

Urban Middle-Class Women's Responses to Political Crisis in Buenos Aires

By

Claudia Briones, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology
University of Buenos Aires

Marcela Mendoza, Ph.D.
Center for Research on Women
University of Memphis

With

Ricardo Fava, Ana Rosán, Gonzalo Díaz, and Mariana Esplugas

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For additional copies of this report, contact
The University of Memphis Center for Research on Women
(901) 678-2770 or crow@memphis.edu

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Introduction

This preliminary report on the responses of urban middle-class Argentine women to political crisis is based on the analysis of observations and interviews recorded in Buenos Aires from February 15th to September 30th, 2002. A team of Argentine researchers carried out observations at rallies, street protests, and *cacerolazos* (banging of pots and pans to show disagreement that became a symbol of Latin American women's political action since the 1970s), and covered weekly observations at two neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas barriales*). The researchers also interviewed 30 individuals (women and men) self-described as middle-class protesters. Additionally, the Buenos Aires and Memphis teams compiled an extensive electronic database on newspaper articles, Internet-generated news exchanges, magazines, and academic publications referring to the current economic crisis in Argentina.

After a brief introduction to the events that define this period of political unrest, we analyze below the characteristics and modus operandi of two neighborhood assemblies. Then we discuss relevant topics from our interviews, particularly referring to women's views about their own political participation. We substantiate our analysis of women's political participation by discussing those materials in the conclusion.

Criteria and Sample Composition

We interviewed 30 self-described middle-class protesters in Buenos Aires: 25 women and five men (17 to 90 years of age). We interviewed these men to compare and contrast their opinions with what the women said. The interviewees have participated in *cacerolazos* or neighborhood assemblies, or are very supportive of the protests and the *asambleas* movement (see Table 1 below; also Tables 2 and 3 in Appendix show demographic characteristics of the sample). Unexpectedly, except for four women who are active in feminist organizations, women and men held very similar views on issues related to Argentina's political crisis, the role of the neighborhood assemblies and street protests, and the extent to which these developments could be related to globalization.

Table 1: Age and Gender of the Interviewees

<i>Interviewee's Age</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Less than 24	2	1
25 to 44	9	2
45 to 64	10	1
65 or more	4	1
Total	25	5

We started each semi-structured interview by eliciting the interviewee's thoughts and opinions about the current political and economic crisis, and the protests that occurred on December 2001. Then we asked how she or he interpreted both the motto "They all must go!" and the *asamblea* phenomenon. We also asked the person to evaluate her or his participation in neighborhood assemblies. Finally, the interviewee was invited to elaborate on her or his social class position, perceptions of the role played by other social classes in the crisis, and expectations about the future. When these subjects were not spontaneously covered during the conversation, the interviewee was steered towards them. In all cases, the interviewer elicited information on two additional topics: characteristics of women's participation in neighborhood assemblies, and the extent to which the *asamblea* movement could be related to globalization.

Current Economic Crisis and Political Unrest in Argentina

By many social and economic indicators—such as one of the highest (96 percent) adult literacy rates in Latin America, 75 years of average life expectancy, and a total fertility rate of 2.41 children born per woman—Argentina's society has an extensive middle-class that is also educated, urbanized and cosmopolitan. However, over the past decade, the country suffered recurring economic problems of inflation, increased external debt, capital flight, and budget deficit.

Economic growth in 2000 was a negative 0.5 percent, as both domestic and foreign investors remained skeptical of the government's ability to pay debts and maintain the national currency fixed exchange rate with the U.S. dollar. When the government efforts to achieve a "zero deficit" in order to stabilize the banking system and restore economic growth proved inadequate, Argentines began seriously questioning the outcomes of free market policies. These policies already resulted in pauperization of the working-poor, unprecedented unemployment rates (exacerbated by the continual downsizing of the public sector), and wider disparities in the concentration of wealth.

An example of those economic policies is the "Convertibility Plan" engineered by Domingo Cavallo. Based on the strategy of pegging the Argentine currency "one to one" to the U.S. dollar, this plan promoted the privatization of nearly all state-owned companies. It supported market deregulation and opened the financial sector to foreign capital inflows (Teubal and Rodríguez 2001). The economic reforms—such as overall openness to businesses in the external sector, prevalence of financial capital vs. production, and limited funding for services in the public sector—contributed to shape a new pattern of capital accumulation (Basualdo 2002). The policies resulted in generalized

social exclusion and impoverishment of the working class, and shrinking of the middle class (Kessler 2000; Basualdo 2001).

In November 2001, in an attempt to reduce capital flight and stop withdrawals from the banks, the government severely limited the citizens' access to their bank accounts, a legal device popularly known as *corralito* (little corral or playpen).

On December 19th, 2001, embittered by the effects of economic agendas devised by politicians viewed as ineffective, Argentines from middle-class sectors expressed their collective disappointment with a massive pot-banging street protest. While this *cacerolazo* signaled a turning point in Argentina's democracy, the significant event was only the largest among several social protests that opposed the effects of neoliberalism on the country's social structure (Auyero 2002 a y b; Giarraca et al. 2001).

Argentine authors who have analyzed the economic reasons for the collapse leading to *cacerolazos* in December 2001 (Bustos 2002; Calcagno and Calcagno 2002; Macedo Cintra and Farhi 2002) affirm that these street protests are politically grounded in the divorce between Argentina's civil society and its politicians and policy-makers. A number of studies (Bielsa et al. 2002; Cheresky 2002) analyze the widespread mistrust of Supreme Court judges and members of Congress that is part of the citizens' everyday conversations. According to opinion polls, the public generally perceives political leaders and elected officials as corrupt and incompetent. The already weak constitutional mechanisms for accountability and citizen scrutiny of government affairs are eroded by a notorious lack of civic organizations—organizations that could participate as alternatives to traditional political parties. Thus, the customary exercise of representative democracy “entrusting” elected officials resulted in government practices characterized by

“...Widespread use of decision mechanisms (decrees, emergency laws, judicial *per saltum*, bribes, police pressures, abuse of ‘reserved funds’) that were exceptional and non-institutional, tarnished by an unconcealed mixture of public and private interests, dismantlement of most mechanisms for control of political power, and discretionary use of the judicial system, the state's police and other security forces as forms of political leverage.” (Echegaray 2002:132; our translation from Spanish).

