate toward the quarters of the assured next president. In this context Menem refused to participate in the second return, accusing Duhalde of organizing an electoral fraud, and Kirchner of being a Montonero.¹⁹

In this way, the success that the first electoral return implied for the recomposition of a representative institutionality was interrupted as the second return was frustrated and a government elected by a large percentage of the electorate could not be proclaimed. The new government appeared thus trapped by the persistence of the logic of the Mafia-State and without being able to effect its political capital - or popularity - in an immediate manner. This situation

¹⁹ The Montoneros were an armed organization of young Peronists founded in 1970. Its core ideas combined elements of historical Peronism with revolutionary Christianity and left-nationalism. By the mid-1970s, after merging with other revolutionary organizations, Montoneros became the largest group of the revolutionary left. First the death squads formed by the Peronist right, and later those created by the military junta, murdered and disappeared thousands of Montonero militants. Many others went into exile. In the 1990s many former Montonero leaders gave support to Carlos Menem's neoliberal administration. Other former Montoneros, dissident of their former leaders, have given support to the government of Nestor Kirchner. (Tr.)

should be read in light of the reconfiguration of the totality of the political system that will be carried out this year through the elections of the government of the city of Buenos Aires, of the government of the Province of Buenos Aires, of Cordoba, and of national legislators.

III. The ballot boxes and the streets

And so, as was hoped, the first strategies of reflection on the relation between the effects of the events of December 2001 and the elections of April -May of 2003 have begun circulating. These arguments could be gathered in two large sets of conclusions, each one arrived at - with all its nuances- from an opposing perspective.

The first set of arguments sustains the idea that there is no political legacy to the events of the 19th and 20th. The possibility of organizing a political revolution starting from that discontent - if that was an authentic possibility - has been definitively exhausted. The political left has been completely neutralized. It is not that there are not great discontents - or that greater ones can not be foreseen - but rather that the existent demands have not been organized from outside the political system, which now permits the restoration of the proper institutional procedures for the mediation of such conflicts. It is not that there has not been a profound crisis, nor that it has been resolved. Rather, the crisis logically generated discontents, and now it is all about dealing with those issues towards the normalization of social co-existence through political methods. From this angle, the realization of the first electoral return possesses a very special significance, since it constitutes a very important step in the moderation of spirits. Although frustrated, the second return confirmed a climate of withdrawal of the extremes. The threat of antipolitics was conjured. If this first strategy of reflection is festive, the second set is of lament for a lost opportunity: the events of December were the beginning of a possible revolution. But for that, it was necessary to endow the discontent with a political program, an organization, a perspective. One can polemicize over the characteristics of these organizational forms or over the scope of these perspectives, but one can not deny that these are the conditions for the elaboration of a political alternative. The fundamental error committed by those who participated in the revolt - and above all by those who participated in autonomous experiences - was to have tangled themselves up in the paradoxical structure of the slogan "all of them out, not a single one should remain." In this way, they lost sight of the complexity of the political struggle to end up each one hidden in his/her refuge, with an idealist discourse and some abstractly horizontal practices.

Both readings oppose each other in perspective but confirm the same image of what happened: the elections occupied the center of the political dispute and one of the contenders as it seems simply did not constitute itself at that scene, abandoning the battlefield and signing in this way its defeat. If the forces unleashed in December did not show up in the electoral act, it is because that December has already ceased to exist. Thus April-May of 2003 constitute the evidence of a retroactive defeat of that which could have happened after December of 2001. The lesson appears transparent: the political system is frankly on its way toward resurrection, and the forces of counterpower have become entangled in a foreseeable political infantilism.

Both perspectives correspond with the same reading over the facts of the 19th and 20th as a founding moment and an opportunity for developing a political revolution. Only that while the first feared this possibility, the second desired it. And both hold, in striking coincidence, the same

image of politics as a game of two on the same plane, with homogeneous rules of the game: as if they were dealing with a game of chess. In this way, things are presented as a match in which the Political System, Power or the State was "staking everything" against Popular Power, the Politics of Horizontality or Counterpower. With things set up in this way, the evaluation is unarguable: the experiences of counterpower should have to mature, learn how to "do politics," begin the long march (as with Lula and the PT) that would lead them, sometime, to become an authentic option of power (poder).

