

# CIVIL SOCIETY, HUMAN RIGHTS STRUGGLES AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN ARGENTINA AND RUSSIA: SOME BRIEF COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS

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*Editorial note. This joint conclusion is based on the paper by Daucé and Peruzzotti published in this issue of Laboratorium. See those papers for authors' contact information.*

The late 1980s and early 90s saw an upsurge in comparative research on civil society in Latin America and Eastern Europe. At the time, scholars supported the idea of a “third wave of democratization,” and Latin America was presented as a model for post-communist countries. Civil societies in both regions were analyzed comparatively. Emblematically, the Russian Soldiers’ Mothers were often compared with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. However, the further evolution of post-communist societies soon discouraged further comparison. This was especially the case for Russia, where social and political change took unforeseen paths. Scholars came to underline the specificity of Russian social structures and traditions to explain this. Given this divergence, why revisit the comparison between Russia and Argentina today? Our answer is that two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, comparative research appears interesting again because the illusions of transitology have disappeared and new research perspectives emerge out of a recognition of the specificity of historical circumstances.

## **PATH DEPENDENCE OR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The first striking difference between Argentina and Russia concerns the dissimilar historical trajectories of both countries. Argentina was an early modernizer in Latin America that reached an unprecedented level of advancement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This translated into the rise of a dense civil society. Economic success, however, was not followed by political institutionalization. Argentina failed in stabilizing a democratic regime for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a peculiar history of political instability, democratic, semi-democratic, and authoritarian regimes succeeded one another without being able to institutionalize themselves as a more permanent type of regime. Political instability and the inability to stabilize either

a democratic or an authoritarian regime were in part due to the fact that different sectors of society enjoyed something close to a veto power over each other. This marks an important contrast with the Russian experience described by Daucé, where a Soviet-type regime reigned unchallenged over society for several decades. The fact that Argentina had a long and rich tradition of democratic struggles and (however intermittent) democratic rule meant that once the transition from authoritarianism was initiated, previously prominent social and political actors immediately returned to center stage: the two main historical political parties (Radicals and Peronists), trade unions, and other interest group organizations. One could thus clearly speak of a “resurrection” of both political and civil society. Russia faced a more fundamental problem: that of creating a civil and political society practically from scratch.

Secondly, the path of transition to democracy has also been different. The Russian political transformation, even though supported by new social movements, was characterized by former communist leaders staying in power. The situation was different in Argentina, which saw a rapid decomposition of the military regime’s power, particularly after it was defeated by the United Kingdom in the Malvinas/Falkland war. In Argentina, a military dictatorship in crisis was forced to relinquish power, pressured by the mobilization of civil and political society. As soon as the power of the military began to crumble due to economic and political mismanagement, Argentina was able to draw on pre-existing political parties and trade unions, as well as on new social movements, to press the dictatorship to accelerate the transfer of power to a civilian government. After the fiasco of the Malvinas/Falkland War, the military as an institution had little bargaining power and was thus forced to relinquish control to a democratic administration without being able to negotiate the terms of its withdrawal from power.

The third difference concerns the emergence and evolution of the human rights movement in both contexts. The Argentine human rights movement was largely fueled by families of the victims, their most famous organizations being the so called Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. The movement grew in isolation, for most of civil and political society did not initially embrace its cause. The human rights movement was a new actor and voice in the Argentine political landscape; it played an important role in the period of democratization and continues to do so under democratic rule. Its discourse and leadership in the final years of authoritarianism helped to awaken and mobilize a preexisting civil and political society that rallied behind its demands for democratization and retribution. The first elected democratic administration of President Raul Alfonsín embraced the human rights agenda, initiating the historic trial of the military Juntas that had ruled the country between 1976 and 1983. For the Alfonsín administration human rights policies were a central aspect of its agenda, and since then it has remained an important public issue. In contrast, as Daucé shows, the Russian human rights movement was unable to draw support from preexisting civic or political networks and organizations other than the dissident movement. Once democracy was established, human rights issues did not figure prominently in the agenda of the new government; and contacts between human rights activists and civil servants were mostly informal and sporadic. Human

rights activists did not have any significant influence over the administration throughout the 1990s and were powerless when confronting episodes such as the Chechen wars.