Generalized rejection of politicians, judges, and police officers became apparent through the so-called “*voto bronca*” (anger-driven vote), and in numerous initiatives at the local and national levels to promote civic abstention on Election Day. During the legislative elections in October 2001, for example, abstentions, null votes and non-voters reached 41% of the roll. It should be noted that voting is mandatory for all Argentines: every adult between 18 and 69 years of age must vote on Election Day (Canton and Jorrat 2003).

Under a sweeping mood of social unrest, several supermarkets and food-stores were ransacked across the country in December 2001. On the evening of December 19th, looting was spiraling in different cities, counteracted by excessive police repression. President Fernando De la Rúa declared martial law. Immediately after his public announcement on national TV, a spontaneous *cacerolazo* stormed the streets of Buenos Aires. The massive protest caused the resignation of the Minister of Economy Antonio

Cavallo. Less than 24 hours after the protest, President De la Rúa resigned, too, amidst a violent day's journey which ended with 30 people killed by the police and more than 4,500 protesters detained in prison.

On the following days, a National Legislative Assembly elected Adolfo Rodríguez Saá as president. Rodríguez Saá (former governor of San Luis Province and member of the *Justicialista* Party) immediately announced a series of emergency measures—such as the suspension of foreign debt payments, creation of a million jobs, and a new currency, all with the purpose of reactivating an ailing national economy. However, Argentines became disgruntled by the appointment of discredited individuals for cabinet positions, and conciliatory gestures towards Union leaders considered by many as detestable. Internecine feuds remained rampant within the new government who seemed to ignore the popular outcry that had just happened. On December 28th, a second extensive protest or *cacerolazo* on the streets of Buenos Aires brought forth Rodríguez Saá's resignation.

Two interim functionaries then briefly occupied the presidential office. On January 1st 2002, the National Legislative Assembly appointed Eduardo Duhalde as caretaker president, following a mechanism of presidential succession sanctioned by Argentina's constitution that made somewhat unfairly the world's headlines as “five presidents in two weeks.” Duhalde was granted a two-year term, until December 2003.

Eduardo Duhalde is the former governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, and member of the *Justicialista* Party, whose affiliates are called *Peronistas* after party founder and former President Juan Domingo Perón. Duhalde is also a former Senator in the national chamber and the losing candidate in the last presidential election. His political clout is large enough not to be toppled overnight by street demonstrations.

Rallies and street protests in Buenos Aires and other cities marked the summer season of 2002. Moreover, from December 2001 to March 2002, a total of 2,014 *cacerolazos* occurred at different locations around the nation (Ovalles 2002). Common citizens whose bank accounts and other monetary assets had been frozen by the *corralito* organized the protests (Schuster et al. 2002 gave a detailed chronicle of the urban unrest during the month of January). Politicians and elected functionaries suffered *escraches*, a slang term that alludes to the action of making a person's secret transgressions public. *Escraches* are humiliating public performances in which a group of people goes to the home or the workplace of someone considered “guilty” and informs passerby about the person's transgressions, or spray-paints slogans on the walls (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 2002). *Escraches* are also performed on the streets, in restaurants or cafes, wherever the person is found.

Defrauded clients and investors besieged many foreign and national banks, demanding restitution of their personal confiscated assets. The peso peg to the dollar was abandoned in January 2002, and the peso was floated. The exchange rate plunged and inflation picked up rapidly. Congress held its sessions in fear—guarded by armed police and surrounded by a metallic fence. A discredited Supreme Court of Justice endured the first of a series of weekly *cacerolazos*, aimed to unseat all its members.

Starting in late December 2001, grassroots assemblies began to meet every Friday in many neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. By March 2002, 272 popular assemblies were meeting regularly around the country (Fraga 2002; Ovalles 2002).

In Buenos Aires, the popular assemblies converged at *Plaza de Mayo*, the city's symbolic square located at the center of government buildings such as the Pink House (Presidential House), the colonial Cabildo, and the main Catholic Cathedral. In the same Argentine tradition that inspired "*las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*" movement, urban protesters chanted an increasingly popular motto "*que se vayan todos*" (they all must go!). The all-inclusive "they all" comprises members of the three branches of government, politicians affiliated with the main political parties, contractors of public utilities companies (private companies that provide services such as electricity, gas, and telecommunications), executives and CEOs at various banking holdings, etc.

The most belligerent among these grassroots groups called themselves *piqueteros* (picketers). They quickly organized many working-class neighbors and unemployed workers to participate in protests that took the form of highway blockades, and concerted requests for food at chain supermarkets and food-stores. *Piquetero* assemblies have a relatively unstructured, flat hierarchy and sustain an ideology of political autonomy that resists cooptation by the "apparatus" of established political parties. The *piquetero* movement also lodged active discussion groups about the broken links of political representation that estranged elected officials from the citizens (Caparrós 2002; Lewkowicz 2002; Cafassi 2002; Situaciones 2002; and Bielsa 2002).

At the same time, the cash-strapped federal government tried to implement a series of emergency welfare measures, mainly in the form of small subsidies for the unemployed heads of households. The new administration also promised to bring forward the date originally set for general elections. People perceived all these measures as too-little-too-late politically motivated acts of government. The officials never quite acknowledged the *de facto* installation of the *piquetero* movement as a thermometer of social unrest. They rather underscored its "anarchic" and "coercive" nature, comparing it to the riots that followed another major economic (hyperinflation) crisis in the late 1980s.

Meanwhile the spontaneous *cacerolazos* dwindled, victims of their own effort to become consistent and "institutionalized" forms of protest. Many of the original neighborhood assemblies evolved into concrete endeavors, such as neighborhood fairs, artistic events, and self-managed charity soup kitchens. Middle-class neighbors occupied run-down public buildings, turning them into free soup kitchens and cultural centers.

By August 2002, the Argentine economy began to stabilize, albeit at a lower level. Unemployment rates soared up to more than 25 percent, and 49 percent of the population fell below the poverty line (Kritz 2002). Middle-class neighbor protests became less frequent, contrasting with the booming of the *piquetero* phenomenon, whose participants continued showing-up at the street protests.

