

# NEW FORMS OF SOCIAL MOBILIZATION IN DEMOCRATIC ARGENTINA

**Marina Farinetti**

*Marina Farinetti teaches at the School of Politics and Government, National University of San Martín (Argentina). Address for correspondence: Escuela de Política y Gobierno, Paraná 145, 4° Piso, C1017AAC Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. marinafarinetti@hotmail.com. The author wishes to thank three anonymous reviewers and Mariana Heredia for their comments and thoughtful insights, as well as Ricardo A. Gutiérrez for his revisions of the final draft of this article.*

## INTRODUCTION

The process of democratization in contemporary Argentina began in 1983. Since then, government formation has been based on periodically held democratic elections. Nevertheless, there have been serious political crises, which have in various ways affected the stability of most presidents over the period. In 1989, the most profound economic crisis Argentinians had experienced since 1983 resulted in hyperinflation (around 300% per month) and the spread of looting and social unrest in most large cities. Due to the crisis, the first democratically-elected president, Raúl Alfonsín (Unión Cívica Radical, or UCR), had to hand over power to his elected successor, Carlos Menem (Partido Justicialista, or PJ), five months before the scheduled date. In 2001, a comparable socio-economic crisis prompted the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa (UCR).

Social mobilization has been a central component of the successive social and political crises that took place over these years. This article analyzes the main forms of social mobilization linked with labor issues in a broad sense of the term, including the lack of work. It adopts a panoramic point of view, in the manner of an aerial photograph that captures the whole picture as well as the most significant details. At the same time, the analysis of social mobilization offered in this paper has been conceived to facilitate cross-country comparison within (and beyond) the scope of this issue of *Laboratorium*.

My work builds upon Charles Tilly's notion of *repertoires of collective action*. A repertoire of collective action is the set of means a certain social group uses to

present its demands. A repertoire should not be understood only in instrumental terms—as the most suitable means to achieve the desired goals under given circumstances—but also in terms of learned practices and culture. For example, if workers generally use strikes as a means of protest, it is not solely as an efficient tool to achieve their goals, but also as a technique they have learned and incorporated in the work environment. A repertoire involves “a population’s daily routines” and “internal organization,” as well as “a population’s accumulated experience with collective action,” all of which are combined with standards of rights and justice (Tilly 1986:10; also see Tilly 1978 for an overview). This concept can be particularly useful at the initial stages of comparative research. For the same reason, I use the concept of *modular collective action* developed by Sidney Tarrow (1994): a form of collective action—such as strikes, street demonstrations, barricades, and riots, among others—used by various social groups in expressing their respective demands.

Tilly uses the concept of a repertoire of collective action to refer to long-term processes, because repertoires change very slowly. In the case studied here, I focus on repertoire changes that began after the fall of the 1976–83 military dictatorship. That traumatic and bloody period had created a gap in the history of social mobilization in Argentina. The 1970s were characterized by a high level of social radicalization and political conflict. Social and political activists were the target of illegal detention and physical disappearance at the hands of the military. My general hypothesis is that the continuity of the social mobilization repertoire broke down during this period. However, as will be seen in this article, some significant past experiences of social mobilization have proven to be resilient. Thus, section 2 analyses the centrality of labor mobilization in the configuration of the “historic” repertoire of collective action. Section 3 introduces the new forms of social mobilization that emerged in the political and socio-economic context of post-dictatorship Argentina. Sections 4 and 5 examine two paradigmatic cases of the new forms of social mobilization: *piquetes* (road and street blockades)<sup>1</sup> and “social outbreaks” (*estallidos sociales*). These sections discuss whether and how features of the “historic” repertoire persist in the new forms of social mobilization, a topic taken up again in the concluding section along with a discussion of the modular character of the new forms. The analysis is based upon secondary sources as well as (especially in the case of social outbreaks) my own fieldwork.

