

THE PIQUETEROS AND THE DIALECTICS OF THE DESBORDE

By

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A mi compañero y comandante, Fidel

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	4
ABSTRACT.....	7
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
The Piqueteros .....	9
Methodology and Structure .....	16
On Case Studies.....	17
World-Systems .....	18
Micropolitics.....	21
2 HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT.....	24
Peronism .....	24
1968-69 and thereafter.....	29
The Cordobazo.....	32
The Welfare State .....	35
The Desborde Popular .....	37
The National Reorganization Process (or, Capital’s Response).....	39
The Neoliberal State .....	44
‘Planes’ .....	48
What to make of Globalization, Neoliberalism, the ‘Powerless’ State and the Dialectics of the <i>Desborde</i> ? .....	51
3 ANALYSIS OF THE PIQUETERO MOVEMENT .....	53
The Piquete and the Piqueteros: A Perspective .....	53
The Context .....	55
The Movement’s City .....	56
Politics in the Margins.....	58
City of Slums .....	60
Changing Character of the <i>villas</i> .....	63
The Popular Design .....	65
Movements and Territorialities .....	69
The MTD Piqueteros (or, La Frescura Antisolemne).....	72
Organization .....	74
De-institutionalization .....	76
Space .....	80
Work.....	81
Time .....	82
The Piquete From Within.....	85

Exclusion, Otherness and Autonomy .....	88
The <i>Desborde</i> and the Crisis of the Neoliberal State .....	91
4 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	96
Piquetero Literature .....	96
New Social Movements.....	100
Societal Movements.....	104
The State’s Response: ‘Progressive’ Politics .....	106
The Big Picture .....	109
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	113
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	122

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The *piquetero* (picketer) movement traces its origins to protests in Argentina's smaller interior cities. In the early 1990s workers laid off as a consequence of the privatizations of several state industries began adopting the *piquete* (roadblock) as a means of protest. The first *piquetes* blocked traffic coming in and out of those cities as a means of pressuring local governments for jobs and a living minimum wage. Meanwhile in Buenos Aires, the place that had once been home to the largest, best organized and most cohesive working class in Latin America, decades of neo-liberal social and economic reorganization had drastically altered traditional social structures, forms of organization, and the subjectivities of those in the poorest areas of the city. When towards the end of the 1990s, the *piquetero* movement spreads into Buenos Aires the socially and economically reconfigured poor urban setting dramatically transformed the movement. Gradually the movement's demands shifted and began revolving around concepts such as 'autonomy' and 'territory,' concepts previously unheard of in such a setting.

While the existing literature on the *piqueteros* has focused on their effectiveness in making demands on the state, their affects on macropolitical change, and to a lesser extent the particularities of their organizational structures, I argue that the movement has a much more

profound significance that has escaped the literature thus far. Also, I show how social movement theories, particularly New Social Movement theory which the *piqueteros* are habitually categorized within, are inadequate in grasping this phenomenon. The lynchpin for the *piqueteros* novelty and significance, that which explains the mentioned shift in demands, I argue, is the movement's construction of a new subjectivity amongst those who have been left out of any significant kind of involvement in society or the market; a condition in which millions of Latin Americans have been forced into as a consequence of the modalities of late capitalism. Moreover, setting this discussion within what I call the 'dialectics of the *desborde*,' I argue for the Piquetero's larger transcendence as a continuation of the Argentine class struggle. Drawing on a new and growing body of literature produced within Latin America that deals with a redefinition of emancipation as understood within horizontal grassroots organization in a post-Leninist 'globalized' and 'neoliberal' world, I tell the story of how the movement is reinventing emancipation through the active construction of subjectivities that challenge orthodox narratives on emancipation.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### **The Piqueteros**

The term piqueteros was first utilized by local media reporting on the first piquetes [picket or roadblock]. Used in many cases with the intent of stigmatizing the protesters, it was quickly appropriated by the movement; today the chant “*¡piqueteros carajo!*” is one of the more commonly heard within the piquete. To refer to a ‘piquetero movement’, however, is problematic to say the least. It is best defined as a ‘movement of movements.’ Within the ‘movement’ one finds an array of organizations with diverse and at times contrasting ideologies, organizational structures, and objectives. The common denominator shared by all seems to be simply that their members are poor, un or sub-employed and have adopted the piquete as a form of protest.

Their story begins, more or less, with the re-election of President Carlos Menem in 1995. Menem won amidst a growing economic recession and rapidly rising unemployment. In May of 1995 the aggregate un and sub employment rate had grown to an extraordinary 29.7%. An enormous portion of these workers had been simply expelled from the labor market, while others suffered the consequences of labor flexibilization or had to find means of survival in the informal sector (Svampa, 2003: 12-13). The Argentine state, even without social safety nets or labor reinsertion programs in place to cushion the shocks of Menem’s reforms, nonetheless counted on the consistent support of the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo), the country’s largest workers union (2003: 13). By mid 1997 the country was on an economically and socially downward spiraling path that culminated in the protests of December 2001 and their aftermath.

During the decades prior to this job-crisis, employment had been the popular classes’ principal means of subsistence, social integration and organization. Along with this current wave of unemployment came “increasing inequality and number of families without the means to meet

their basic needs” that would reach unprecedented levels during this period (Germano, 2005: 29). From the viewpoint of the popular sectors the unions had not only accompanied but praised the government in their structural reforms while the political parties – particularly the Peronist Justicialista party – had become nothing more than an ‘electoral machine’ from whom they continued to receive material benefits but no longer identified with politically (Godio, 2003). This crisis of representation<sup>1</sup> went hand in hand with the theoretical shift from classical marginality theories to the contemporary so-called new poverty. That is, “rising unemployment, declining opportunities in even informal sector activities, a rise of private provisioning within a barter economy, social exclusion and new dimensions of marginalization, rising violence and insecurity (Ward, 2004)” had become inescapable features of the urban landscape. This new poverty, moreover, is embedded within a neoliberal framework within which “new forms of social organization have emerged, and invariably are responding to [...new] forms of organization that are no longer built around unions” and, in the case of Argentina, “are much more individualized and vested within the shantytown and squatter areas or *villas miserias* (Ward, 2004).” This shift is embodied by a representative of the Peronist party who confirmed that these circumstances make organizing the popular classes all the more difficult given that, as he explained, “dealing with a poor person is very different than dealing with a *pibe chorro*” (Germano, 2005: 34).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, many *piqueteros* argue that “the political parties are structured in a reality that has been profoundly altered” (Germano, 2005: 33) and no longer hold any relevance to their daily realities.

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<sup>1</sup> This phenomena has also been described as the *Crisis Punteril* from the Peronist party’s perspective.

<sup>2</sup> During the past decade in Argentina juvenile delinquency has increased, and in strides (Miguez, 2004). *Pibe chorro*, literally translated from Lunfardo to ‘Kid Thief,’ is the term, used demeaningly from the ‘outside’ and reinforcingly from ‘within,’ for those youths who participate in ‘*delinquent*’ activities.

The first piquete took place in November of 1994 in the small town of Senillosa in Argentina's Neuquén province. Upon the completion of a major hydroelectric power plant the worker's reacted to the ensuing massive layoffs with a piquete. Their demand was the reincorporation of those workers (Germano, 2005: 43). With the further decomposition of the state enterprise model,<sup>3</sup> along with the emergence of the minimalized state, the piquete increasingly became taken up as a form of protest. As of 1996, with a piquete carried out in reaction to the privatization of the YPF in Cutral-Co, another small interior city, the piquete transcended its Neuquénian boundaries and initiated its expansion into the rest of the country (2005: 43). These events would come to represent "the moment when a new identity – the piqueteros–, a new form of protest – the *corte de ruta* [picket]–, a new form of organization – the *asamblea*– and a new demand – work– marked an important transformation in Argentine society's mobilization repertoire" (Svampa, 2003: 23). Yet, still in the late 1990s the 'piquetero movement' was something of a historical anomaly. While it had extended throughout the country and won impressive struggles it remained practically absent in Buenos Aires, the country's political nucleus (Oviedo, 2004: 183).

While said changes were taking place in the interior of the country, Buenos Aires was going through its own transformations. Between at least the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the military dictatorship (1976-83), Buenos Aires had been home to the largest, best organized and most cohesive working class in Latin America. By the early 1990s, the social and economic restructuring of the first neoliberal years had already made an important impression on the city. In Buenos Aires these neoliberal reforms had their most evident and dramatic impact on the closing down of local industry (Cerrutti, 2004: 5). Moreover, these

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<sup>3</sup> With special emphasis on the privatization of YPF's (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales), Argentina's paradigmatic state-owned oil company.

reforms brought along with them increased social segregation and polarization that left an important mark on the socio-demographic and socio-cultural spaces inhabited by the popular sectors in the city (Cerrutti, 2005: 26). This ‘mark’ is often alluded to as the ‘social decomposition’ suffered by the poorest sectors of the city. That is, with the disappearance of the factories, unions and parties, the three most important organizational components for the pre-neoliberal argentine working class, social relations in the poorer sectors of the city, it was argued, fell into a state of social decomposition.