Field Research in Buenos Aires: The Neighborhood Assemblies

During this period of political unrest (March 1 to September 30, 2002), Ricardo Fava, Ana Rosán, and Claudia Briones—our team of researchers in Buenos Aires—conducted ethnographic observations in several neighborhood assemblies, *cacerolazos*,

and other street protests around the city. They finally settled on two assemblies to carry on systematic observations.

The neighborhood assemblies or *asambleas barriales* are groups of residents who gather spontaneously in public squares and at street corners on various heavily populated neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. From the start, they experimented with egalitarian decision-making processes borrowed from the more radical *piquetero* (picketeer) movement characterized by horizontality and direct, participatory democracy.

The neighbors who participate in *asambleas* are middle-class adult men and women (about 20 to 65 years old). The assemblies' volunteer membership includes students, homemakers, white-collar employees, teachers, business-owners, professionals, and so forth—some of these middle-class participants are currently unemployed. The meetings are announced by hanging a piece of fabric that shows the neighborhood name and a legend such as “Neighborhood assembly”, “People’s Assembly,” or “Self-Organized Neighbors.” These makeshift flags mark the rallying point for the gathering and are often used as insignias during street protests and peaceful walks.

The meetings are held in the open, if the weather permits. On rainy days, the staff from a variety of locales (sport clubs, Catholic parishes, public schools, and cafes) usually volunteer to host the *asamblea*. However, the members would accept the offer reluctantly as a last resort, evaluating the benefits of enjoying a sheltered session against the intended message of public visibility and openness that the assemblies want to convey. During the blooming of *cacerolazos*, participants in each neighborhood assembly numbered about one hundred, although by the time these observations took place, the numbers had dwindled to forty, and sometimes fewer than ten.

The neighbors who participate in *asambleas* further divide themselves into task groups or commissions. These commissions coordinate *escraches* or contribute to soup kitchens; they also discuss neighborhood matters, address job creation, organize community (vegetable) gardens, and so forth. These smaller task groups meet at a time and day different from the main assembly meeting. Women’s participation in commissions dealing with the purchase of food is remarkable. For example, women are in charge of parceling, packing and distributing food staples obtained through wholesale collective purchases.

As the number of neighbors who participate in *asambleas* dwindles, so does the number of commissions. However, their efficacy remains the same, if not stronger, due to the fact that fewer commissions with highly committed members now concentrate on several tasks at once. Each *asamblea* has decision-making authority over the smaller commissions on all matters.

The day-to-day work of the *asamblea* starts with a gathering of the members and the election of a chairperson and a secretary (called “scribe”), who takes notes for the minutes. Individuals can nominate themselves and are then confirmed by vote of the majority. The chairperson moderates the debate and establishes a timeframe for the discussion, while the scribe keeps records of proposals and voting. Both roles would intentionally change each time: members of the assembly put special care into avoiding nominating the same chairperson twice in a row. Scribes are overwhelmingly women (they usually bring pen and paper).

The scribe makes a list of the proposed speakers. First to speak are commonly the members who bring a proposal for consideration. Updates on the projects carried out by different commissions usually follow, in the order in which they were brought up to the meeting, deliberately avoiding prioritization. These updates often require additional discussion time to address concrete endeavors. Members engage in intense debates to perfect or redefine the assembly's own rules and operation. Broader political topics are also discussed alongside day-to-day planning of specific projects. The neighbors deliberate on themes such as the country's political unrest, the perceived havoc in the society caused by neoliberal policies, the embezzlement of funds by politicians and corporations, to what extent the "*que se vayan todos!*" motto should actually include "everybody," disapproval of Supreme Court decisions, and so forth. They engage in those discussions alongside the planning of yet another *escrache*, overseeing neighborhood improvements, or organizing a soup kitchen.

In all the meetings that we observed, the participants engaged in a pervasive impulse to redefine again and again the *asamblea's* own organization, which resulted in widespread psychological stress. This stress stemmed from the participants' eagerness to discuss—more or less simultaneously—matters of different nature and magnitude, without designating a leading person who would help them stick to a single agenda.

Members generally vote on issues by raising hands. Complex matters are handed off for discussion to smaller commissions. In principle, each and every member of the assembly has the responsibility to carry forward a proposal that has been already approved by vote, but to make sure that the proposed task will be accomplished specific verbal commitment of a number of members is always sought.

At the beginning of the *asamblea* phenomenon, neighbors made attempts to bring the movement to a higher level of organization and accountability. Therefore, the meetings usually started with the election of two delegates to the inter-district assembly. Several inter-district assemblies further sent representatives to the all-neighborhoods general assembly, an umbrella organization that intended to consolidate all the different neighborhoods included in the Federal District of Buenos Aires and its large suburbia. However, many participants became suspicious of these higher-level reunions. They thought that those meetings were manipulated by leftist activists, and stopped sending delegates.

Small but active leftist political parties are not alone in their attempts to co-opt *asambleas*. Elected officials have also attempted to revamp near-defunct community centers (*Centros de Gestión y Participación*) to obtain political benefit from the self-motivated and enthusiastic volunteerism manifested by the neighbors who participate in *asambleas*. In any case, the neighborhood assemblies consider themselves sovereign and independent of any other higher-level organization. Inter-district assemblies reached their peak of popularity by April and May 2002. They are still faring better than the larger all-neighborhoods' umbrella organization.

Members of assemblies also develop referenda and collect signatures. They draft resolutions (for example, to put a grip on higher fees sought by companies that provide public services), and organize *ollas populares* or people's pots. *Ollas populares* are the big boiling pots used to cook and serve soup, stew, or pasta to passerby. Food is

distributed as a rallying point to obtain political support. These “people’s pots” were originally conceived as devices for political protest, but the meals that they serve now are quickly becoming necessary resources to truly malnourished and unemployed citizens.

Yet other projects carried out by *asambleas barriales* include squatting public buildings (neglected by the government or in the process of being sold to private owners). Afterwards the neighbors volunteer to do the repairs and restore the original public service purpose of the building. The assemblies also compile lists of job openings, print and distribute newsletters describing their own activities, and organize community orchards, artistic shows, polls of opinion, and demonstrations of support for the *piquetero* movement or other community efforts.