## ARGENTINA'S HISTORIC REPERTOIRE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Most features of social mobilization in Argentina during the second half of the 20th century are closely linked to the Peronist Party (also known as PJ) as the

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1 According to the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, the term *piquete* refers to: (a) a small group of people displaying posters with statements, political slogans, requests, etc.; (b) a group of people who peacefully or violently try to impose or maintain a strike's claim. However, in this specific case, given the oil industry traditions of the towns involved, the term may be related to the *picadas*, a name that was given to open roads by oil companies, in which they installed different signals or *piquetes* (see Sánchez 1997).

political representative of workers' demands. The expansion of the working class as well as its incorporation into politics took place in the context of a "social revolution" led by Juan Domingo Perón after 1945, following which, as Halperín Donghi (1994:26) writes, "all relations between social groups were suddenly redefined."

Peronism was essential in the emergence and formation of the modern working class in Argentina, and trade unions became a central political and social actor. The support workers gave to Perón, besides being based on new experiences of collective identity at the workplace, was also and primarily based on political identification. As Daniel James points out:

In an important sense the working class was constituted by Perón; its self-identification as a social and political force within national society was, in part at least, constructed by Peronist political discourse which offered workers viable solutions for their problems and a credible vision of Argentine society and their role within it. (James 1993:38).

Peronism gave social conflicts a political content and linked the working class to the state in a particular way.<sup>2</sup> Ricardo Sidicaro (1998:155–157) explains how this happened:

The conflict between the subaltern classes, on the one hand, and almost all factions of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, carried over into the political arena as the antagonism between Peronism and anti-Peronism.

Arguably for the first time since the recent growth in the urban industrial infrastructure, social conflicts were projected from the factory and specific regions of society to the political relations of Argentine society as a whole. The fact that there were unifying political elements transformed the very nature of the conflicts.

Perón emerged as the representative of a social force excluded from the political sphere. According to his doctrine, this political representation would not be fully accomplished by the exercise of formal citizenship rights and through the mediation of political parties. The working class should have privileged access to the state through its own organizations—the trade unions.<sup>3</sup> The interpenetration between Peronist identity and trade unionism, on the one hand, and the nature of the linkage between the state and the unions, on the other, gave labor struggles a remarkable

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2 It is worth noting, following Sidicaro, that despite the centrality of industrial workers in the formation of the working class as a social actor, the two categories are not identical. The Peronist working class was not only composed of industrial workers (Sidicaro 1998:153–154).

3 Peronist discourse about the working class has been analyzed at great length. See, for example, De Ipola 1987; Sigal and Verón 1988.

degree of cohesion and efficiency. Trade unions acted as transmission belts between the state and the workers.<sup>4</sup>

In this configuration, the labor movement was always strongly linked to political struggles. Since the military coup that overthrew Perón in 1955, the legal prohibition of Peronism in elections led to a “dual political system” between 1955 and 1966 (Cavarozzi 1988). The strategy of the Peronists and labor was to destabilize the government in power, be it military or civilian. Trade unions developed a defensive capability anchored in economic conflict and in the symbolic force of the struggle for the return of Perón, in exile since the military coup. In the 1970s trade unions became engaged in a process of social and political radicalization. Further discussion of the historical context is beyond the scope of this article; in short, trade unionism and politicization were two features that strongly shaped labor conflicts in Argentina. It was in that context that Argentina’s historic repertoire of collective action built up around typical forms of labor protest—strikes, street demonstrations, and plant occupations—which were radicalized and adopted by other, non-labor actors from 1955 to 1976.

### **ARGENTINA AFTER THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP**

Raúl Alfonsín, leader of the UCR, defeated the Peronists in the 1983 presidential elections. His campaign was built around the defense of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. A new political era began, marked by public awareness of the heinous crimes of the military government and the hope for justice, change, and a break with the authoritarian past. Democracy and human rights protection were central at the time. The military leaders were tried and convicted for crimes committed during their administration, with its legacy of thousands of people missing and many more illegally detained, kidnapped, tortured, and forced into exile. The human rights movement was the central force of social mobilization during the first years of democracy.