It is within this context, nevertheless, that the piquetero movement emerges within Buenos Aires. In reference to their demands, relations to institutional politics, and objectives, two piquetero ‘branches’ emerged. Generally speaking, the first and by far most numerous branch included those piquetero organizations that had strong ties to, or were offshoots of, traditional political parties or unions. These include, only to name a few, the PO (Polo Obrero) which is the piquetero ‘wing’ of the Trotskyite Partido Obrero (est. 1964), and the MTL (Movimiento Territorial de Liberación), a subsidiary of the CTA (Central de Trabajadores Argentinos) union with historical connections to the Communist Party (est. 1918). Also, associated with the CTA is the FTV (Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat) and the MTV (Movimiento Teresa Vive) is through its leadership associated with the MST (Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores), a political party established in 1992. It must be said, however, that this is not a homogenous group. Their relationship with institutionalized politics oscillates between, for instance, the FTV who’s principal representative Luis D’Elia served as undersecretary for the Social Habitat in the Argentine Federal Planning Ministry during the Nestor Kirchner administration (2003-2007), and others such as the CCC (Corriente Clasista y Combativa) who stands in opposition to the national government proposing to replace it with a ‘united’ and ‘patriotic’ coalition government.

This ‘branch,’ in so far as I am concerned, represents an important enrichment in Argentine social movement’s mobilization repertoires though they do not represent a way of doing and thinking politics qualitatively different than the traditional parties and unions. These organizations made of the piquete a tool for recuperating that which had been lost: jobs, meaningful citizenship, the reopening of closed factories and in some cases their re-nationalization. Ultimately, these organizations still saw in the system a possibility of returning things to the standards they had once held. Moreover, much if not all of the work in North American<sup>4</sup> academia on the piqueteros has already been devoted to these organizations (Stahler-Shold, et al. 2007; Alcañiz and Scheier, 2007; Wolff, 2007; Villalón, 2007).

The second branch of the piquetero movement encompasses those organizations which were born out of localized neighborhood (*barrio*) organization and who maintained an important detachment from union, party and state logics. That is, these organizations have taken the piquete as a point of departure instead of an end to other means; as a moment to look forward and find solutions that are not rooted in a past which bears no resemblance with the present. In their pursuit of social change one of these organizations’ novelties has been, in contrast to the first branch, to not associate the state with change. Change, according to them, comes not from above but from a *setting free* of those elements that are cultivated *within* the movement. The kind of change desired comes as a product of defending, developing and harvesting those social relations and modes of organizing that develop *within* the movement and the spaces the members inhabit and interact in on a daily basis. These organizations include primarily the MTD’s (Unemployed Workers Movements) in the greater Buenos Aires, as well as the UTD (Union of Unemployed Workers) in northern Argentina. In Buenos Aires some of the more prominent

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<sup>4</sup> Excluding Mexico

have been the MTD Solano, MTD Guernica, MTD Cipolletti, and, to an extent, those organizations organized under the CTD (Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados) Aníbal Verón. Moreover, not long after their founding many of these organizations initiated efforts to remain autonomous from state logic and control, as well as a defense of a territory within which they live, organize and many times have begun to produce. Embracing a timely re-conceptualization of social change, emancipation and even revolution, these organizations, working within their particular ‘times’ and circumstances, arrived at interesting and timely conclusions. Unless otherwise noted I will be refer to this second ‘branch’ as the ‘piquetero movement.’

Today piquetes are held principally as a means of pressuring the government to maintain or increase *Planes* allocated to the organization. Though analogous programs have been in place since the early to mid 1990s, the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* is the current focalized assistance programmed aimed at the country’s poorest and unemployed sectors. Each *plan*, distributed to “provide a minimum monthly income to all argentine families,”<sup>5</sup> provides families with a monthly pay of approximately 150 pesos (~ \$50), many times in exchange for service in public-works projects. The administration of planes by the piquetero organizations began with the piquete itself; since the mid 1990s Menem’s means of dealing with the piquetes had been the distribution of *planes* (Zadicoff, 2003). Today about 10% of the approximately two million *planes* distributed by the government are administered by piquetero organizations (Svampa, 2005). Yet, though most piquetero organizations receive or, as they understand it, *arrancan* [the forceful act of taking] *planes* from the government, how they administer and invest the planes is heavily dependent on which ‘branch’ of piqueteros they belong to. Many organizations have

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<sup>5</sup> [www.trabajo.gov.ar/jefes/index.asp](http://www.trabajo.gov.ar/jefes/index.asp)

been rightfully accused of utilizing the *planes* in ways that perpetuate Argentina's traditional clientalistic party networks. However, many piquetero organizations openly recognize this problem and have developed innovative ways of curbing it. Moreover, one can still find the odd case of a piquetero organization that has refused the *planes* and nevertheless survived.

Though the movement's ever evolving dynamics foster making any concrete conclusions or constructing any stable categories within which to place them impossible, what is clear is that the piquetero movement has made a name and place for itself in Argentine society and will not soon wither away. Nevertheless, they remain a highly debated theme within Argentine society. Where some analysts see them as the genuine representation of the Argentine popular (ex working) classes, for others the blocked streets and ruckus represent nothing more than an increasingly disturbing day to day nuisance that must be dealt with, 'firmly' if necessary. In relation to other social or workers movements, the piqueteros have tended to form fleeting, if any, alliances. In present day Buenos Aires much of the discussion around workers' movements revolves around, for instance, the *trabajadores del Subte* (the subway workers' union), the *trabajadores del casino* (a floating-casino workers union) and the 'recuperated factories' movement (Zanon, Bauen, Brukman, etc). While strong alliances amongst these are common, the piquetero movement generally has limited presence in their struggles. While it is not unlikely that a piquetero organization join in one of these movements's manifestations in a show of solidarity, the partnerships tend to end there. The piquetero's objectives, it seems, are far too localized to have much affinity with those of the 'worker's movements.' The same tends to be true in relation to the *piqueteros* and student and human rights movements. It is with this background in hand, then, that we venture into the world of the piqueteros in an effort to understand them and their demands within their contexts and with their complexities.

## Methodology and Structure

This research began with puzzling questions about an experience that is lacking adequate answers. These were questions regarding demands made by certain *piquetero* organizations in the greater Buenos Aires. Specifically I am referring to demands over ‘territory’ and ‘autonomy,’ demands which do not fit into the analysis made in the existing literature on the *piqueteros* which make use of various canonical social movement theories. Accordingly, this thesis has adopted a theory-building (as opposed to a theory-testing) path which takes the form of two interrelated qualitative case studies. The case study was chosen for three principal reasons: there are its theory-building capacity (Eckstein, 1975), its distinctiveness in seeking “to achieve both more complex and fuller explanations of a phenomena” (de Vaus, 2003: 221), and its appropriateness “for the investigation of cases when it is necessary to understand parts of a case within the context of the whole” (2003: 231). The first of two case studies that make up my thesis, presented in Chapter 2, is a retrospective explanatory case study organized around the paradigm of what I call the dialectic of the *desborde*. It assumes a World-Systems approach, the reasons behind which will be explained later in this chapter. The ‘data’ presented in this case study is a historical/theoretical analysis on the cause-effect relationships of the factors involved in the social, political and economic transformations occurred in Argentina over the past half century. It will set out to explain how and why certain events happened consequently setting the context for the second case. The second case, presented as Chapter 3, will be a descriptive case study that will draw on Argentina as a macrocosm and focus on the *piqueteros* at a micropolitical grouping level. This case study will take a micropolitical approach, the reasons behind which will also be explained later in this chapter. The goal is to demonstrate the relationship between the *piqueteros* and the *desborde* thus situating the *piqueteros* in the larger context of those social, political and economic transformations occurred in Argentina over the past half century. As any

well developed descriptive case study aspires to do, my endeavor is to present a complete description ('tell it how it is') of the phenomenon within its particular context.<sup>6</sup> By linking these two cases the ensuing 'final case' will, as de Vaus reasons, tell us more than and something qualitatively different from that which both cases on their own could (2003: 221). The conclusions gathered in this 'final case' will be presented in Chapter 4 along with an assessment of the implications this research has for the existing and future literature on the piquetero movement as well as social movement theories.

### **On Case Studies**

As Flyvbjerg states, "good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 241); this is what I have attempted in this thesis. Good narrative, moreover, "typically approaches the complexities and contradictions of real life. Accordingly, such narratives may be difficult or impossible to summarize into neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories." This professed lack of neat formulae, which this thesis is a testament to, should not of being taken as a negative but understood as "a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 237). As researcher I have studied "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and in doing so have had to venture outside of much of the canonical literature of the discipline.

On a gloomier note, it has long been argued that a case study cannot be of value in and of itself. Those who hold this opinion often hold that the case study is most useful for generating

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<sup>6</sup> Given that descriptions highlight only selected aspects of a case and thus can never be a-theoretical, my description of the *piqueteros* and historical events will resemble more "a painting of a landscape than a photography; they will be an interpretation rather than a mirror image" (de Vaus, 2003: 225). Therefore, I write conscious of the fact that the descriptions I provide are *my* descriptions rather than *the* descriptions of the cases. I have selected, based on my own 'implicit theories,' the *relevant* events, peoples and connotations and will order the present selected facts and conclusions as I deem best fit.

hypotheses in the first steps of a total research process whereas hypothesis testing and theory building are best carried out by other methods later in the process. However, I consider this a mistake. The mistake, as Flyvbjerg has already stated, is that formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 228). It is the ‘force of example’ more than ‘formal generalization’ that I strive for in this thesis.

### **World-Systems**

In the practice of using a case studies to build theory one “begins with only a question and perhaps a basic proposition, looks at real cases and ends up with a more specific theory or set of propositions as a result of examining actual cases” (de Vaus, 2003: 223). The first step, then, is to work out what *is going on* in the case and why it is happening. My explanatory case study begins with ‘symptoms:’ why are the organizations making these demands? How do these demands relate to the country’s larger sociopolitical situation? I approach these questions through an analytic framework that is particularly apt at engaging in the analysis of large-scale social change over long periods of historical time, the World-Systems framework.