On March and April 2002, we registered a period of expansion of the *asambleas barriales* in terms of larger participation, followed by a contraction in May and June. However, the *asambleas* remain committed to neighborhood issues and have actually increased their importance as groups of opinion.

Practicing Ethnography at *Villaflor* and *Villa Esperanza*.

We carried out systematic field observations in two neighborhood assemblies henceforth called *Villa Esperanza* and *Villaflor* (these are fictitious names). *Villa Esperanza* is located in a well-to-do neighborhood of the Buenos Aires Federal District. This *asamblea* convenes upper middle-class male and female professionals. Most of the participants were already friends or acquaintances before they decided to meet as an *asamblea*. Two commissions are at work in this assembly: one to analyze local issues, and another devoted to the overall situation in the nation. The mood of the discussions is friendly and there is a notorious lack of partisan politics among the participants.

Villaflor instead attracts mainly lower middle-class constituents. *Villaflor* is located in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Although professionals participate, most members are sales employees, homemakers, and the currently unemployed (actively seeking a job). Some individuals were affiliated with political parties, and yet other members had some previous exposure to political action volunteering for civic organizations. The *Villaflor* meetings consist of 20 to 30 participants, largely women. Since politicians make no effort to hide their partisan views, often refuting proposals and trying to steer the agenda of the daily meetings, the climate of the discussions in this *asamblea* is considerably different from the other one that we observed.

The first two months at *Villaflor* were spent on practicalities required to define its own organization. Participants developed a great deal of anxiety due to tensions between the need to devote time and effort to drafting the assembly’s internal regulations (perceived by some as too detailed, almost trivial) and their desire to discuss the widespread national crisis. It should be noted that the draft for the assembly’s rules and regulations remains unfinished, and the inquietudes involved never ceased.

Interestingly enough, the national crisis is perceived as the *raison d’etre* of this *asamblea*—instead of the pressing local problems identified at the neighborhood level. An initial proposal about organizing a new political party was quickly dismissed, out of concern that such an organization could be perceived as “left wing” or as endorsing a “*coup d’état*”. However, the participants promptly planned and executed short-term

projects (such as wholesale food purchases) to fulfill immediate needs in the neighborhood. The proposal about forming a political party faded into vague references to a “social movement” and never regained momentum.

Broad discussions at *Villa Esperanza* revolved around the following topics: generalized rejection of politicians; the need to remove all the members of the Supreme Court; social consequences of the neo-liberal policies; pervasive corruption in the House of Representatives and the House of Senators as well; unfairness of the tax system that targeted smaller “collectable” payers while turning a blind eye on big corporate evaders; the spiraling fees charged by the private companies that provided public utility¹ services; and the influence of the IMF on the nation’s economy.

At the neighborhood level, along with organizing a collective purchase of packaged food—proposed and carried on by women—*Villa Esperanza* participants planned an open market/trade fair, both as a way to lower the cost of essential goods and as an opportunity to generate employment. The fair, proposed and coordinated by a woman, is open to all buyers and to neighbors from other parts of the city.

By the end of June, the participants had somewhat soothed tensions between local and national concerns by setting short-term and long-term agendas. Among the first short-term proposals, the neighbors supported civil disobedience actions—such as a drive to stop paying the increased rates charged by most public utility companies.

At *Villaflor* instead, a large part of each meeting was devoted to issues of national scope, something fueled by the participation of leftist activists. Non-partisan members often complained about the amount of time invested in considering the topics that politicians would bring-up for discussion. This *asamblea* has a comparatively much stronger commitment to the inter-district assembly. They send delegates and vote on inter-district proposals, even though non-partisan members are suspicious of being politically manipulated.

¹ It might be relevant to discuss the idiosyncratic relationship of Argentines with their utility services. For a long time owned or subsidized by the state, Argentines perceived the supply of basic utility and transportation services as government responsibility, at the same level as health care or the nation’s security (moreover, in common speech, utility bills are usually referred to as “taxes”). A generalized inefficiency of most of these state-run enterprises favored privatization propaganda. The administration of President Carlos Menem carried out a wholesale privatization of all public services. While citizens initially welcomed improvements in the quality of services, concerns soon started to grow because the tariffs charged by the new owners had no “social component” whatsoever. The hastily signed concessions rendered the state nearly powerless to exert any control on the price of services, which soared way beyond the inflation index. In the frenzy of privatization, even those efficiently run state-owned public companies were sold. The buyer’s payment to the Argentine government was in some cases symbolic or a mere accountancy exercise, since the new owners quickly recovered their initial “investment” by soaring tariffs—which became some of the most expensive in the world. In other cases, the buyers did not take any “entrepreneurial risk” whatsoever to renew or improve the existing infrastructure, as economic groups akin to the political establishment secured decrees forcing users to pay in advance for future sewers, telephone networks, highway improvements, and so forth. As the national economy started to go downhill, the initial efficiency showed by the privatized companies waned. Rampant mismanagement and lack of investment forced repossession by the state or at least some degree of government regulation. During the 1990s, by moving back and forth between state-regulated and privately own public services utilities, the average Argentine user experienced the worst of both worlds.

Although *Villaflor* achieved comparatively fewer neighborhood-level goals, this *asamblea* is prolific in proposals, notably the creation of “brigades” to restore the provision of electricity or phone service to homes that had been cutoff due to nonpayment. In the case of community purchases, the *Villaflor* women joined efforts with a neighboring assembly to coordinate and oversee the packing and distribution of the purchases. Other political actions carried out by *Villaflor* are *escraches* in front of the main offices of public utility companies and participation in street protests or *cacerolazos*.

From May to June 2002, *Villa Esperanza* members spent time carefully evaluating the pros and cons of their involvement in the inter-district assembly. As a result, several members participated in inter-district commissions. Women, in particular, volunteered to form a Health commission. Together with women from other assemblies, they proposed and voted on the creation of committees to address the health care crisis. The purpose of these committees was to appraise the needs for medical supplies at the local hospital. Members of the Health commission set up a desk at the entrance of the neighborhood hospital to poll users on the quality of health care services. They also conducted repeated interviews with the hospital director, medical staff, and patients. At the same time, the *Villa Esperanza* fair became very successful in the neighborhood.