With the beginning of democracy, Peronism reinvented itself as the political opposition, focusing on labor struggles and economic demands. The trade unions succeeded in embracing the economic demands of other sectors of society, in an escalating cycle of social mobilization and economic crisis. It implemented its historic repertoire of protest: sectoral, multi-sectoral, and general strikes expressing economic demands that, in most cases, were shared by a broad cross-section of the population. Trade unions resorted to general strikes repeatedly, achieving high levels of adherence (Farinetti 1999). In 1989, hyperinflation led to an unprecedented increase of poverty among the middle and working classes. Lootings (mainly in search

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4 The industrial relations system that developed in Argentina since the onset of Peronism involved a high degree of state intervention and regulation, the heavy centralization of collective negotiations in every sector, and the preservation of the purchasing power of salaries. See Novick and Catalano 1992. Changes in the Argentine labor movement in the 1990s have been understood as an “epochal change,” related to the breakdown of industrial labor relations; see Palomino 1995.

of food) shocked the public and precipitated the transfer of power from Alfonsín to Carlos Menem.<sup>5</sup>

The Menem administration was faced with the challenge of curbing inflation. In order to do so, it drastically changed the economic model by promoting economic openness and the dollarization of the economy, thus bringing about the unexpected combination of a Peronist government with the internationally hegemonic economic doctrine of the time—neoliberalism. The state's shrinking role (as a result of privatization and the reduction of public employment) rendered vulnerable some previously well-integrated social groups. With Peronists in the government implementing a neoliberal economic program unfavorable to workers, the trade unions initially fought against the privatization of public enterprises but ultimately were reduced to struggling for the survival of their organizations and the preservation of jobs.<sup>6</sup>

The government succeeded in stopping inflation, but the social costs of its economic policy were rampant unemployment, increasing poverty, and high foreign debt.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, allegations of corruption became a central element in the political dispute. Menem lost the 1999 presidential election to an opposition electoral alliance, which tapped into some widely held expectations. The Alliance for Work, Justice, and Education, better known simply as "the Alliance," was made up of the Union Cívica Radical (UCR) and a number of minor parties that joined forces in the Frente País Solidario (FREPASO). However, the newly elected president de la Rúa was likewise unable to straighten out the economy and to sustain policy changes. Nor did the Alliance itself hold together: the governing coalition dissolved after Vice President Carlos Álvarez (FREPASO) resigned due to differences with presidential policies.

On December 19 and 20, 2001, a combination of food looting and popular *cacerolazos* (banging on pots in protest) led to the resignation of the president and reached a level of general social impact that seemed to mark a turning point in Argentine history. The entire population experienced an extreme situation of social chaos and political crisis. De la Rúa resigned on the night of December 20 with no clear successor. After a series of four provisional presidents, the next elected president, Néstor Kirchner (PJ), assumed power in December 2003.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Here I will not focus on looting, a very interesting form of collective action that played an important role in the mobilizations of 1989 and 2001. On looting see Auyero 2007. On hyperinflation, see Sigal and Kessler 1997.

6 In Latin America, Presidents Salinas de Gortari in México (1988) and Pérez in Venezuela (1989) also came from originally populist parties but ended up carrying out neoliberal reforms. See Murillo 2005.

7 Some figures can eloquently convey the magnitude of the social costs in the 1990s. In 1983 the unemployment rate was 3.9%. From then on it grew steadily: in 1994 the unemployment rate rose to a two digit-figure (12.2%), and in 2001 it went up to 19%. The population below the poverty line went from 29.4% in 1994 to 57.5% in 2002, while the "destitute" population went from 7.9 to 27.5 % during the same period. Data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census ([www.indec.gov.ar](http://www.indec.gov.ar)).

8 It is worth noting that the four provisional presidents (Fernando Puerta, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, Eduardo Camaño, and Eduardo Duhalde, all from PJ) were selected according to rule of succession stipulated by the Constitution.

With economic recovery and a return to the model of the interventionist state initiated by President Néstor Kirchner after 2003, the trade unions regained some ground and tried to rebuild their “historic” links with Peronist governments. In 2008, under the administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (PJ), an upward social mobilization cycle began. This time the novelty was the social mobilization of the rural population in the midst of a major confrontation with the government over withholding taxes on rural exports, a key factor for both economic growth and state revenues.