World-Systems is a multidisciplinary approach “rooted in the historically specific totality which is the world capitalist economy” (Wallerstein, 1974: 391). Its two most prominent figures are sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein and historian Fernand Braudel. The former developed the World-Systems theory working off the latter’s premise that capitalism needed to be understood ‘upside-down,’ that is to say, that the two basic characteristics of capitalism were a “relatively high degree of monopolization – that is, an anti-market” (Wallerstein, 1991: 356) as well as not being confined “to a single choice, of being eminently adaptable, hence non-specialization” (Braudel, 1992, 381). Moreover, as Braudel pointed out, the global distribution of the concentration of surplus, which *is* a defining characteristic of capitalism, became stabilized by

about 1640 (Wallerstein, 1974: 401), thus avoiding the “*de facto* confusion between industrialism and capitalism” (Wallerstien, 1974: 398). In working out his macro-sociological perspective, Wallerstein developed the concept of a world integrated not by a world-empire with a political-center but by a world-economy through the global market. Given that the world is wholly connected through capitalist relations, World-Systems assumes that “there is no such thing as ‘national development’” and thus “the proper entity of comparison is the world-system” (Wallerstein, 1974: 390). This implies that countries or regions can not be spoken of as existing within different ‘stages’ of development given that since the “nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been only one world-system in existence, the capitalist world-economy” (Wallerstein, 1974: 390). Accordingly, there exists a single world economy with a single division of labor alongside multiple cultures (Wallerstein, 1974: 390).

This method permits taking nation-states as variables; they are understood as elements within the capitalist system and global *class struggle* which are both understood to be fixed element of the World-System. States, moreover, “are neither progressive nor reactionary” by these standards, they are simply responding to the “movements and forces that deserve such evaluative judgments” (Wallerstein, 1974: 415). In regards to these ‘movements and forces,’ World-Systems “takes seriously the concept of capitalism as a way of organizing [...] the modern world” (Wallerstein, 1991). Consequently this framework also permits us to concentrate on the movements and forces within the nation-state and formulate what I call the ‘dialectics of the *desborde*.’ Therefore, the first case study is an attempt to “enable us to see better what has happened and what is happening” (Wallerstein, 1974: 415) from this macro perspective.

The story told in my case study focuses on the argentine state beginning roughly at the commencement of its first ‘democratic’ government in 1916 up through the neoliberal era.

Nonetheless, it must be read within the context of the history of the twentieth century global industrial division of labor. This story begins during the last quarter of the nineteenth century when “the rise of manufacturing created for the first time under capitalism a large-scale urban proletariat.” As a result there arose the first “anti-capitalist mass spirit” (Wallerstein, 1974: 410), which, in consequence, gave rise to concrete organizational forms for channeling that ‘spirit’: trade unions and socialist parties. During this period the bourgeoisies of the ‘core’ countries were faced with the threat of the internal instability of their state structures; as Wallerstein explains, “they were simultaneously faced with the economic crisis of the latter third of the nineteenth century resulting from the more rapid increase of agricultural production than the expansion of a potential market for these goods” (Wallerstein, 1974: 411). The solution to retain stability came in the form of a redistribution of the surplus agricultural production to allow that these goods to be bought and, consequently, that the economic machinery return to a smooth operation. Therefore, “by expanding the purchasing power of the industrial proletariat of the core countries, the world-economy was unburdened simultaneously of two problems: the bottleneck of demand, and the unsettling ‘class conflict’ of the core states – hence, the social liberalism or welfare-state ideology that arose just at that point in time” (Wallerstein, 1974: 411). This welfare-state ideology, coinciding with the end of the First World War, symbolized “the end of an era; and the Russian Revolution of October 1917 the beginning of a new one, [...] a stage of revolutionary turmoil but it also was, in a seeming paradox, the stage of the consolidation of the industrial capitalist world-economy” (Wallerstein, 1974: 411). Argentine ‘democracy’ and Peronism exhibit a similar paradox: as we will see, the democratic aperture early in the twentieth century, along with the rising revolutionary turmoil of the Argentine industrial working class channeled

into the Peronist movement also wind up consolidating Argentina's place in the capitalist world-economy.

### **Micropolitics**

A closer look at the piqueteros is essential given that from both an understanding-oriented and an action-oriented perspective, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). In comparison to random sampling, taking the piqueteros as an *extreme case* "can be well-suited for getting a point across in an especially dramatic way, which often occurs for well-known case studies such as Freud's 'Wolf-Man' and Foucault's 'Panopticon'" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). The second step in this theory building process, then, is this kind of an examination of the piqueteros. This heavily descriptive process carried out in the second case study will focus on the piqueteros at the 'micropolitical' level. Micropolitics, in this tradition, is as an analytic concept elaborated by Felix Guattari whose major concerns involved "capitalism as a world system that creates new forms of control as it erodes old ones and a sharp critique of leftist bureaucratic structures" (Best and Kellner, 1991: 85). It is at heart a "critique of state and party worshiping forms of Marxism, [...and a] dramatic poststructuralist attack on representation, interpretation, the modern subject, and 'the tyranny of the signifier'" (Best and Kellner, 1991: 85).

Accordingly, micropolitics as a concept is inline with the critique of the 'left' politics of the past century which orbited around the debate of 'reform or revolution.' The problem, according to Guattari and others, was that either option could only think change *through* the state and thus "winning power over the state became the nodal point of the revolutionary process" (Holloway, 2005). That is, either one joined a political party and helped it win institutional power or one joined the guerilla and helped it win control over the state. Both visions,

nonetheless, focused on the state as the idyllic location from which society could be changed. As the logic goes, even if currently the capitalist class may be manipulating the state for its own interests, after the revolution the state will be manipulated by the working class according to their interest. The mistake made by the left, however, has been to not take into consideration that within their strategies “there exists, inevitably, a funneling of the ‘disorder.’” That is, “the fervor of those who struggle for a different society is taken and diverted toward a single direction: winning control over the state;’ the construction of the party or army thus eclipses” the multiplicities of demands and aversions that initially fueled the uprising (2005). What is more, all of those elements of the struggle that do not contribute to the lone objective are considered secondary and, in conjunction, suppressed. As Holloway argues, “a hierarchy within the struggle is established” leading to “the impoverishment of the struggles [...] by a process of auto-censorship” (2005). Ultimately it is “a form of disciplining the class struggle, of subordinating innumerable forms of class struggles to the exclusive objective” (2005) which assures that “the struggle is lost from its very inception” (2005). “As the century advanced,” continues Holloway, “the stateist paradigm increasingly became optimism’s assassin. The apparent impossibility of revolution at the beginning of the twenty-first century reflects [...] the historical failure of a particular concept of revolution: the one identified with control over the state” (2005). Thus, “the only way we can imagine revolution today is by means of the dissolution of power, not its conquest” (2005).

What the left capable of auto-criticism and critical reflection has learned has been that “if we rebel against capitalism it is not because we want a different power structure but because we want a society in which power relations have been dissolved” (Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 1994). This means that the struggle is no longer *for* power but *against* power. Power, in this sense, is

understood in its broadest sense. That is, power is understood as something that is dispersed, fragmented, decentralized and omnipresent; something that simply winning control over the state can not bring 'under control.' Micropolitics, thus, is particularly apt in 'uncovering' those forms of doing politics and constructing power by focusing on the 'little things' "that Nietzsche called discreet and apparently insignificant truths, which, when closely examined, reveal themselves to be pregnant with paradigms, metaphors, and general significance" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 238). More than diminish the significance of the 'macropolitical,' by focusing on the micropolitical (or molecular) levels, Guattari developed a theoretical perspective capable of capturing the multiplicity of experiences that create potent bonds and relations amongst people where and when, from a macro perspective, there does not seem to be anything going on (Best and Kellner, 2001). In this sense micropolitics can be defined as "small scale" or "anti-institutional" politics (Best and Kellner, 2001) that exist outside the scope of 'macro' institutions and structures. Deleuze, along with Guattari, hold that in such cases "those who evaluate things in macropolitical terms understand nothing of the event, because something unaccountable is always escaping" (Deleuze, 1987: 238). Micropolitics is well suited for observing those rebellions that do not allow themselves to be pressed into the templates of the macro political occurring in places and spaces where institutions are being 'overflowed' (*desbordado*).

## CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

### **Peronism**

In an essay debating the causes of the unusually horrific events of the most recent military dictatorship, Argentine historian Tulio Halperín Donghi argues that the historical contradictions that culminated in that terror lie in the landed aristocracy's refusal, in 1916, to accept any meaningful incorporation of the middle class into the political and economic structure (Donghi, 1987). In 1916, Argentina held its first 'free' elections where the opposition party, the Radical Party, came to power. The tensions between the unscathed hegemonic role of the agrarian bourgeoisie and newly 'incorporated' Radical Party, along with the added stress of worldwide economic crisis of the late 1920s, led to "a return to the [un-integrated] past." To be "reincorporated," the middle and working classes would have to wait until the June 1943 military coup (Tedesco, 1999).