And nevertheless, the ruptures are not other than that: ruptures. A de-stituent power doesn't necessarily work following the requirements of that which institutes. December 2001 was not the appearance of a political subject. This is why no such subject has become manifest. There was, indeed, a rupture, and a visibilization of a new social protagonism. But this protagonism is what it is precisely because it does not understand politics the way it was understood a decade ago. This is why it is not prudent to lament that these forces have not acted as if they were this subject. Yet there is more: the effects of the events of the 19th and 20th were so radical - and endure to such a point - that the elections were completely affected by them. But this by no means allows to establish a direct *a priori* relation between the street struggles and the elaboration of experiences of counterpower and the result of the elections as such.

In fact, the same people that have participated, voting for this or that candidate, are in many cases the ones who later participate in the alternative experiences of counterpower. Or better still: they are not the same, since one is not the same in the polling booth and in the assembly, or the roadblock. Each place is instituted according to heterogeneous rules: if the elections attempt to represent all that exists and, for that reason, decree the nonexistence of that which it does not manage to capture and measure, the experiences of counterpower, to the contrary, exist only in situation, in a territory, a spatiality, a bodily disposition and a self-determined time.

We don't say that there is no relation between the two. We can not deny that both ambits affect each other in a relevant way. We do say, however, that there is no *a priori* relation between them. We are dealing with dynamics that are heterogeneous - in their constitution. To transfer the power (potencia) of a situation to what happened in the elections, leads to its dissolution. And, on the contrary, to order a situation starting from a global reading of the elections leads to the destruction of the possibilities of such a situation.

We no longer are in the chess game. There is not one single dimension. There does not exist a single set of given rules. As a friend once said, this is not about the whites against the blacks but about the blacks against the chessboard. While the whites move in a certain manner, respecting certain rules and preserving certain goals, the blacks can very well alter what is expected of them. This can give birth to another operation, create new strategies, annul all pre-established objectives and experience new becomings. It might be said that all this is no more than an impossible flight on the part of some black pieces that would be committing suicide. But this is not true. To escape the instituted does not have to be an idealist trait. In fact, the blacks should take much into account the board and above all the movements of the whites. But - this time as a function of another game: that which they intend to play, since it is not true that to do our own game we must first win within a game that we aren't interested in.

To kick over the board, then, is not to ignore it nor to scorn the consequences. On the contrary, it is only by intending to play something else that one gets to know the complexity of the power relations. That is why to think of an "a priori non-relation" does not indicate a mutual absence of affection, but rather it shows us that such affections exist as a clash of forces of different natures. Each of them develops a priori in an independent manner (in the sense that the dynamic of one does not depend directly on the dynamic of the other) and has no preconceived type of relation (causal, of correspondence), and, at the same time, there is no reason to discard the fact that their evolution brings them to certain confluences, to march parallel or to clash in a direct way, producing all types of configurations, including unexpected ones.

And in this case it turns out that the political dynamic has fractured. On one side, power institutionalizes itself, seeks to normalize itself. And for that reason it finds itself in an atrocious combat to manage to do what before the rupture of December it accomplished without major problems: carry out primaries within the parties, select candidates and elect governments that take office with some legitimacy starting from a determined accumulation of votes. On the other side, the forces of counterpower gain time, organize themselves, argue, carry out the most varied of actions. As it can be seen, the consequences of the 19th and 20th continue to act in permanent manner across the social field, as condition - of de-stitution - including for those who struggle to play different games.

IV. Phenomenology of counterpower

Counterpower is not much more than the combination of resistances to the hegemony of capital. That is to say: such a *multiplicity* of practices that is not thinkable in its unity (as a homogeneous movement) and, at the same time, a *transversality* capable of producing resonances - of clues and hypotheses - among different experiences of resistance.

The formula "to resist is to create" speaks of the paradox of counterpower: on one side, resistance appears as a second moment, reactive and defensive. Nevertheless, "to resist is to create": resistance is that which creates, that which produces. Resistance is, therefore, first, autoaffirmative and, above all, does not depend on that which it resists.