Within the period analyzed in this section, the 1990s were a critical time for union activity and the emergence of new forms of labor-related social mobilization. The trade unions underwent significant divisions, and their membership decreased as a consequence of deindustrialization, unemployment, and impoverishment. The trade unions’ ability to represent labor and economic demands and to achieve improvements diminished.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the social sciences did not focus at the time on trade union activities and instead paid a great deal of attention to new forms of social mobilization directly related to the social effects of the neoliberal economic policies: *piquetes* and social outbreaks.

## PIQUETES

According to a study by Federico Schuster and others covering protests from 1989 to 2003, nearly half the protests consisted of trade union strikes and demonstrations. But from 1999 on, there were increasingly more *piquetes* than trade union protests. While in 1992 there was one *piquete* for every seven trade union protests, in 2001 there were twice as many roadblocks as trade union protests (Schuster et al. 2006). Different data confirm the emergence of a new social mobilization phenomenon—the *piquetero* movement. According to Svampa and Pereyra (2005:347), the *piquetero* movement has a twofold origin: on the one hand, the term refers to

the new community experience linked to the collapse of regional economies and to the accelerated privatization of state companies made in the 1990s; on the other hand, it refers to the territorial and organizational action born in suburbs of the City of Buenos Aires, linked to the gradual and profound transformation of the working classes’ world due to the deindustrialization and increasing impoverishment of Argentine society that started in the seventies.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, *piquetes* commanded the general participation and support of local communities and townships. In this first wave of *piquetes*, demands were aimed at

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9 See Murillo 2005 and Armelino 2005. On the diminishing power of trade unions within Peronism, see Gutiérrez 2003.

10 See also Svampa and Pereyra 2003. Among the many works devoted to the *piquetero* phenomenon, I would like to note Scribano 1999; Delamata 2004; and Massetti 2004.

finding realistic solutions to the lack of jobs in the local community, calling for job creation, the establishment of companies, and subsidies for the unemployed.

To depict the initial *piquetes*' most characteristic elements, let us examine some examples in detail. The foundational character of the movement can be seen in protests in two townships in the Patagonian province of Neuquén, Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincul (1996–97), in which the name *piqueteros* was first used to describe protestors. Located very close to each other, both towns were negatively affected by the privatization of the state oil corporation YPF, which caused massive layoffs and the removal of a number of benefits associated with the social role previously played by public companies in those communities (grocery supplies, hospitals, etc). In the first blockade, around 500 demonstrators raised barricades of burning tires across a national route and blocked access to both cities for about seven days. The local press referred to them as *piqueteros*.<sup>11</sup> The first demonstrators were young people, a diverse group that ranged from construction workers to teachers to the self-employed. Then, the *piquete*'s social composition was widened and diversified. Governor Felipe Sapag's presence was requested in the conflict zone, with a concrete proposal involving an unrealized promise to construct a fertilizer plant. The governor, meanwhile, sought to divert the conflict to the national authorities. The demonstrations had no defined leaders. Nevertheless, rules of behavior emerged aiming at cohesion, homogenization, discipline, and role assignment within the group.

Nine months later, a teachers' strike declared in Neuquén in 1997 led to a second roadblock in the oil villages, where a group of young people calling themselves the "stokers" (*fogoneros*) came out. They blocked the access route to Cutral-Co in order to support the teachers' demands. Over a hundred activists participated in the roadblock. After several days, the provincial government appealed to the Gendarmerie (the national border police) for repressive action. By then, the stokers' *piquete* had grown with the support of the villagers. The stokers faced off against the police with the weapons they had at hand: sticks, iron bars, and slings. Violent police repression and provincial police intervention resulted in the death of one woman, Teresa Rodríguez, a fact that deepened and spread the mobilization to the rest of the country. The stokers were somewhat anarchic and did not participate in the assemblies that began gathering around towers (a symbol of the oil industry) in several locations. Various types of people came together in these assemblies: unemployed workers, housewives, state employees, city councilors, and provincial legislators. The assemblies were moving toward a genuine form of organization, with delegates from every sector working on short-, medium-, and long-term demands.