This came in the form of a military coup on June 4 of 1943 which had been motivated by the nationalist sector of the Armed Forces' "extreme dislike for what the military men saw as [the president's administration's] extreme conservatism (Alexander, 1979: 30)." It had as its objective to put an end "to the 'electoral fraud era' (*década infame*), and its political conservatism," and had as "one of its main participants [...] Colonel Juan Domingo Perón" (Tedesco, 1999: 2). In early 1944, after a reorganization of the military government fueled by a struggle between those who promoted a break in diplomatic relation with the Axis powers, those who didn't, and those who opposed Perón's growing influence within the military, Perón emerged triumphantly. This debate, though, was far from settled and would have severe consequences for decades to come. Nevertheless, Perón became "the most important figure in the

military government,” holding the positions of minister and vice president on the ministry of war along with a post as secretary of labor and social welfare (Alexander, 1979: 33).

Concerned over the growing alienation between the government and the civilian population, the military government intensified an alliance building process that had begun previous to the 1943 coup. Perón and his allies believed that “the military government would not be able to last long it did not fairly rapidly gain allies among at least some civilian elements, [...for this] Perón turned to the industrialists [...and] the labor movement” (1979: 35). As secretariat of labor and social welfare, Perón’s enacted “a great deal of social legislation, the stimulation of growth of the organized labor movement, and increasing intervention in the process of collected bargaining.” These legislations extended “social security (principally health insurance and retirement benefits) to virtually all parts of the working class, laws concerning paid vacations and holidays, labor inspection, limitation of the employers’ right to dismiss workers, and a wide variety of other matters” (1979: 37). This had effectively put an end to “the age-old system of labor spies, to dismissals of any worker who joined a union, and to the beating up of labor militants” (1979: 38).

Perón’s industrialist allies, however, had understood their relationship with him differently than did the workers. The industrialists “tended to look upon the military government as a passing phenomenon” (1979: 35) that would eventually fall and give way to the Radical Party’s return to power. Because of this, they saw no point in mortgaging their, and the Radical Party’s, future on an alliance with the military government. Moreover, the union leaders soon “began to discover that [...] the loyalty of many of the union members had been transferred from the trade union leaders to [Perón himself]” (1979: 39).

Perón's relationship with the workers was neither as straight forward as it might have seemed. However small of a minority they may have been, the anarchist, Communist, and some socialist union leaders, who from the beginning had resisted Perón's blandishments, were dealt with ruthlessly (1979: 39). Perón believed that unorganized workers, including those organized by union leaders not subordinate to him, presented a "dangerous panorama." He deemed that "the best organized working masses [were those] which can best be directed and led in all spheres" (Tadesco, 1992: 4). To this Perón passed the Law of Professional Associations that determined whether employers were legally bound to negotiate with a certain union. According to the law, "any union, in order to engage in collective bargaining or to have any dealings with governmental organizations, would first have to have *personeria gremial* (official recognition) from the Secretariat of Labor" (1979: 40). Nevertheless, Colonel Perón's success in acquiring a broad base of support among the civilian population consolidated his power within the military government. By mid October, 1945, "his military colleagues concern over his pro-labor policy and the potential political power with which it was furnishing Perón" proved widespread and urgent enough to force his resignation from his government posts and have him placed under arrest (James, 1988). On the morning of October 17, 1945, before the Supreme Court (to whom the government was handed) was able to hold elections, "columns of [working class] demonstrators began arriving in the center of Buenos Aires [...demanding] Perón's release from confinement and his return to government." By that evening, the protestor's actions had grown so massive they "had forced the government to release Perón [...] leading to the consolidation of a social and political movement which has dominated Argentine society" ever since (James, 1988).<sup>1</sup> Some argue that this was the first time the working class appeared as a political actor

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting, and I believe telling of Perón's politics, to consider that nobody took the trouble of explaining who kidnapped him nor were his whereabouts during his kidnapping made public. Neither was there legal punishment for

(Tadesco, 1992). What was not questioned was that after these events organized labor had proven itself to be the other (alongside the military) major source of political power in Argentina. From then on, Perón's stability would rest on maintaining loyalty to both these forces. When Perón returned from prison, instead of resuming the functions of his old positions, he launched his candidacy for the elections of February 1946.

Within the military, especially after the reorganization of February 1944 and the events of October 1945, a "division of the Argentine body politic between supporters and opponents of Perón took place; [...] to an increasing degree, all previous bases of political alignment tended to give way to the issue of Perón/anti- Perón" (Alexander, 1979: 41). The same was true for the split among civil society. In these circumstances Perón proved himself, at least in the short term, an exceptionally astute politician. Perón's famed 'double-discourse' allowed him to "curb inconvenient demands of his labor supporters by pleading the unwillingness of the military leaders to go alone, [...] while at the same time as he] could hold over the military leaders the threat of a new October 17 if they weakened in their loyalty to him" (1979: 47). Perón easily won the elections of 1946 and proceeded to continue with his working class oriented policies and nationalist economics. Ideologically, Perón and his supporters pictured themselves "as constituting a 'third position' between capitalism and communism," although even those more philosophically inclined within his movement were "never able to picture it as a coherent political philosophy" (1979: 62). Regardless of ideological cohesion, however, Plotkin explains that "for the vast majority of the working class, the ten years of Peronist rule had meant a real improvement in their living conditions through a notable redistribution of income, their incorporation into the political system and into the state apparatus, as well as the reformulation

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the supposed kidnappers nor were their names revealed (Plotkin, 1998: 31).

(in their favor) of old patterns of social relations with other sectors of society” (Plotkin, 1998: 30).

Peronism would begin to face its gravest challenges in the early 1950s. A growing economic crisis, reversal of positive trends in real wages, the slowing down of economic development and Perón’s reversal of economic nationalism along with the death of his Wife Evita had taken their toll on Perón’s government. In September of 1955, after months of speculation and a failed coup, the anti-Peronist factions of the military (notwithstanding contradictory positions amongst themselves) staged a nationwide rebellion and seized control over the weakened government. Perón fled on a Paraguayan gunboat and eventually found himself in Franco’s Spain. In Spain he would spend nearly 18 years in exile. The new regime’s principal goal “was economic modernization. Much of the government’s economic program hinged on weakening the power of organized labor as both a factor of power in civil society and an obstacle to plans for rationalizing the country’s economic structures and attracting foreign investment” (Brennan, 1994).

During the period of September 1955 to June 1966, with the Peronist party outlawed, a series of failed elected presidencies each followed by a military coup failed to provide the country with viable political and institutional stability. In June of 1966, after an armed conflict between opposing factions of the military following a military coup that toppled then President Arturo Illia of the Radical Party, Juan Carlos Onganía assumed the presidency. During his presidency Illia had lifted restrictions on the legality of the Peronist who had triumphed over the Radicals in the 1965 legislative elections (Tedesco, 1999). This caused an upheaval within the military between the *azules* who valued Peronism’s nationalism, Christian character and considered Peronism a moderate force useful in the fight against the left, and the *colorados* who

understood Peronism as a communist influenced classist organization that needed to be eradicated (Tedesco, 1999). Though Onganía had led the *azules*, he eventually entered into confrontations with the Peronists for which he “removed legal recognition from some of the most important unions and seized union property,” appearing, at least in the short term, to “have broken the back of the Peronista political and trade union apparatus” (Alexander, 1979: 119). Onganía, underestimating the resiliency of the Peronist unions, was confronted “by a vertically organized labor movement united and mobilized against the regime preceding his (Buchanan, 1985: 76),” a group that remained loyal to exiled Perón. This proved an even greater concern given that Onganía’s administration’s goals of creating a “proper investment climate for attracting foreign capital” required that he first deal with the “labor problem” (Buchanan, 1985: 76). The right to strike was suspended, the right over the dismissal of strikers was authorized, government intervention in unions was sanctioned along with the inspection, freezing and confiscation of union finances, and labor assemblies were prohibited within Onganía’s first year as head of government (Buchanan, 1985). Moreover, after an initial “period of grace” immediately following the coup, “the regime imposed mandatory state arbitration on all collective bargaining, decreed strict wage controls for a period of eighteen months, then suspended collective bargaining entirely” (1985: 77). This is the setting in which, in May of 1969, what would become the single most decisive event of the ensuing forty years took place.

### **1968-69 and thereafter**

1968 is described by Daniels (1989) as “the year when the gathering forces of antiestablishment, anti-imperialist, and anti-elitist protest peaked” causing many people to believe “that the worldwide structure of power, within and among nations, was at the point of collapse” (1989: 3). This three year long ‘revolution’ was, as Wallerstein describes, “one of the great, formative events in the history of our modern world-system” (Wallerstein, 1991: 65).