### LIBERAL INCENTIVES AND LOCAL TRADITIONS

An important issue in the comparison of civil societies and human rights movements in Russia and Argentina is the relationship of human rights discourse with local political traditions. Daucé demonstrates that there was no previous experience of human rights struggles in Russia. Furthermore, she argues that there were no previous democratic experiences that could serve as a socio-cultural basis for the project of democracy-building (even though the first experiences of Dumas after 1905 and the February revolution in 1917 were often quoted at the beginning of the 1990s). Thus dissidents and democratizers were forced to rely on foreign models. Simultaneously, democracy in post-communist countries became an issue that was forcefully promoted by a string of Western governments and international foundations and organizations. In Argentina democratic discourses and experiences had been present since the very origins of the country. One could argue that the importation of liberal and democratic institutions largely took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and those traditions were eventually internalized into distinctive national political traditions. It is important to note, however, that the two main Argentine democratizing movements had been shaped by a populist understanding of democracy that was openly hostile to some elements of liberalism, such as the emphasis on governmental accountability and an autonomous civil society. In fact, the emergence of a politics of human rights under the dictatorship introduced into the Argentine political culture a novelty: a clear demarcation of the terrain of civil society from that of the state and a demand for accountable government. This ran counter to many elements of the populist democratic tradition, generating collective learning processes that challenged certain political legacies which were inhibiting the development of democracy.<sup>1</sup> The history of many of the civic struggles described in Peruzzotti's article indicate that the conflict between opposing understandings of democracy became one of the axes of division between certain sectors of civil society and political elites. Considering the Russian experience, Daucé refers to the discourse of human rights as a Western import. In Argentina, it is important to stress, it was also a marginal discourse: the human rights movement initially found it difficult to enlist domestic support for its cause, and it survived in the most difficult years thanks to the sponsorship of transnational civil society and Western governments. Yet the demand for rights and for accountable government was eventually adopted by large sections of the citizenry. Such processes of political change do not happen overnight. The key question is whether such a process of collective learning took place in certain

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1 The concept of *delegative democracy* coined by Guillermo O'Donnell (1995) was meant to emphasize how local traditions (particularly in countries that shared a common populist past) were distorting the functioning of democratic institutions, leading to a form of democracy that greatly differs from the standard representative model.

segments of Russian society, internalizing this discourse (or elements of it) as part of a new democratic culture, and to what extent it has served as an inspiration for the emergence of a post-human rights generation of social movements and NGOs that could deepen the agenda of rights and the rule of law in new and previously unforeseen directions. Daucé believes that the first experience of human rights politics could lead to such an evolution.

Russian reformers and human rights defenders renounced the Latin American model of transition as it was idealized by political scientists.<sup>2</sup> This theoretical mirage did not survive social realities in Russia. In this country, the opposition between political leaders and human rights defenders is back. The government is unchecked in its control over the country, its opponents powerless in their protest. Civil activists in Russia fell back on social and friendship networks to support their non-governmental organizations. This practice is an inheritance from the Soviet period. Due to the repressive nature of the regime, the dissident movement was structured around closed networks that did not operate in the public sphere. While this was the case of opponents of military rule under the last dictatorship in Argentina, it was largely considered a strategic choice, given the highly repressive nature of the regime. But as soon as processes of liberalization were launched, political mobilization rapidly returned to the public sphere. In this sense, there is in Argentine society a very strong tradition of political and social mobilization. Historically, those engaged in protest and other forms of collective action have been able to gain visibility in the public sphere. This tradition goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when civic organizations gained a strong voice in the public sphere (Sábato 2001). In Russia, on the contrary, after the brief liberal episode of perestroika, activists once more made friends and families an important part of their daily activities. Mixing contradictory values, they are trying to conceive a civil society based on personal ties of proximity instead of developing political checks on the state.

## REFERENCES

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2 The subfield of transitology was soon replaced by an interest in the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that might be hampering the process of democratic consolidation. Unlike transition studies, which focused on the short-term interactions between authoritarian and democratizing elites, the analysis of democratic consolidation emphasized the distorting influence of authoritarian legacies on current political and institutional processes. Its findings eventually opened a discussion (and the new conceptual subfield of qualitology) on how to overcome those legacies through the promotion of cultural and institutional reforms. See Peruzzotti 2004.