During the first wave of the *piquetero* movement in 1997, another emblematic roadblock was organized in Tartagal and General Mosconi, two towns in the northern province of Salta also severely affected by the privatization of YPF. Again, the diversity of sectors that came together at the roadblock was remarkable. In Salta, according to Benclowicz (2008; also see Barbetta and Lapegna 2001):

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11 See Sánchez 1997. This is one of the sources I used along with the national print media. See also Auyero 2004.

[The social movement was organized] in two separate *piquetes*, each with a well-established social composition. The southern *piquete*, located near the forefront of the repressive forces, was composed mainly of employed and unemployed workers. The northern *piquete* was composed of traders, businessmen, and teachers, among others. The confluence of thousands of unemployed workers in the southern *piquete* and the development of a deliberative popular process involving the actors previously mentioned allowed the visualization of community issues and interests within this social bloc and helped build a new collective subject. When the roadblock consisting of unemployed workers organization was repressed, the entire community came to their defense and the protest thus became a real *pueblada* [township uprising].

From the beginning until the end of the roadblock on May 14 at noon, the functions of the representative system were actually abolished by massive popular assemblies carried out in the road. These deliberative popular initiatives took sovereignty into their own hands, ignoring the elected municipal representatives. In addition, delegates elected to negotiate with national and provincial governments could be recalled and were required to submit any official proposals to the assembly's consideration, which could accept or reject the proposal [...] The assembly mechanism and the growing influence of leftist groups of unemployed workers contributed to the expansion and radicalization of demands.

On Tuesday, May 13, after provincial authorities visited the conflict area, businessmen and merchants were able to satisfy part of their demands and therefore withdrew from the roadblock. But the protest was not over: unemployed workers reinforced their demands for stable jobs, rejecting the government's work plans and unemployment benefits [...] Finally, in a context marked by the constant threat of repression, on the 14th, after a substantial improvement in the government's offer, the roadblock was lifted by the unemployed workers.

From this description of the Neuquén and Salta small-town *piquetes*, two characteristic elements of the roadblock phenomenon are apparent: a panoply of local social actors coming together in collective action—which fosters greater participation and has a multiplier effect in other locations—and the spreading of assemblies as an organizational form to reach collective decisions within the framework of mobilization.

The territorial organizations that emerged from the roadblocks increasingly came together on a national level. The first national organizations of the *piquetero* movement were formed by 1998: *Federación de Tierras y Viviendas/FTV* (Land and Housing Federation) and *Corriente Clasista y Combativa/CCC* (Combative and Classist Current). As Svampa and Pereyra point out, the incorporation of a large number of unemployed workers from the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires was decisive for the nationalization of the *piquetero* movement.

With the crucial participation of organizations from the suburbs of Buenos Aires, the nationalized *piquetero* movement was capable of blocking all the access routes to



the city of Buenos Aires at once. The blockade of bridges and downtown streets soon became part of the everyday life of Buenos Aires middle-classes. By then, the assembly format had allowed the *piquetero* movement to include new forms of organization, helping them build new social networks beyond the unemployed workers and leading to a dispute with traditional trade union and party channels. The national media network was sought as the immediate space of recognition by the several epicenters of protest. *Piquetes* tended to transform themselves into everyday spaces of sociability (Auyero 2004).

The grand mobilization of December 2001, analyzed below, gave a new vision and drive to the *piquetero* movement. Besides the increasing importance of the organizational dimension of the *piquetero* movement, the *piquetero* organizations' disparate linkages to political parties likewise became relevant. However, diversity and territorial influence remained very important features of the *piquetero* movement after 2001. Svampa and Pereyra (2005) provide an account of this inscription into the political sphere:

Primarily, the organizational forms of the *piqueteros* were strongly marked by the trade unions, either through the unions' direct intervention in the unemployed workers' organizations (as in the case of *Federación de Tierras y Vivienda/FTV*, linked to the Argentine Workers Central/CTA) or simply by the presence of activists with a history of union activism.