Before we can understand the transcendence of the events in Argentina, however, we must situate it within these worldwide events. As Wallerstein goes on to explain, the ‘revolution of 1968s “origins, consequences, and lessons cannot be analyzed correctly by appealing to the particular circumstances of the local manifestations of this global phenomenon” (1991: 65). To begin putting this into context, it is useful to point out that at this moment the United States was dropping “more non-nuclear bombs on [the anticolonial struggle] than had been dropped on all of Asia and Europe in World War II” (Kurlanski, 2004: *xvi*), Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated, the “Black Power” arm of the civil rights movement emerges, the U.S. strategy in Vietnam shifted toward Vietnamization as a reaction to the Tet Offensive, the city of Chicago “purchased helicopters for its police force and started training 11,500 policemen in using heavy weapons and crowd control techniques” (2004: 8), protesters and police battle for control of the streets of Chicago for eight days, the list goes on. In France “a movement launched by a handful of students which threw its university system into confusion, touched off the largest strike in the country’s history, and rocked the foundations of its political regime” (Touraine, 1971: 22). In Paris, what began as a student protests was joined by a “wave of strikes and factory occupations, and the political uncertainty that followed the Week of the Barricades” (1971: 26) which fused into what is now recognized simply as May ‘68. The ‘movement,’ unlike the revolutionary movements of the past, “did not fight its adversaries directly,” but rather “ran up against the prevailing utopianism of the rulers of society which asserted that social problems can be simply solved through modernization, adaptation, and integration” (1971: 25). These events, disparagingly interpreted as ‘bourgeois daddy’s boy’s’ playing revolution’ by the communist party, were ultimately suppressed by the government. In similar fashion, ‘old lefts’ throughout the world responded to these uprisings “with increasing impatience and hostility to the spreading

‘anarchism’ of the ‘new lefts’” (Wallerstein, 1991: 70). Nevertheless, as Touraine argues, after these events a new ‘fact’ emerged: a fact that proved “that power was no longer an instrument of economic exploitation for the benefit of a minority but rather a structure of management, control, and manipulation of all social life” (1971: 347). Class struggles, then, would have to be reinvented not in terms of “economic conflict,” but as “clashes with the apparatus of integration, manipulation, and aggression” (1971: 28).

In Latin America 1968 represented an equally momentous experience. The student demonstrations in Mexico City over university autonomy and freedom for political prisoners and the resulting several hundred deaths (Daniels, 1989: 239) stand as one of the more dramatic events of this period. Yet, for the rest of Latin America 1968 also represents the beginning of the Peruvian anti-imperialist and nationalist military government, the launching of an urban guerilla campaign by the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the conference of the Roman Catholic bishops of Latin America in Medellín, the *minero* revolts in Bolivia, the death of ‘Che’ Guevara, and the *Cordobazo* in Argentina. The common dominator shared by the uprisings of 1968, argues Kurlansky, was their “desire to rebel, ideas about how to do it, a sense of alienation from the established order, and a profound distaste for authoritarianism in any form” (2004). These rebellions were aimed against power- “power over people and power over nations, power exercised on the international plane by great imperial states, by governments within nations, or by people in positions of dominance over the powerless under them” (Daniels, 1989: 5).

Many important questions came to light from these events: Is it possible to achieve significant political change without taking state power? Are there forms of social power worth conquering other than ‘political’ power? What (if any) form of organization should anti-systemic movements take? Is there any political basis on which anti-systemic movements can join hands?

These questions only grew in relevance as we entered the later stages of capitalist development. Today in Latin America one can find several examples of movements that have come to ask themselves, through lessons learned through their own experiences, these very questions. What is more, they have found fascinating answers. Before arriving at those movements and answers, however, we will consider one of the important turning points for Latin America during the revolution of 1968; more specifically, the *Cordobazo*. The *Cordobazo* represented the first time the Argentine working class acted (as a class) outside the state and union apparatuses. Unchained from party and union hierarchies, these events signaled a *desborde* (overflow) of the state's institutions and consequently, according to Alexander, were the "events which ultimately brought Juan Perón back to Argentina and then back to power" (Alexander, 1979: 129). The state and capital, however, would and did not react passively to these events. In reaction to this *desborde*, as we will also see, capital and the state entered into a process of intense restructuring which would have major consequences for the Piquetero movement forty years later.

### **The Cordobazo**

On May 29, 1969, the working class and students in Córdoba lead a historic event that became "a point of inflexion in the long political process of the popular struggles." After that day nothing would be the same; "the *Cordobeses* not only rejected the governments violence, but utilized its own violence (counter-violence), to force the state into retreat and continued until defeating it" (Cena, 2000: 50). The state was 'defeated' on three fronts: 1. the events broke the psychological dominion that dictatorship had over the working class which had kept them immobilized, 2. the massive working class mobilizations took place outside the bureaucratic union's established channels, and 3. the workers adopted illegal and violent methods over the interclass collaborative negotiation methods that characterized the traditional Peronist bureaucratic unions (Cena, 2000: 250). Moreover, the *Cordobazo* set off a wave of insurrections

throughout the country “which would take the military government’s genocide to pacify.” The *Cordobazo* “was to an important extent the culmination of a decadent and spiraling logic that the workers movement had been trapped within: the bureaucratic unions contributing toward the defeats and the defeats strengthening the bureaucratic unions (Anonymous, 1972: 31).” May 1969 began to break that spiral; for the first time in many years the working class had gone on the offensive.

Córdoba is Argentina’s second industrial center and at the moment of the *Cordobazo* was dominated by the automobile industry (Brennan, 1994). The Onganía government (1966-1970) had been particularly harsh toward labor. In the year prior to the *Cordobazo*, economic and labor policies were already especially resented in Córdoba. “The city’s pivotal automobile industry,” explains Brennan, “had taken advantage of the government’s hard-line labor policies and had [...] reduced wages by some 20%, laid-off nearly 1,000 workers, and periodically reduced the work week” (Brennan, 1994). The *Cordobazo* occurs after a series of smaller worker and student strikes and demonstrations within the same month. On May 28, 1969, several workers unions and student organizations met clandestinely to plan a strategy for the strike set to take place the following day. It was decided that the strike would be a ‘*paro active*,’ that is, “a mass abandonment of work and subsequent street demonstration in order to display the unity of the Córdobaes working class and fortify local labor militancy,” as opposed to the more common “lackadaisical stay-at-home strike, the ‘*paro matero*’”(Brennan, 1994).

The protests began that morning at the Renault factory where stewards on the morning shift stopped work in their departments and gathered the workers together to organize the factory abandonment (Brennan, 1994). With them the workers took “steel bars, tools, bolts and screws, anything that might be of use in a confrontation with the police.” The workers began a march

from the factory to the city center, some eight kilometers away. As they walked through the industrial sector on the outskirts of the city and the nearby neighborhoods, some 4,000 more workers and students joined the procession. The column had grown to some 6,000 by the time it reached one of the main avenues nearer to the city center. The column was met by the police who initiated what would be a long day of offensives and counter offensive attacks between the police and workers. The first encounter resulted in the death of Máximo Mena, a worker of the Renault factory. When word “spread through the downtown neighborhoods of Mena’s death,” the workers were joined by middle-class residents who had “watched the confrontation from their windows and balconies and were now sharing in the collective indignation, not only with the immediate police brutality, but with three years of authoritarian rule” (Brennan, 1994). By one o’clock on May 29<sup>th</sup>, some “one hundred and fifty city blocks [...] had been occupied by the protesters.” Some of the union leaders “initially attempted to establish some degree of organization over the protest. Nevertheless, the uprising had taken on a spontaneous<sup>2</sup> character [...] without regard to any greater tactical design. The union leadership was largely working in the dark, barely able to follow the course of events much less control them” (1994).

Within a couple of hours “the protest had turned destructive. On [...] the city’s principal commercial street, protesters burned down the offices [...] of the representatives of the government and its perceived ally, foreign imperialism” (1994). As the day seemed to be coming to a close “many, perhaps the majority, abandoned the barricades.” As the workers made their way “back to their neighborhoods, [...] many for the first time realized the significance of the day’s events. Smoldering buildings and the charred frames of cars, streets strewn with shards

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Spontaneous’ as it is used here is, by my interpretation, reflexive of the nature of the uprising. That is, the term reflects a view from the outside of the movement; in this case the view of the union leaders who the workers were no longer responding to.

of glass, barricades and bonfires gave the appearance of a city at war” (Brennan, 1994). Because of continued resistance the military delayed the retaking of the city until the following day. When the troops and tanks began to move into the barricaded zone they were again met by gunfire. However, the protestors “low caliber hunting rifles, pistols, and Molotov cocktails were no match for the army’s tanks, bazookas, and machine guns” (Brennan, 1994). Cordoba had become an occupied city, “the army had posted troops at strategic points throughout the city and moved in heavy tanks. [...] After two days of protest and violence, the *Cordobazo* had ended” (Brennan, 1994). Onganía’s government was henceforth nearly completely dependent on the support of the army to remain in power and, his government never being able to reassert its authority after the Cordoban protest, he was forced to resign a year later (Brennan, 1994).

Prior to this event, the Argentine “workers unions [...] were ready and willing to negotiate and collaborate with the civilians or military in power; the working class’s demands were reduced to simple economic demands that did not question the legitimacy of the capitalist system” (Cena, 2000: 249). In an anonymous assessment of the events published in 1971, the author concluded that up to that point the working class had “suffered a kind of mania by following Lenin’s recommendations.” This meant that “theory had been degraded to the mechanical repetition of formulas adequate for the necessities of the bureaucracy and has ceased to be a useful instrument for conscious action” (Anonymous, 1972: 7). The events that occurred in 1969, according to the same author, “changed the course of history in Argentina. [...] For the first time in a long time, this change was a profound one, [...] a radical change determined by the working class” (1972: 30). This working class victory, however, is far from the end of the story.

### **The Welfare State**

Some before me have proposed the idea that the victory of the workers in Cordoba be understood as having *desbordado* (overflowed) the state institutions (Zibechi, 2003). This would

imply that the actions of the insubordinate during the *Cordobazo* transcended the state's institutions (unions, parties, military, etc.). Consequently, even if only during a narrow window of time, they escaped the state's control. This instance of *desborde popular* (popular overflow), however, must be understood within its own institutional context: the welfare state.