Among *Villa Esperanza* neighbors, the sustained increase in the cost of public utility’s services is a matter of great concern. They proposed several courses of action, including stamping a seal on the bill that would read “Say No to Payment—Neighborhood Assemblies,” and a study to determine the actual cost structure of utility companies and their real margins of profit. A third proposal included taking the matter to court and trying to secure judicial harbor provisions to prevent future raises in tariffs. At every *asamblea* meeting, members discussed other topics of broad scope, such as the growing malnutrition and famine among the poor and the unemployed, and the citizens’ lack of confidence in the Supreme Court.

The *Villaflor* assembly took a direct approach to the uneasiness generated by leftist politicians and called for a debate on the notion of “enemy.” The participants concluded that such a label could not be fairly attached to other members of the same *asamblea* (the neighbors said that “enemy” applies better to “oligarchy” and “imperialism”) and they ended with a call to unity. However, after this particular session, the virulence of the debates cooled off considerably and many political activists dropped their attendance altogether.

Villaflor also sends delegates to the inter-district assembly and considers the formation of “reconnection brigades” or pickets to prevent more cuts in the provision of utility services to neighbors who could not pay. Remarkably, *Villaflor* dismissed up front any court remedy. The neighbors mistrust the eagerness with which government agencies want to channel most consumer claims through the judicial system.

The *Villaflor* assembly also considers the situation of neighbors who are *sin techo* (roofless²). Outright squatting of abandoned houses was rejected because the

² We prefer a literal “roofless” translation instead of “homeless.” *Sin techo* refers to people who recently, unfairly, or incidentally lost their home. These individuals struggle to differentiate themselves from the structural poor, vagabonds, and shantytown dwellers.

neighborhood as a whole would not condone such an unlawful procedure. Another suggestion was to claim state-owned lots or negotiate with the *Centros de Participación y gestión* (discredited government-sponsored neighborhood councils). However, this proposal was discarded due to people's distrust of state-run agencies. The neighbors were deeply concerned about the unlawfulness of any usurpation of property. Often, the group discussions focused on concepts such as "How to distinguish between legality and necessity in emergency situations?" and "How to enforce respect for private property when the state government froze the savings accounts of the folks who are now *sin techo* (roofless)?" As one participant said:

"Today we are in an emergency situation and we must therefore apply emergency solutions. I used to be in favor of private property until the banks took my savings away from me".

During July 2002, we observed a decline in the number of participants in both *asambleas*. Some less committed members who participated at irregular intervals dropped for good. *Villa Esperanza* and *Villaflor* neighbors went through almost simultaneous periods of reflection and balance. They pondered their achievements and expressed frustration for the unaccomplished goals.

Villa Esperanza successfully continues with the community fair and the soup-kitchen initiatives. Assembly members are proud of the group endurance and the strong friendships and social links created among them. The hard-won "catharsis" that marked the assembly's departure from partisan politics is also perceived as an achievement. More critical members question that *Villa Esperanza* has pursued too many projects at once. Broader political discussions persist—on topics such the renewal of all elective offices (the "*que se vayan todos*" motto) by means of a Constitutional Assembly, and whether the country should stop paying the external debt. It remains unclear how those goals would articulate with the neighborhood assembly's local scope. The idea of creating a social movement defined as "anti-power" or "an alternative to (state) power" is gaining consensus.

At *Villaflor*, the neighbors' reflections often focus on the purpose of the *asamblea* movement, and strategies for its survival. For example: "What is an *asamblea*?" "What purpose does the *asamblea* have?" "Should the *asamblea* join efforts with labor unions and other civic organizations?" "Should the assemblies' movement explicitly seek to gain political power?" "Has this 'fear of power' crippled the growth of the movement from the beginning?"

Although most of these questions remain unanswered, *asamblea* members have articulated some thoughts. For example, now they do not see a power-seeking strategy as something intrinsically bad or wrong; also, they welcome the idea of establishing links with other organizations. However, the neighbors reject the concept of a "multi-sector" political alliance—an idea that has predominated in the country's political life since the Perón era—because it would bring widely discredited actors (such as government agencies, labor unions, and business owners) to the table of negotiations. *Asamblea* members would choose to approach grassroots organizations (such as cooperatives of parents at public schools and public hospitals) instead. Some said that they were

“... [A]fraid of political power because the only feasible power we know is submissive to bankers and economic groups”.

“Let’s not reproduce the errors of twenty years ago.” “Let’s discard those political alliances as outdated, meaningless symbols of power.”

Many participants think that this constant redefinition is a unique condition of the *asamblea* movement, and that by having fuzzy, dispersed aims they can resist attempts of assimilation or cooptation by other, stronger and more established political organizations.

Interviews with Middle-Class Protesters in Buenos Aires

Cacerolazos on December 19th and 20th, 2001

Most of the interviewees participated in the street demonstrations of December 19th and 20th, 2001, or in other *cacerolazos* immediately afterwards. They have either marched with the many columns that converged in Plaza de Mayo, or rallied at important street intersections in their own neighborhoods. The individuals who did not participate followed the events on television and heartily approve the claims made by their fellow citizens. All the interviewees said that the *cacerolazos* began within the people’s homes. The loud sounds produced by spontaneous banging of pots and pans could be heard through the neighbors’ walls and from the inner part of each block. Only some time after, the protesters took to the streets and invited each other to join the columns marching towards Plaza de Mayo. For those initially undecided, learning about the martial law decree announced by President de la Rúa through national television was the most powerful catalyst.

Some individuals said that they joined the street demonstrations moved by their own economic penury, or because they had their assets frozen in the “corral” set up by the banks. Many others, like Mercedes (interviewed on April 26th 2002), just marched “out of a general sense of indignation towards the lack of justice” or to defend “democratic values, against the incompetence and indifference of the politicians.” All the interviewees mentioned a generalized and spontaneous sense of civil duty—a notable sentiment, considering that they are auto-identified as middle-class Argentines. Some explain the widespread participation in *cacerolazos* as solidarity with “the people who are being hurt in their pockets”.