Secondly, leftist political parties that offered their structures to *piquetero* organizations marked the presence of a different logic of organization. Thus, organizations such as *Polo Obrero* (which depended on the Trotskyite *Partido Obrero*), *Barrios de Pie* (linked to the left-populist *Patria Libre* party), *Movimiento Territorial de Liberación* (related to the Argentine Communist Party), and the *Movimiento Teresa Vive* (linked to the Trotskyite *Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores*) represent paradigmatic examples in which an organization for the unemployed is subordinate to party direction. Here, politics in an institutional and electoral sense appear as a clear objective to be achieved by the *piquetero* organization.

Thirdly, many *piquetero* organizations were formed around neighborhood leaders who had a militant background but maintained a total disengagement with trade union and political party logic. Here, examples include organizations such as *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados Anibal Verón/MTD* and the iconic *Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados/UTD* from General Mosconi, Salta, which decided not to integrate any of the national organizations.

In many cases, the logic of political construction strongly pervades the *piquetero* organizations. Such is the case of *Corriente Clasista y Combativa/CCC* (which has a strong union background, while most of their leaders are also members of the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party/PCR), the Guevarist *Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez/MTR*, and the controversial *Movimiento de Jubilados y Desocupados/MIJD* (an organization with high media exposure).

In this way, the *piquetero* movement began to get involved in party politics as it gained organizational strength. Undoubtedly, the historic repertoire of contention associated with Peronist trade unions' collective mobilization was a base that allowed the experience of the unemployed in Argentina to expand. Similarly, the know-how associated with the process of social and political radicalization before the military dictatorship influenced the current social struggle of the unemployed.<sup>12</sup> In the 1990s, however, before the *piquetero* movement went national and reached its peak, another new form of collective action arose that was as important as the *piquetes* in the renewal of the repertoire of contention.

### SOCIAL OUTBREAKS

The social outbreaks arose in the context of the implementation of fiscal adjustment measures in the provinces over the 1990s. They took place in provincial capital cities that were (and are) highly dependent on the public sector. I consider "social outbreak" (*estallido social*) the most appropriate term to refer to these protests due to their violence, spontaneity, and the general character of collective action.<sup>13</sup> The first social outbreak occurred in the province of Santiago del Estero's eponymous capital city at the end of 1993, and the press simply named it the *Santigueñazo*.<sup>14</sup> This event initiated a wave of social outbreaks, of which it was the most violent. The case of Santiago del Estero best expresses the common features of this type of social mobilization.<sup>15</sup> Let us now briefly analyze the *Santigueñazo* (see also Farinetti 2005).

On December 16, a crowd of state employees who had not been paid their wages for three months assaulted, looted, and burned the headquarters of the three constitutional powers: the Government House, the Palace of Justice, and the Legislature. At the same time, the crowd attacked and torched more than a dozen homes of provincial high officials and political and union leaders. It was the first protest in Argentina in the 1990s that rejected political representatives en masse for their corruption. It had a striking level of violence and spontaneity. By that time, Santiago del Estero was undergoing a very serious crisis: the provincial government had fallen into bankruptcy and was unable to pay the salaries of public employees.

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12 See Merklen 2005, 2009. According to Merklen, one of the characteristics of the *piquetero* movement—territorial inscription and community organization—was linked to the experience of the urban land occupation.

13 On the theoretical and methodological grounds of the study of social outbreaks as a form of collective action, see Farinetti 2002; Merklen and Sigal 2008.

14 Located in northwestern Argentina, the least developed region of the country, Santiago del Estero has few industries and limited economic diversification. While the provincial economy is highly agricultural (approximately 40%) compared to the country as a whole (about 10%), the state is still by far the largest employer.

15 Riots were very common in the provinces during the first half of the 1990s. Besides the Santiago del Estero case, it is worth mentioning those of Jujuy (several episodes between 1993 and 1995), San Juan, Córdoba, and Río Negro (in 1995). See Farinetti 1999.