The classical conception of the welfare state is of one that “provides services to groups of peoples as part of the rights of citizenship.” These services can range “from help to the needy, retirement funds, workingmen's compensation, medical services, pensions for new mothers, unemployment benefits and public education” (Guy, 2001). Between the 1950s and the mid 1970s in Argentina virtually “all working people nominally came to be under the coverage of the pension system” (Usami, 2004: 219). Beginning in 1954, pension plans for agricultural workers as well as for self-employed, managers, and professional workers were introduced. Shortly after, during the first anti-Peronist military government (1955-58), the coverage was further extended to homemaking service workers. Moreover, the health insurance coverage expanded dramatically in 1970 when the Social Health Insurance Law was legislated demanding that “all employees had to be enrolled in the health insurance system, and trade unions were admitted as health insurance administrators together with the government and state-run and mixed enterprises” (Usami, 2004: 220). What this highlights is that even under the governments harshest toward labor the state was nonetheless an inclusive one.

The modern state is one which both acts as the institutional system of political domination and has a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force. In the same way that a specie's prevailing biological purpose is to reproduce in a constant attempt to evade extinction, a state's 'organic' purpose is to maintain political domination and monopoly over physical force. In an inclusive state such as the modern welfare state, this 'organic purpose' is achieved through the

inclusion of the majority of the population into the state's institutions; as Luhmann contends, "the welfare state is the realization of political inclusion" (Luhmann, 1981: 35). Those institutions (health care, education, social security, workers unions, etc), consequently, functioned as mechanisms of social control; that is, social control understood in the Parsonian sense as any social process or mechanism that counteracts deviant tendencies. Charles Taylor explains that the institutions of the modern welfare state can be understood "as mechanisms of control and 'normalization'" due to the fact that, in order to become beneficiaries of these institutions, citizens must submit to bureaucratic regulation that cut across all aspects of one's life (Taylor, 1997: 68). Thus, we can assert that an inclusive welfare state's ability to perform its functions as a state depends on its ability to incorporate and control a population.

### **The Desborde Popular**

As stated in the introduction, the image of society *desbordando* (overflowing) the state is a fundamental element of my larger thesis. However, before introducing the *desborde* I find it necessary to disassociate it from the concepts of 'failed states' and 'decentralization.' In the former, "because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people," a state "loses legitimacy and, in the eyes and hearts of a growing plurality of its citizens, [...] becomes illegitimate" (Rotberg, 2002). The state's legitimacy, therefore, dissolves under its own incapacities to deliver the 'goods' that, according to the population and its institutions, it has the responsibility of delivering. The latter, decentralization, refers to the relative dispersal of political decision making. It generally refers to the "dispersal of administrative discretion" and "location of economic decisions" (Wolman, 1990: 29). Although "there is no single operational definition which can adequately capture the conceptual meaning of decentralization" (Wolman, 1990: 41), it is at the very least a conscious and calculated process by which a state "distributes

power from the center” (1990: 29), be it political or economic. The *desborde*, as we will see, is something quite different.

In *El Desborde Popular y La Crisis del Estado* (orig., 1984) Peruvian anthropologist Jose Matos Mar describes a phenomenon in early 1980s Lima that, when discussed in the context of the *Cordobazo*, provides a revealing juxtaposition. Though Mar’s *desborde* was not the consequence of violent protests, the insights provided is indispensable given that in both instances the logic of overflowing the existing state institutions is one in the same. In Peru the *desborde* was the result of a process of rapid mass migration into the capitol city. The *desborde*, according to Mar, occurs when “the spontaneous mobilization of the popular sectors, questioning the authority of the state and recurring to multiple strategies and mechanisms” (Matos Mar, 2004, 17-18) cross the institutionalized boundaries. The state, in consequence, becomes unable to ‘put things in order’ and channel life in the country into a ‘legitimate consensual frame.’ In Peru the state was *desbordado* by the emerging social dynamics that provided “the base for a social life and an institutional capacity of representation” that did not depend on “authorities, political parties and, principally, the state” (2004: 82). During the *Cordobazo* the working class, who had hitherto been organized into the highly hierarchical and bureaucratized Peronist unions, found themselves in a confrontation not only with the police and military forces, but also with the logic and principles of the existing institutions. In this confrontation, as in Peru, the existing structures of society, culture and state are ‘overflowed’ and exposed as obsolete even if only momentarily.

These moments of ‘liberation’ from the state’s physical and ideological dominance have profound and lasting affects both for the state as well as the protagonists. The crossing, culturally and or physically, of the “limits of the official institutionalized order” present the state

with a dilemma: the very existence of a *desborde* is a sign the state has lost its control over society, if it does not reorganize itself and regain control then it will quickly become perceived as incompetent and replaceable.

### **The National Reorganization Process (or, Capital's Response)**

When a state is *desbordado* it loses its legitimate monopoly over violence and its ability to exert control over a territory and population. In Argentina, the first attempts to regain social control after the *Cordobazo* and the ensuing uprisings came in the form of a coup d'état which put an end to the Onganía government. In June of 1970 the military generals replaced Onganía as head of government with then military attaché in Washington Brigadier General Roberto Levingston. His appointment, though, was rather symbolic. In March of 1971 General Alejandro Lanusse, who since Onganía's ousting held *de facto* control over the military, took over the presidency (Alexander, 1979: 119). Lanusse, who had overthrown Levingston on "the argument that [Levingston] had sought to make overtures to Juan Perón," soon set about continuing negotiations with Perón more openly and determinedly than had Levingston (Alexander, 1979: 133).<sup>3</sup> The Argentine military government saw no other recourse than the ostensibly desperate measure of negotiating the return of Perón, the only person they deemed capable of bringing the working class back under control of the state. Perón's short return from Spain, though, was marked by an obscure sequence of events that culminated in his nominating Héctor Cámpora, a 'nonentity' within the party, as the Peronist candidate for the upcoming elections. Cámpora won the elections and was inaugurated as president in May of 1973. His presidency was quickly shadowed by Perón's final return to Argentina less than a month after Cámpora's taking office. Within a number of weeks both Cámpora and his vice president resigned paving the way for the

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<sup>3</sup> The process of negotiations between Perón, Lanusse, Perón's supporters and anti-Peronist parties were characterized by, according to Alexander (1979), "semi-secret maneuvers and negotiations."

return of Perón to the presidency. Perón returned to office “amidst a wave of national reconciliation and good feeling that [...] would certainly have been [...] inconceivable only a few years before” (1979: 139). The political and economic crisis absorbing Argentina was severe enough that even Perón’s most stubborn critics were “hoping and praying” that Perón “live long enough to overcome the crisis” (1979: 143). Perón’s death in July of 1974 and the incompetence of his wife Isabel Martínez de Perón as presidential successor had proved these first attempts at regaining control to be a failure. As for the working class, their “struggle was reaching a peak in 1976 in spite of the great confusion and demoralization [...] as they perceived the degeneration of ‘their’ Peronist movement and the betrayal by ‘their’ government” (Munck, 1985: 57). After two years of failed attempts to ‘stabilize’ economic and sociopolitical conditions along with the gradual internal decomposition of the Peronist government, Isabel Martínez de Perón’s term was interrupted by another coup d’état. The ensuing military dictatorship governed between 1976 and 1983. The military regime would refer to itself, fittingly so, as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization).

The military government determined to carry out programs for eradicating subversion, normalizing political life and restoring economic growth (some officers spoke of a necessary minimum of ten to fifteen years of governance), considered the creation of an alternative base of legitimacy to replace that of the democracy they had overthrown a primary necessity (Pion-Berlin, 1985). The ideological lynchpins of this legitimacy would, in return, provide a justification for the high social costs necessary to implement their programs. While the Argentine military presented these justifications “as abstractions like ‘order,’ ‘development,’ and, ‘Christian civilization,’” such vague notions are nevertheless spelled out in concrete goals (Epstein, 1984: 34). These goals, moreover, must be understood within the global economic and

sociopolitical contexts of the moment. On the global economic front the *Proceso* was intimately intertwined with capital's reaction to the worldwide anti-institutional and working class victories of the '68 era. This 'reaction' consisted of a process of deterritorialization whose end result we tend to recognize today as 'globalization'. It has been argued the chief difference between the *Proceso* and the military regimes previous to it was its strong links forged with international capital. According to this reasoning the aim of this new regime was not simply 'social order,' equally important to the military government was the achievement of an "economic stability as preconditions to attract domestic and international capital investment" (Munck, 1985: 46). On the political front the military government's initial legitimacy rested upon its ability to prevent another *desborde* (Ciappina, 2004). The *Proceso* was, effectively, the state's final attempt to subdue the working class Perón had begun to arouse. These two processes came together in Argentina to finally, through brute force, terror, and a profound structural reconfiguration of society, economy, and the state's institutions and functions, reassert the state's control over argentine territory. It has long been understood that the military government can be read as "a sharpening of class struggle on the one hand and the internationalization of capital on the other" (Munck, 1985: 46). However, these have rarely, if ever, been placed in the context of neoliberal globalization and the *desborde*.

In response to 1968, 'capital'<sup>4</sup> comprehends that to survive it must evolve in accordance with its environment. The Fordist/Tayloris industrial models proved inadequate in the post 1968 world; this was a moment where that model's disciplinary mechanisms and institutions were being overflowed and rendered useless. In response capital became 'globalized.' Zibechi (2003: 300) explains:

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<sup>4</sup> 'Capital' as representative of in international capitalist economy

Capital removes its decision making centers from within the nation-state and situates them at a 'global' level leaving behind only neocolonial enclaves to manage local matters. Along with this, capital 'deterritorializes' production. It removes industries from the working class neighborhoods which had become working class strongholds and moves them to places without working class traditions, cultures, or organizational experiences.