In effect, in Argentina a combination of networks has emerged that work around experiences of health, alternative education and economy, assemblies, occupation of factories, roadblocks, etc. These experiences are heterogeneous in relation to each other. These networks tend - and not always succeed - to autonomize themselves with respect to the command of capital to the same extent that the latter cannot include or integrate them socially, but rather it only excludes. If the *crisis* is at the base of these resistences, it is no less true that the subjectivities forged there have given way to dynamics that transcend the times and penetrate the causes of the crisis. Among the most important characteristics of these resistences there are: (a) the fusion between vital reproduction and politics; (b) a better comprehension of the possibilities of the relation between institutions (the State) and power [potencia], and (c) the confrontation as form of protection and as truth of counterpower.

Since capitalism works by managing life, resistences are precisely bioresistences. There is no

sphere of existence in which one does not find practices of resistance and creation. These networks possess a growing capacity of resources to the extent that they develop in expansive dynamics, linking producers among themselves, producers with consumers, inventing new forms of interchange without mediations by mafias, etc.

If we have used sometime the image of a *parallel society* to describe these circumstances, we have done it *in spite of* - and not in virtue of - the association that this image carries with it with respect to a supposed isolation. The experiences of power (potencia) are not *small separate worlds*, but rather that which *produces the world*, that succeeds in *instituting experience* where apparently there is pure devastation (*desert*). Far from thinking of separation, power (potencia) produces connection, but does it following a different modality from those "centers" (of power [poder]) with respect to which, as they tell us, "we should not isolate ourselves" (the State, "serious" politics, the parties, etc). The experiences of resistance are, precisely, those which invent new forms of taking charge of the public, the *common*, beyond the determinations of the market and the State. It is not about abandoning politics - in the sense of engendering collective destinies - but about the emergence of other ways of configuring tendencies and influences in society. And so, what happened to the movement of resistance? Is there, in effect "a" movement? We have seen above that power (poder) works starting from its own requirements: subordinating life to the valorization of capital, conquering territories and business opportunities, obtaining cheap labor power, making for itself a legality that permits it to move itself at full speed without remaining tied to anything or anyone.

Capital combines control of power (potencia) and subjectivity, of nature and of that produced by science and, in general, the culture of the peoples with abandonment, exclusion, and violence. It is not possible to combat the hegemony of capital as a social relation as if we were dealing with something purely exterior, which has its roots in the halls of government. Essentially, there is no other form of attacking capital without seeing, at the same time, that its power is that of sadness, powerlessness, individualism, separation, the commodity. Hence, there is not any combat against capitalism other than that which consists of producing other forms of sociability, other images of happiness, another politics that no longer separates itself from life.

This poses, nevertheless, a problem when on one side we realize that there is no creation but in situation, but at the same time the confrontation leads us to exit it, to converge with others with whom we must unite in order to develop the struggle.

And, in effect, the development of power (potencia), in situation, leads us to fortify the line of counterpower to defend alternative experiences. Nevertheless, these are not two different things. It is not necessary to abandon the terrain of the situation in order to meet the line of counterpower. The line of counterpower is reached from inside.

The defensive line of the struggles unfolds at the time that hypotheses develop at the interior of each experience, at the time that right there we experience the appearance of new values, of new modes of life.

One of the problems that are posed when there is an attempt to "organize the resistances in a single movement" is precisely the abandonment of the situation in order to organize the struggle.

When this happens, everything is reduced to a discussion of organizational models (of coordination/articulation) as if it were all about getting it right with an adequate technique, abandoning the organic relation between the situations and their requirements and counterpower as a moment internal to the situations themselves.

Thus, the situation is displaced. Counterpower appears organized as a movement whose unity and coherence are placed in front of (and imposed upon) the situations themselves "from outside." The capacity for confrontation appears magnified: everything else "can wait." Or it is proposed that the "work with the grassroots" must be subordinated to or be organized starting from-- "the conjuncture."

Between centralism and dispersion, however, power (*potencia*) offers a trajectory of composition between the situations: multiplicity can react without being organized from outside. The example of the autonomous piquetero movements is very clear: while in the neighborhoods there are attempts to produce in other mode, putting together bands of street musicians, workshops for the children, dispensaries, bakeries, and forms of self-government, a physical barrier for the protection of all they are producing is constituted. There are advances in multiple forms of coordination, and of circumstantial alliances whose priority is to preserve the experience. In light of this discussion, the tragic confrontation of June 26th can be thought of as a point of inflection for the movement of counterpower. This massacre brings back the echoes of a previous one, that of June of '73 in Ezeiza,²⁰ equally decisive at the time for comprehending what is usually called political *ebb*: moments in which what happens at the level of the situation is disvalorized by effect of the defeats suffered at the level of the coordination (of the movement). This is the effect sought by power (*poder*): to ponder the forces of counterpower by their capacity of coordination in a determinate moment; and to spread this image of the relations of force as warning to all the experiences.