The province was in urgent need of supplementary national funds. The national Economy Ministry's office was conducting a fiscal adjustment policy in all provinces that included stress tests. In the case of Santiago del Estero, those measures were not stopped even as social unrest surged throughout the province.<sup>16</sup>

Mass mobilization spread all over the city on that day of popular anger. There was no prior planning of the violence that ensued in the heat of the collective action, in a climate of indignation that tended to mutate into a festive atmosphere. Special attention should be focused on the targets of violence: the crowds indiscriminately vented their frustrations on public buildings as well as private residences of politicians. Their demands did not focus on fiscal adjustment or the national government (which was the only case that could provide a solution to the emergency situation). The crowd went directly to the homes of the people who held political power in the province and looted and burned them.<sup>17</sup>

The violence was one-sided, as nobody came out to protect the arson victims and repress (or condemn) the perpetrators. The protesters encompassed practically the entire population due to the absence of manifest conflict between any parties at that moment. There was a clear division of roles among protesters. Those who broke the doors were anonymous, bold, mostly lower-class young people. They freed the entrance for everyone else. In my reconstruction of the outbreak, no offenders were identified (either by the courts or by society), nor were there noticeable attempts at revenge—all were silent and withdrawn regarding the 1993 outbreak. The events can be illustrated by analogy to Lope de Vega's play *Fuenteovejuna* (1612). In that play, all villagers questioned in the course of an investigation into the killing of a high government official answered "the village did it," making it impossible to identify the individual perpetrator. As in the play, the people of Santiago del Estero seemed to have decided not to reveal (or to forget) the perpetrators' identity. Thus, the unidirectionality of the violence and the unwillingness to identify the actors involved are signs of a "Fuenteovejuna effect."

The interpretative framework within which wage arrears are deemed grounds for protest is consistent with the single direction of the violence. A central element in the framing of the salary issue was the corruption of the provincial political class. Corruption precisely was the main topic in the national public opinion agenda on the eve of the outbreak and continued to escalate until it was reflected in the crisis of political legitimacy that strongly affected Argentine society after 2001. Allegations of corruption had become part of everyday discourse among the people of Santiago

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16 Neoliberal economic policies implemented in Argentina in the 1990s entailed a massive reduction of the role of the state. Multilateral lending agencies required severe fiscal adjustment measures as a condition to refinance the external debt. Adjustment was presented as a kind of medicine with no alternative.

17 These events were indicative of the structure of provincial politics in Argentina, which is highly personalized and rests upon a peculiar type of social contract: the discretionary and corrupt management of public resources by officials is tolerated in exchange for employment and economic support. In this sense, the *Santiagoñazo* could be interpreted as a settling of scores between conflicting parties. See Farinetti 2008.

del Estero from all social strata. Santiago del Estero society was not divided on this matter, and its common stance resulted in the joint mobilization of various segments of society. Unidirectionality allows for stability in a social conflict. The proof is that those affected by the attacks of December 16 were not publicly defended as innocent by any social or political group, as well as the fact that they chose to withdraw from the public scene.

Viewing the *Santiagoñazo* as a milestone in the process by which public problems are constructed in the country, we can see a movement that focuses on political corruption as the cause of almost all problems and that gradually progresses to the point where everybody demands to throw "them all out." This populist claim was the motto unifying such disparate actors as the suburban poor and middle-class investors during the protests that in 2001 led to President de la Rúa's resignation.

The organization-building process and the emergence and countrywide spread of a collective identity witnessed in the case of the *piquetes* had no equivalent in the case of the social outbreaks. Two important characteristics distinguish social outbreaks from *piquetes*: their restricted territorial range (outbreaks were confined to some provincial capitals and smaller towns, and the targets were in all cases the provincial government and local politicians) and their episodic nature (outbreaks did not result in stable social or political organizations with their own objectives and identity). However, I argue that social outbreaks acquired a wider dimension in December 2001. As will be seen next, the protest events of 2001 featured some characteristic elements of provincial social outbreaks: spontaneity, general involvement, and the rejection of politics.