Regardless of where industry finds its new home (be it on a Mexican border town, a 'free zone' in a Central American port, etc), it left in its wake deserted working class enclaves. This is a particular reading of the process that has come to be known as globalization. According to neoliberal ideology, however, globalization is a 'natural and irreversible' process in whose expansion and maintenance the nation-state takes no, or in the worst case scenario a minimal, role. As a respected analyst recently explained, globalization is best understood as a long historical process that began with "homo sapiens leaving Africa" and has progressed into "the creation of an interdependent world in which we take for granted our global tastes in music, film and even food" (Chanda, 2007). Along with this it is also generally understood that globalization is the "set of processes in which capital, technology, people, goods, and information move relentlessly across the inherited map of political boundaries" made possible by "the dramatic decline in the costs of transportation, communication, and production" (O'Loughlin, 2004: 3). While few will argue that this 'interconnectedness' is something wholly new to 'globalization,' most will nonetheless recognize that, at least because of its scale and simultaneous occurrence, globalization as we understand it today is something *different* (O'Loughlin, 2004).

Globalization understood as a 'theoretically genuine, enlightened and human historical process,' however, begins to fall apart if we consider that it may not be the result of new technologies that fell from the sky but, as I have tried to outline above, the consequence of the working class 'victory' that *overflowed* the national state. Just as the struggles of the first workers movement brought down the individual capitalist forcing them to align with the working

class, the working class revolts of the 1960s *overflowed* the nation states' giving rise to new forms of capital organization, states and domination. It seems evident that the workers' struggles of 1968-69, the so called 'revolution of 1968,' was decisive in the breaking of the Taylorist-industrialist-State patron (Zibechi, 2003: 200). If we accept this we will see that it has important implications when discussing the context in which the Piqueteros struggle is situated.

Just as the working class enclaves had been 'deserted' so was the welfare state which, though it never delivered any considerable benefits to the rural workers, peasants or lumpenproletariats, nonetheless provided society with its essential disciplinary institutions (schools, factories, social services, political parties, unions, etc). Raul Zibechi argues that after the *Cordobazo*, the ensuing coup d'états and dictatorships pre-1976 "were capital's short term responses while it prepared much deeper changes" (Zibechi, 2003: 200). To implement those deeper changes, though, a new level of discipline and violence would be needed. This, naturally, found its 'elective affinity' in the military government's *Proceso*. Economically the *Proceso*'s objective were twofold: on one hand it set out to demolish the socioeconomic structure created during the decades of Import Substitution Industrialization, and on the other it would assure that the changes produced during this process of deindustrialization, along with the integrity of the accompanying new modes of accumulation, be rendered irreversible. What was sought was not the transition from a 'redistributive' model of industrialization to an 'accumulating' one, but the elimination of the social and economic bases of the old model accompanied by Argentina's insertion into the international division of labor (Germano, 2005: 22-23). Politically, As Munck (1985: 50) points out, the resort to military dictatorships by the Latin American bourgeoisie was a sign of the fundamental instability of capitalist rule and the bourgeois' inability to structure a stable system of hegemony. This means that, with the inclusive welfare state out of commission,

before the military could leave government a new state, one that would perpetuate the military's economic policies and be able to successfully govern this reconfigured world without recourse to the military's violence would have to be fashioned and set in place.

Along with 'globalization,' the notion of a neoliberal nation-state-in-extinction or nation state with an increasingly marginalized role is, from my point of view, riddled with fallacies disseminated through the same neoliberal ideology that serve to conceal many of globalization's realities. Those who adhere to that conception describe the neoliberal state as the 'powerless state,' or some variation thereof. The post-dictatorship state in Argentina falls into the category of 'neoliberal state' and though its functions have changed it has not (and this is generalizable to other states in Latin America) become a 'powerless state.' What is more, those who argue the emergence of a 'powerless' state confuse the restructuring of a state's functions with its loss of power.

### **The Neoliberal State**

Manuel Castells holds that the "instrumental capacity of the nation-state is decisively undermined by globalization of core economic activities" (Castells, 1997: 244). As a result, during the 1990s "the degree of freedom of governments' economic policy has been drastically reduced." This, he maintains, has been accompanied by "a declining capacity of governments to ensure, in their territories, the productive basis for generating revenue" (1997: 246), which have, therefore, resulted in what he calls a 'powerless state.' More specifically, the state he describes is one which is "increasingly powerless in controlling monetary policy, deciding its budget, organizing production and trade, collecting its corporate taxes, and fulfilling its commitments to provide social benefits" (1997: 254). Even supposing, as Weiss does, that "it is undeniable that striking changes have taken place inside nation-states in recent times" (Weiss, 1997), Castells' argument is unconvincing, for example, in its discussing the affects of IMF policies on

populations. There exists a “deep resentment among citizens all over the world who feel the full impact of [IMF policies which remove the remnants of political controls over market forces] on their lives,” he argues, who protest only to have their cries bypass “their obsolete nation-states” (Castells, 1997: 269). The problem in Castell’s argument lies in the reference to this state-in-question as obsolete and ‘powerless;’ Castell’s argument disregards that the very ‘obsolete nation state’ he refers to is nonetheless ‘powerful’ enough to not have their legitimacy or structural integrity challenged by those resentful citizens. Héctor Díaz-Polanco reasons that “the world would be quite harsh for capitalists if it were truly populated by ‘minimalized states’ or no states at all” (Polanco, 2006: 101). Weiss, moreover, correctly argues that “any significant ‘weakening’ in [a state’s] capacity for macroeconomic management [...] may owe at least as much to ‘domestic’ institutions as to global processes” (Weiss, 1997). Understood in the context of capital’s process of deterritorialization (globalization), the argument that the ideal world for capital is one with minimalist or vanishing states seems to me unreasonable given that “in practice we can not understand globalization’s birth [...] without considering the role of both the central and periphery states and the new types of relationships established between these” (Polanco, 2006: 100). Considering these new roles and relationships we can deduce that “these changes have to do not with the diminution but with the reconstitution of power around the consolidation of domestic and international linkages” (Weiss, 1997). Discussing these new linkages Díaz-Polanco describes the process through which “the central states have become increasingly powerful while the periphery or dependent states are assigned new roles” (Polanco, 2006: 101). For us, the goal is to understand those domestic linkages forged within the dependent states. This requires an examination of *what* those new roles are and *how* they govern internally.

For the post-dictatorship Argentine state, the professed neoliberal state, the question of governing is no longer concerned with making the population productive through a process of incorporation. That process entailed, as we have discussed, a certain way of organizing and controlling society. As a result of the state's inability to maintain control over society during the democratic government (1973-1976) preceding the coup, the military government needed to devise a state that could maintain equivalent levels of dominion as the authoritarian state in a democratic context. As we have also mentioned, the military government found their 'elective affinity' in 'globalizing' capital and the 'neoliberal' state that this process was serving to erect.

The ten years of structural reforms (supervised by the International Monetary Fund) during Carlos Menem's presidency (1989-1999) served to "deepen the process of increasing poverty, social vulnerability and exclusion initiated in the 1970s with the military regime" (Svampa and Pereyra, 2003: 12). These reforms ushered in "an extreme privatization program, deregulations of all kinds, in particular with regard to the 'flexibilization' of labor markets; and a new 'opening' to the world economy" (Teubal, 2004). Menem's economic programs finished dismantling most of the state's public welfare functions and drastically reduced budgets for public housing, education, social security, and health (McSherry, 2000). The government assumed a discourse of 'inevitability' toward these measures and disqualified any who confront them; as far as the government was concerned the resentful union organizers had become 'obsolete' or 'corporativist' and the irritated political party leaders 'nostalgics' and 'extremists' (Germano, 2005: 26). What is more, these "neoliberal, free market reforms [...] along the lines of the so-called 'Washington Consensus' [...] entailed an explicit repudiation of the populist and statist postulates defended by Peronism since the 1940s" (Smith, 1991). The question is,

nevertheless, how the state was able to govern notwithstanding these transformations after the military's retreat from power.

It should be noted that the military government had catastrophic physical and ideological affects on the worker's and student's movements. By the time the military government's legitimacy began being called into question five years "marked by an absence of protest from the working class" had transpired. As Pion-Berlin recounts, following the coup "strikes were scattered and quickly repressed, the Peronist Party was barred from political activity and could not mount a successful underground resistance" (1985). This so-called restoration of 'order and decency' undertaken by the military had caused no significant challenge from the bourgeoisie and aided the further decomposition for the Peronist movement (Munck, 1985). The dictatorship carried out an exhaustive repression of guerrilla, leftist and 'industrial guerrilla'-that is, factory militants. This resulted in the long list of deaths and disappearances which left a deeply scared, yet acquiescent, argentine society.