On June 26th clashed, on one side, the logic of the gang, of the old task groups of the dictatorship convoked now by the private security firms, the logic of hunting and slaughter, and, on the other side, the dynamic of the protection of the column to back the retreat. While from power (*poder*) the clash is sought, from counterpower the clash is not produced in order to measure forces, or to advance over power (*poder*) by way of force, but rather to affirm itself, to protect the comrades, to pressure and conquer unemployment relief packages - in order to help sustain the workshops, etc, to demand freedom for the imprisoned comrades.

Behind the notion of *ebb* there is a frustrated expectation of imminent political revolution. In effect, the 19th and 20th of December were read as the signal that the crisis of neoliberalism opened the course of a political revolution. The demonstrations of the assemblies to the Plaza de Mayo prefigured the next constituent assembly. The march of the piqueteros with their hidden faces was a glimpse into a popular army in formation. The occupied factories revealed the red grassroots of

²⁰ On June 20th, 1973, a crowd of half a million people gathered at the highway that goes to Ezeiza, Buenos Aires' international airport, to welcome Perón, who was returning to the country after having lived in exile since 1955. Elements of the Peronist right set a trap for the radical groups attending the event. As they were trying to escape, hundreds of members of the Peronist youth and other radical groups were killed, while many others were injured or tortured. The Ezeiza massacre was a turning point that signaled the beginning of the repressive backlash against the radical movements. (Tr.)

an insurrectional proletariat and the barter nodes - in case they were considered - an alternative to the functioning of the capitalist economy.

Thus, 2002 was lived as hope and frustration: the nodes of barter had to sacrifice the figure of the *prosumer* to assist millions of persons that exceeded all prevision and interrupted the reflection that was being gestated in those networks over the role of money and over the forms of autoregulation of the nodes. Inflation appeared, as did shortage of goods, counterfeiting of money, and the incapacity to regulate the flows of credit, persons, and products.

The piquetero movement - above all in its autonomous versions - was strongly attacked at the time it had to face an accelerated increase of its ranks, at such velocity that it became very difficult for it to assimilate everything to the productive dynamic under development. The assemblies, after attracting thousands of people wore themselves out in eternal struggles with the parties of the left.

In the end, those which essentially constitute lines of exploration, of situational production of alternative forms of social reproduction, were invaded by the expectation that such practices should present themselves as *alternative* (symmetric) *institutions* to those of the market and the State. To project over these practices a will to alternativeness and to convert them into global substitutes for the dominant institutions implies to neglect the specific quality of those becomings as well as to interrupt their experimentation in the name of a majority logic that judges them not for what they are - in their multiplicity -, but rather for that they should "come to be".

Ebb, then, is a mystifying category. The discouragement that announces it arises from a frustrated belief: that the new social protagonism could be conceived as a new politics in the scene of power (poder). It is clear that, as a politics, the new social protagonism - or counterpower - would not give place to just one more politics, but rather to one founded in the most positive features of some experiences of resistance such as horizontality, autonomy, and multiplicity. These authentic keys to counterpower were thus taken as a combination of universal and abstract answers - an ideology - apt for an a priori resolution of the dilemmas of the every situation.

This is not a question of reclaiming optimism, but rather of revising - if there was such a will - this mechanism. The *ebb* and the disillusionment - if they exist - represent the perception of a lost occasion, of the unfinished political revolution, the failure of a politics. Such representation proves to be even less appropriate if the endurance of the struggles, the emergence of new experiences, and the development of an extended and profound inquiry are established.

Perhaps the 19th and 20th did not as much announce a coming revolution as they do a rupture. It is not that the very idea of revolution is not at stake there is no reason to resign from it but that such revolution has appeared as a demand for a new concept: rebellion, revolt and the subversion of *subjective modes of doing*.

Buenos Aires, May 5th, 2003

Hasta siempre,

Colectivo Situaciones