On December 19, after several days of lootings and protests in many provinces that were experiencing food shortages, turmoil began in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area with a wave of lootings of stores and supermarkets in the suburbs. In addition to that, social unrest spread to downtown Buenos Aires with the mobilization of middle-class citizens particularly irritated by the freezing of bank accounts.<sup>18</sup> The crowd took over the streets before the weakened national government declared a state of siege, seen as the only means of coping with the situation. President de la Rúa made the announcement in a speech broadcast by national radio and television. Once the speech was over, people spontaneously began banging pots on the windows, balconies, and doors of their houses, gathered on street corners and squares in every neighborhood, and began marching along the major avenues toward *Plaza del Congreso* and *Plaza de Mayo*, the city's quintessential demonstration sites located by the Parliament Palace and the Government House, respectively.

The massive mobilization on the evening of the 19th in the city of Buenos Aires led to harsh police repression, beginning in the early morning of the 20th and continuing all day, reaching a high level of violence and drama. Twenty-eight

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18 The national government had recently imposed severe restrictions on cash withdrawals from bank accounts, a measure known as the *corralito*, which negatively affected the whole population, and especially the middle class. People were allowed to use their deposits only to make payments with credit cards or through bank transfers, which caused great inconvenience to holders of bank deposits, but also dampened general economic circulation.

casualties were reported nationwide. Yet the social unrest and general atmosphere of disorder continued in parallel with extreme political uncertainty. The *cacerolazo* (pot-banging) entered the repertoire of forms of collective action as a non-violent variant of social outbreaks. This time *piqueteros* were very active among the protesters. The energy of the December 2001 social outbreaks strengthened and expanded the *piquetero* movement at the time, prompting a proliferation of (short-lived) local assemblies in the neighborhoods of most important cities, in which the participants sought to take politics into their own hands.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Collective life in Argentina was reborn, and collective action flourished, with the return to democracy in the 1980s. In the 1990s, neoliberalism created a context of economic adversity and an opportunity for new forms of collective action. The new forms endured beyond the original situation and the needs of those who created them. They are thus best understood in terms of Tarrow's *modular collective action*. *Piquetes*, social outbreaks, and *cacerolazos* are now part of the resources used by protesters of different types and social background to express their demands.

For instance, in the recent rural mobilizations, landowners and rural entrepreneurs resorted to *piquetes* all over the country while people in the cities expressed their support for the rural demands with *cacerolazos*; in the province of Entre Ríos local environmentalists chose *piquetes* as the best way to publicly manifest their opposition to the building of two large pulp mills across the border on the Uruguay River, thereby gaining widespread media attention and provoking a major diplomatic conflict between Argentina and Uruguay (see Alcañiz and Gutiérrez 2009; Gutiérrez and Almeida forthcoming); and social outbreaks have become a frequent means of demanding justice for socially condemned crimes.

Regarding the connection between the new forms of collective action and party politics from a historical perspective, we can observe a divergence between the struggles of the working classes and the Peronist party, which in the past worked as a channel for workers' identity-building and the expansion of their civic rights. The link between contentious collective action and the old Peronist discourse that gave political recognition and an institutional home to the working class has been lost. However, the legacy of the traditional repertoire provided a cultural base (in terms of learned experiences) for the development of the new forms, especially in the case of the *piquetero* movement.

Not only Peronism but the entire political sphere, through a process of detachment that has been taking place since 1983, has become organizationally and ideologically divorced from the social struggles and demands for social rights that resulted in the December 2001 events. The "throw them all out" slogan used in the social outbreak of 2001 clearly expressed that detachment.

In the historic repertoire of collective action, trade unions articulated all social demands and struggles related to labor problems. After 1983, the protagonists of social outbreaks and *piquetes* began to recognize each other and articulated their struggles through the media rather than through trade unions or other

institutionalized channels. In the process, the *piquetero* movement became highly productive from an organization point of view and succeeded in becoming a broker between society's demands and state social policies, often participating in the implementation of social relief programs. On the contrary, social outbreaks have been resistant to an institutionalization of collective action and a formation of stable organizations. Yet this has not prevented outbreaks from becoming an important element of the repertoire of collective action through which people (including the unemployed) can occasionally exercise direct power and impose limits on the state.

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