The interviewees unanimously said that this spontaneous convening of citizens rallying outside traditional party lines brought them to a state of euphoria that—despite the deeply felt political crisis—made them feel reunited with fellow citizens. Argentines from all social sectors are used to participation in demonstrations organized by established political parties, labor unions, or human rights’ organizations, but the *cacerolazos* on December 19th and 20th signaled the end of middle-class people’s passive acceptance of government policies perceived as futile and even morally wrong.

As for the effect of the rallies on the interviewees, the most important outcome was the “increase in the level of people’s political awareness.” For example, Antonio said (on April 26th 2002): “One year ago you would never hear such discussions and demands among the middle class.” The interviewees concurred that “starting from the 19th ... now we do speak the same language.” By reference to the 1976 military coup

d'état in Argentina, Laura said (on May 16th, 2002): *"It's as if suddenly recent history begins to make sense to everybody."* She added: *"After the cacerolazos, everybody connected the dots ... of the economic and social problems ... hmm ... in today's Argentina, everything is related to what happened since 1976."*

"Que Se Vayan Todos, Que No Quede Ni Uno Solo!" (They All Must Go, Not a Single One of Them Should Stay!)

Almost immediately, the protesters adopted the popular motto "They all must go, not a single one of them should stay!" However, people's ideas about who "they all" are differ. Through time, the divergence of opinions has become more pronounced. As Santiago said (on July 10th 2002), "they all" would apply to:

"All elective offices... above all, those public officials accountable not only for this year's disaster but, say, the last twenty or thirty years, specially those embodying the Argentine model of caudillo,³" or else "any and all political leaders, because ...well, I wouldn't say that members of the Supreme Court are politicians but yes, they are part of the ruling class.⁴"

Paula (on June 13th 2002) extended the scope of the definition:

"I believe that 'they all' has to do with everybody that holds a position of power ... union leaders, senators, representatives in the lower chamber, government officials, everybody that in one way or another is an accomplice in bringing on the current state of affairs."

Other interviewees urged a less literal interpretation of the motto "they all must go!" It would mean, instead, a partial cleansing of the political arena with the purpose of deterring further embezzling and corruption. However, all the interviewees agreed that at least some elected officials should be prosecuted and imprisoned for malfeasance—something the local folklore says would never happen. As Mercedes said (on April 26th 2002):

If 'they all must go' means that the current political summit goes away and another better-prepared, more knowledgeable, with impeccable democratic values takes its place...well great! Now, if 'they all must go' means anarchy, no way. The motto means let those who are in government go but bring in apt, professional people to replace them and start doing things well."

Romina said (on May 23rd, 2002) that Argentines now have the opportunity to change the way they do politics: *"The replacement has to do directly with a radical reform on how we do politics in this country, from scratch. We have to start ... see? ...Like a blank page, like the beginning of a new book."*

³ The term *caudillo* in Argentina refers to charismatic politicians, particularly those who have the skill to organize and maintain networks of political clientele.

⁴ Interviewees actually used the term *dirigencia* that we translated as leaders, politicians, or ruling class. Literally *dirigencia* means "political leaders" (*dirigentes*), but it is usually applied to politicians, member of government, or the most conspicuous heads of groups of opinion. These political actors are seldom perceived as holding power on account of their social class. Therefore, "ruling class" is a defective translation because *dirigencia* is actually devoid of class strife implications.

Also, explaining the meaning of the most popular motto used by the protesters, Mirta said (on July 19th, 2002):

“I dispute such ‘they all must go!’ ... what is the subject of that phrase? Where do I stand if everybody else goes away? ... Everybody but me, it would be? [laughs] ... it’s a magical usage of the subjunctive, like we did with the motto ‘never again!’⁵ since let’s say it ... it won’t be ‘never again’ in terms of magic thinking... [silence] Where do I stand? Are we talking about citizens?”

As in Mirta’s opinion, many protesters who otherwise support the need for political renewal would dismiss the motto “They all must go!” as utopian and therefore unacceptable.

Middle-Class Discontent

To some extent, all the middle-class interviewees have been directly affected by the current economic crisis, either because their assets were confiscated or because they lost their jobs. But without dismissing outright the harm brought upon them by the crisis, all coincided in minimizing its personal effects—when compared to the famine and structural poverty that affect many of their countrymen in the lower classes. Beyond economics, most say that the core of the crisis is the deterioration of the nation’s social fabric. Middle-class interviewees express a feeling of despair and uncertainty about the huge scope of the disaster, and what the future might bring. They manifest anguish about what kind of country the future generations would inherit. They sadly reckon that still there is room for worsening. Unanimously the interviewees argue that Argentines need to reevaluate what it means to be a “middle class society,” since many are now impoverished and would only qualify as middle-class in cultural terms. As Adela says (on September 3rd, 2002):

“The poor are now progressively poorer, and the middle-class all but disappeared. The poor continue to do the same things that they did so far. The middle-class, lacking ... having lost jobs in such a disproportionate number, is driven practically to nonexistence.”

During the interviews, some individuals cited widely known 2002 statistics on the growth in Argentina’s poverty level; and remembered the country’s long-standing tradition of a large middle-class. Many point out that the best indicator of crisis is the growing gap between rich and poor. Seeing herself pushed to a lower class, Lucía says (on May 16th, 2002) with irony: *“The difference between working class and middle class is not measured anymore in terms of relative wealth but in terms of relative penury.”*

While many impoverished people continue ascribing to middle-class status, some interviewees (who are members of this class by measure of wealth, education, and cultural tradition) chose to distance themselves. They criticized the Argentine “middle”

⁵ *Nunca más!* (never again, no more) refers to the motto that became popular in the early 1980s, when Argentines learned—as a result of careful investigations widely publicized—about all sorts of atrocities committed by the exiting de facto military regime. Along with generalized rejection of those brutalities, the slogan “never again!” implies that a military de facto regime will never again be allowed to hold power in Argentina.

for its proverbial lack of interest in collective issues; and claim that the main obstacle to overcoming the national crisis is the upper-middle class' historical disengagement from political activism and a self-absorbing egoistic attitude that resulted in flawed solidarity with the poor. They acknowledge, nonetheless, that something has changed recently in terms of the middle-class' attitude and political involvement.

Moreover, many recognize the important role of the neighborhood assemblies in fostering class-consciousness. The interviewees also point out the sizable difference between “*the middle-class individuals turned into pot-bangers (caceroleros)*” and “*the lower-class individuals turned into picketers.*” Out of empathy and compassion for their social exclusion, many admire the picketers' capacity for organizing. However, middle-class interviewees mistrust the objectives and methods of the picketer movement.

Vision Toward The Future

Uncertainty is the word that best characterizes the interviewees' expectations about how the national crisis could resolve, and which role the neighborhood assemblies could play in the solution. The interviewees talk at length about what they would have wished for the *asamblea* movement, but do not elaborate on how they think it would actually evolve. Everyone wishes for a radical transformation of Argentina's social structure, something akin to a “new foundation.” However, the idea of “enforcing preexistent pacts⁶” prevailed—rather than a completely new deal that would organize the country anew. Most individuals oppose a picketer concept of “*letting the bygones be bygones.*” They recognize that a core of social agreement can save the nation.

A commonly shared vision for the future includes greater civic participation, additional mechanisms to assure “direct democratic participation,” and more substantive involvement of the middle-class in the political process. How the “second foundation” would be carried out is left undefined. The interviewees support a notion of “*starting from below,*” and strengthening community links at the neighborhood level.

Interestingly enough, most interviewees are disconcerted when asked about to what extent the current crisis in Argentina could be related to globalization. When prompted to respond, only a few could articulate a strong correlation by endorsing conspiracy theories.

The interviewees who could see the crisis to some extent related to globalization argue for political factors that go beyond economics. They mention how developed nations exercise violence to enforce a new (global) world order, while corruption weakens local governments. They also argue that less developed nations are losing political independence and control of the globalization process, while their economic independence is greatly reduced by abusive foreign debts, as in Argentina's case.

Gender and Political Participation

Out of conviction or necessity, all our female interviewees define themselves as fighters. However, with the exception of feminist activists, none of the interviewees

⁶ Most schooled Argentines know by heart the phrase “enforcing existing pacts” (*en cumplimiento de pactos preexistentes*), which belongs to the preamble to the original 1853 Constitution.

(women and men) have spontaneously discussed gender differences on how they do politics, a point that we consider highly significant. For example, Juana (90, on August 21st, 2002) says that middle-class women protest because:

“They are desperate ... those who are married see that their husbands are desperate, too. They don’t have enough money or even worse, they are unemployed. The same is true for women who are single.”

On street protests or in neighborhood assemblies, their gender is not the axis for the political commitment of the middle-class women that we interviewed. As Estela (25) says, *“Men and women share the same worries, it is not a matter of gender.”* However, once the interviewer introduces the topic, a wealth of reflections follows. For example, Santiago (40, on July 10th 2002) explains:

“In all the spheres, really ... I am amazed by women’s participation and compromise ... they show much more compromise than men ... Today women are completely different from the women I used to know. Women are like a box full of surprises, they are full of strength and steadfastness. In the assemblies, the women who are between 30 and 45 years old show the greatest fortitude and resolution”.

Matías (17, on August 1st, 2002) adds: *“I believe that women have weight in Argentine politics ... in fact, many of our politicians are women.”*

In Patricia’s (42, interviewed on June 13, 2002) opinion: *“Today women take charge and assume a public role because they are versatile ... they get strength from weakness ... We are good women, lovers, wives and mothers ... we are good workers, too, because we want to confront this crisis and create a better future for our children.”*

Similarly, Romina (52, on May 23rd, 2002) says: *“Women are more flexible, they adapt better to social changes ... in these times of crisis, women are always searching for long-term solutions, while men appear to me as disoriented ... at the assemblies, men look for short-term solutions.”*

According to the interviewees, women’s political participation is not new in Argentina; instead the novel phenomenon is the relative absence of sexist attitudes in the *asambleas*. Commenting on the subject, Juan says:

“The absence of sexism is new. Men always prevailed in the many political organizations I have participated in before, but in Villa Esperanza assembly this does not happen, men and women are equal when they work hands-on to complete tasks in the commissions.”

The age of the individuals provides an additional cleavage across the different opinions. Among men, for example, only the elder perceive growing female participation

in the assemblies, while this postulated growth is irrelevant or goes unnoticed younger men.

Among women, feminist activists occasionally bring up concerns and themes that set them apart from mainstream women's discourse. All feminist activists of any age denounce gender asymmetries and differences that continue to operate in the assemblies, and in the society as well. But only mature women say that the remedy is to maintain a militant attitude, and view their feminism as well suited to the current situation. Younger feminists propose a wiser approach that includes, as Amalia (50, on July 3rd, 2002) says, "... *rethinking our role in terms of both class and gender.*"

The interviewees differ on how historical claims for equality accepted by everybody actually relate to the crisis, and also how relevant specific feminist demands may be at this particular moment. During the interviews, elder activists often refer to the historical processes that led to claims for equality, while younger feminists take such equality for granted. Feminist interviewees of all ages highlight the many practical contributions made by Argentine women to solve recurrent political and economic crisis.

A similar age cleavage is observed in the opinions of other women who do not define themselves as "feminists" or "unionized homemakers." While older women who participate in *asambleas* quickly point to elements of gender inequality in the way the assemblies work, and show a higher level of awareness about the historical struggle for women's rights; younger women explain their unique mode of participation, their workload at home, and their commitment to the protests as intrinsic to (naturalized) differences between sexes, never interpreting their situation as gender inequality. For example, Clara (52, on June 28, 2002) explains: "*The way we live now, women cook but men can cook, too. Similarly, men work but women can work too.*"

Argentines are very conscious of the new roles that middle-class women have in the society. Explaining the issue, Cynthia (34) says:

"Today, it is difficult to find middle-class women who are housewives, who are still handling pots and pans in the kitchen. Most of my (female) friends are now employed, they are professionals, and they also have to take care of their homes, their families, and their own social life. For example, in my case, Roberto, my husband is the one who cooks. I have personally nothing to do with pots and pans [laughs]."

Cynthia goes further to say: "*In my opinion, pots and pans (cacerolas) are not related to women anymore.*"

Likewise Mercedes (30, interviewed on April 26, 2002) does not associate the use of kitchen utensils to female domestic symbols. She says that the locus (and strength) of people's resistance lies now on the Argentine family as a whole:

"Women have been participating politically in Argentina for a long time. The latest cacerolazos are not directly linked to women. They are a family affair"

instead. Whole families participate in the protests ... the wife with her husband and the children, all go out to bang pots and pans. If they take the automobile, the husband would be driving while the wife and the children are banging pots. I believe that mothers and fathers do this precisely because of their children, thinking about their children's future. We cannot allow this [the state of siege] to happen again in Argentina. It already happened to our parents and grandparents ... I will go out always ... I am going out to protest always to defend our democracy, freedom, justice, and free speech. I like to show support for those great causes."

Conclusion

Since the inauguration of President Carlos Saúl Menem's new Peronism in 1989, the country has gone through a far-reaching transformation comparable only to the profound changes brought about by the nineteenth century modernization of the Argentine state (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 2002:506). During the 1990s, successive governments applied neoliberal economic policies that impoverished the lower classes and dismantled our traditionally proud and upwardly mobile middle-classes. For that reason, those in the "middle" are drastically reassessing their cherished dreams of social progress and personal development—characteristics of Argentina's society in modern times. Globalization and neoliberalism are also shaking the foundations of the country's cultural traditions and political institutions (Auyero 2002c).

The protests of December 19th and 20th 2001 questioned beyond doubt the soundness of Argentina's political system of representation. One of the main results of the *cacerolazos* and *asambleas barriales* was the massive engagement of women in the political process. In the political arena, the neighborhood assemblies are consolidating a unique form of organization defined by autonomy and egalitarian decision-making. Decision-making is always, without exception, based on the vote of the majority. Nevertheless, direct democracy is affected by the profile of each participant and also by the nature of each neighborhood's issues. Assemblypersons are continuously testing innovative mechanisms to create a true participatory democracy. They are also endlessly redefining the meaning and social purpose of the assemblies. Egalitarian decision-making is a source of tension among members, and generates operational problems. Such built-in tensions are trademarks of this new social movement (c.f. Loveman 1998).

At the same time, the assemblies open a new realm for women's political activity in their neighborhoods, independent from political parties and state-funded agencies. Women lead successful accomplishments, such as neighborhood fairs and soup kitchens. They also participate in campaigns to protest the increase in the fees charged by utility companies, and to appropriate vacated buildings to use them for social purposes. In sum, the neighborhood assemblies take genuine responsibility for community issues neglected by the state and local government. Assemblypersons unanimously attribute their most outstanding achievements to the fact that women are taking leading roles.

During the protests, the *piquetero* movement and the *asambleas* movement promote the same “they all must go!” motto. However, the unemployed working class picketers are politically more radical. They are currently being reduced by clever welfare policies (state-funded aid to the unemployed), combined with other forms of direct assistance. In comparison, the assemblies’ prospect for survival as a social movement looks extremely good, both in terms of their accomplishments and their successful resistance to assimilation by other players in the nation’s political arena.

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Appendix

Table 2: Interviewees' Gender, Age, Education, Employment, and Political Affiliation.

<i>Number</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>
1	Female	30	Employed	University Graduate	
2	Female	34	Employed	University Graduate	
3	Male	70	Retired	University Graduate	Party Affiliated
4	Female	34	Employed	University Graduate	
5	Female	30	Employed	University Graduate	Party Affiliated
6	Male	33	Employed	University Graduate	Party Affiliated
7	Female	50	Employed	N/A	Party Affiliated
8	Female	52	Currently Unemployed	University Graduate	Party Affiliated
9	Female	25	Employed	University Undergrad.	Party Affiliated
10	Female	42	Employed	University Graduate	Party Affiliated
11	Female	36	Employed	University Undergrad.	
12	Male	30	Employed	University Graduate	
13	Female	52	Employed	University Undergrad.	
14	Female	50	Employed	High School complete	Union member
15	Female	30	Student	University Graduate	Feminist
16	Male	55	Employed	High School complete	
17	Female	37	Currently Unemployed	High School complete	Party Affiliated
E18	Female	50	Employed	University Graduate	
19	Female	25	Employed	University Graduate	Feminist
20	Female	55	Employed	University Graduate	Feminist
21	Male	17	Student	High School	Party Affiliated
22	Female	31	Currently Unemployed	University Graduate	
23	Female	70	Employed	High School complete	Party Affiliated
24	Female	53	Employed	High School complete	Feminist
25	Female	90	Retired	Elementary School	
26	Female	60	Employed	High School incomplete	
27	Female	60	Retired	University Undergrad.	
28	Female	52	Employed	High School complete	Party Affiliated
29	Female	71	Retired	High School complete	
30	Female	66	Retired	High School incomplete	

Table 3: Interviewees' Type of Political Participation (*Cacerolazos* or Neighborhood Assemblies) and Date of the Interview.

<i>Number</i>	<i>Interview Date</i>	<i>Neighborhood Assembly</i>	<i>Cacerolazos December 19 & 20, 2001</i>
1	April 1, 2002	+	+
2	April 26, 2002		+
3	April 26, 2002	+	+
4	May 3, 2002	+	+
5	May 16, 2002	+	+
6	May 16, 2002	+	
7	May 21, 2002	+	+
8	May 23, 2002	+	+
9	May 30, 2002	+	+
10	June 13, 2002	+	+
11	June 13, 2002	+	+
12	June 20, 2002	+	+
13	June 28, 2002	+	+
14	July 3, 2002		
15	July 10, 2002	+	+
16	July 10, 2002	+	+
17	July 18, 2002	+	+
18	July 19, 2002	+	+
19	July 24, 2002	+	+
20	July 30, 2002	+	
21	August 1, 2002	+	+
22	August 9, 2002		
23	August 15, 2002		
24	August 21, 2002	+	+
25	August 29, 2002		
26	September 3, 2002		+
27	September 4, 2002		
28	September 4, 2002		+
29	September 17, 2002		
30	September 28, 2002		