Enter 'globalized' capital. As the state was carrying out its disappearances and repression it was simultaneously forging a new kind of mutually beneficial partnership with capital. Capital, as we recall, was no longer tied to a geographical place or nation; the state-union-corporation relationship characteristic of the welfare state no longer held any bearing. Capital thus required a state willing to adhere to the demands of the 'global market economy' while the state required of a global market economy on which to lay of its responsibilities pertaining to the welfare and incorporation of individuals. Lemke, summarizing Foucault's argument on the birth of biopolitics explains that while the neoliberal state "retains its traditional function" of delimitating between state and society, it also takes on new tasks that consist of "intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses" consequently developing "indirect

techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them” (Lemke, 2001). These techniques, accompanied by an ideological transformation of social politics, render subjects ‘responsible’ thus shifting “the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of ‘self care’” (2001). If the welfare states took on the responsibility of looking after individuals within society (even if only for the benefit of macroeconomic policies) we can begin to clearly delineate the state’s reassignment of roles. The emerging neoliberal state had as its primary objective developing the social and institutional conditions for commerce by removing the state’s responsibility over the wellbeing of individuals. The neoliberal state adopted a qualitatively different mechanism which instead of incorporating expels individuals from any sort of meaningful participation in the state or its institutions. The state, as we will see, found the answer to governing without inclusion through mechanisms of focalized assistance. In addition, naturally, the state’s repressive forces (i.e. the police) continue to have an importance presence in the shanty towns and poor sectors of the city have not disappeared either (Grimson, 2004: 7).<sup>5</sup>

### **‘Planes’**

Since the mid 1990s Argentine social politics have gone through important modifications in their way of working to alleviate the effects of the more perverse effects of the structural adjustments. The emergence of focalized assistantship ‘plans’ (the *Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar*)

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<sup>5</sup> It is widely held that authoritarian practices continue within the police institution even twenty years after the democratic transition. The so-called ‘*gatillo facil*’ (easy trigger) has become a particularly troubling and understudied phenomenon of the Argentine police. Some estimates hold that between 1983-2006 Argentina registered 2,114 deaths by ‘*gatillo facil*’ or tortures in jails and detention centers. Over a fourth of these deaths occurring between 2003 and 2006 (the first Kirchner government) and the majority of the overall victims (some 67.8%) have been between 17 and 25 years of age. For further reading see Krause (2007).

have become a defining characteristic of the Argentine neoliberal state.<sup>6</sup> The *planes* began as programs of social protection focused at the poorest sectors of society. Their official objective is to support families so as to provide the means necessary to improve their living conditions and escape the cycle of poverty and/or persevere over a situation of short-term extreme crisis of income (Infante, 2001). The fundamental logic of these programs combines arguments of various natures:

they represent themselves as tied to ideas of rights regarding minimal levels of inclusion; they set out to renovate and articulate the ‘performance of social politics;’ they aim to resolve problems regarding the everyday life-condition in the lives of families and anticipate future problems; they break with the traditional welfare because they are able to come to an agreement or establish a contract with individual families (2001).

A close look at these focalized assistance mechanisms reveals how Latin American states’ have changed the way they ‘think’ governing since the end of the ‘development’ (ISI) period. The previous mechanisms (inclusion or persecution) have been displaced by models of ‘focalized assistance’ through the expansion of programs such as *Jefas y Jefes de Hogar* that directly transfer income to ‘(un)qualified’ individuals with extreme needs. These mechanisms constitute a clientelistic “distribution of welfare plans, [that] anticipate upheavals, reducing the margins of discontent and, hence, the risk of social unrest. [...] A form of letting live in which the state does not seem to guarantee and/or protect life” (Grinberg, 2005). Despite their intentions to “provide social inclusion for those effected by the unprecedented crisis,”<sup>7</sup> however, the *planes* do not meet the standards of a policy based on social integration nor are they based on notions of larger scale social ‘construction.’ The *planes* are, ultimately, a mechanism for keeping people excluded and passive. In contrast to the traditional welfare system, in the neo-liberal governments it is the

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<sup>6</sup> We see this process repeated through Latin America in plans such as the *Plan Oportunidades (ex Progres)* in México, *Bolsa Familia* in Brasil, *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* in Ecuador and *Chile Solidario* in Chile, to name only a few.

<sup>7</sup> Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social (<http://www.trabajo.gov.ar/jefes/index.asp>)

case that “if one does not fulfill their end of the contract, for example, if you have a case where a child is not attending school regularly, or the adults do not participate in the conferences dictated by the program, the beneficiary runs the risk of having their assistance suspended” (Zibechi, 2006). As Infante (2001) explains, “the evaluation of these transfer-of-wealth programs may show positive results on indicators such as increased access to services such as education and support for families in their consumption needs, but they do not have a significant impact on the recipient’s condition of poverty.”

In tune with the strategies promoted by the World Bank, politics based on the redistribution of wealth are abandoned for those policies, such as the one described above, aimed at ‘combating’ poverty (Infante, 2001). In Argentina there are around 2.000.000 beneficiaries of the *Plan Jefas y Jefes*. The numbers speak for themselves: at the beginning of 2005 there were 75.000 people receiving unemployment insurance (active workers who lost their jobs) in Argentina. On the same date, on the other hand, there were 2.010.000 people receiving some sort of focalized assistance. This means that 95% of unemployed workers are people who do not have any kind of relationship with the formal job market and no longer even enter into the category of the traditional unemployed (Zibechi, 2006).

In Argentina the vast majority of beneficiaries of these subsidies live in the urban sprawl around the capital city, particularly to the south and northeast. There, people live surrounded by the decaying ‘skeletons’ of shut-down factories. The relationship between people and state in these areas is quite simple: “the state assures a stable cliental and there are no [competing] social organizations; what you have is a passive and grateful group of people” (Zibechi, 2003). As the deindustrialization process left the factories and unions empty, neutralizing those as mechanisms of control, those ‘in power’ implemented these subsidies which have become a key source of

control, cooptation and division amongst the argentine popular sectors. Thus the forms of neoliberal control are laid bare: it is a state that “accepts the inexorability of exclusion for certain individuals and sectors, and seek to manage this population of anti-citizens through measures which seek to neutralize the danger they pose.” It is a society that seems to have ‘decided’ that it has no use for 10 to 20% of its population (Grinberg, 2005). The State’s responsibility becomes that of organizing the intermediary social fabric, promote motivation, and offer the sufficient security as to maintain public order and social cohesion (Sarlangue, 2001). As Zibechi explains, in Argentina “the state was converted into a guarantor of the reproduction of the work force, reproducing the disciplinary institutions (from the schools and the barracks to the compulsory vaccination and the census), and, through fomenting job contracts for indefinite time periods and minimum wages along with a series of ‘social benefits’ aimed at appeasing rebelliousness and lock workers into the new manufacturing despotism” (Zibechi, 2003: 196).

### **What to make of Globalization, Neoliberalism, the ‘Powerless’ State and the Dialectics of the *Desborde*?**

It seems that a mistake many analysts make in addressing the neoliberal state as a ‘powerless’ state is that they do not take into consideration, or do not understand, that in the neoliberal era the state’s roles have been profoundly reconfigured. Those who profess a powerless state, I have argued, are still holding the state accountable to its ‘old’ functions and therefore fail to comprehend the new dynamics and forms of power. In a similar way, those who understand globalization either as a process which began when humans left Africa or as the product of new technologies that ‘fell from the sky’ overlook capital’s ‘deterritorialization’ in response to the sociopolitical events of the late 1960s. These two processes come together in what we recognize today as ‘neoliberalism.’ Namely, the neoliberal not-so-powerless state hand-in-hand with ‘globalized’ capital create the conditions for new forms of understanding the state,

its relation to capital, and social control. We have examined how Argentina's social struggles of the 1950s into the mid 1970s took place in the context of a welfare state, that is, a state which utilized 'inclusive' mechanisms to exert a form of social control (i.e., domination); moreover, we can recall how the working class victories of the late 1960s *desbordaron* (overflowed) those very institutions. Once 'overflowed' the state found itself in a situation where it could either (with the help of a brutal military dictatorship) reformulate itself and its mechanisms of control or continue to crumble and sooner or later perish. The emerging neoliberal state would exercise very different, though not necessarily less effective, mechanisms for maintaining their institutional system of political domination and monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force (i.e., the functions of a modern state). This dialectical process: 'inclusive welfare state – *desborde* during the *Cordobazo* – neoliberal state' is what I label the 'dialectics of the *desborde*.' It serves as necessary background for an analysis of the Piquetero movement precisely because I will argue that the piqueteros represent the 'antithesis' (the *desborde*) to the neoliberal state. Thus, *where* and *how* to identify the 'proletariat of the twenty-first century' becomes a question of *where* and *how* the neoliberal state is being *desbordado*.

CHAPTER 3  
ANALYSIS OF THE PIQUETERO MOVEMENT

**The Piquete and the Piqueteros: A Perspective**

The Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados [MTD] Piqueteros as a social movement have been hailed for employing novel forms of social protest as well as for becoming the new spokesperson for the nation's popular distress. The actual piquete [roadblock], on the other hand, is a very public event that has induced strong negative reactions from the general public. The more sensible arguments typically made against the piquete harbor some elements of arguments such as: "they can protest, but why do they have to keep me from getting to work, school or home," "what they don't realize is that the ones they hurt most are the poor with unstable low-paying jobs who miss work because of the piquete," or "with every piquete they loose more public support, the country will eventually get fed-up and turn their heads when the state begins to repress." While these arguments –relevant and imperfect as they are– highlight some of the social tensions surrounding the piqueteros, the [North American] academic literature on the piqueteros has likewise focused overwhelming on the piquete rather than the movement. Formulating and answering these questions, I feel, least help us understand the movement's dynamics and *raison d'être*.

In his search for the 'hidden transcripts' behind (un)conventional forms of resistance, James C. Scott concluded that "open political action will hardly capture the bulk of political action. Nor will an exclusive attention to declared resistance help us understand the process by which new political forces and demands germinate before they burst on the scene" (Scott, 1990: 199). The 'offstage' infra or micro-politics, he argues, provide "the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused" (Scott, 1990: 184). This holds absolutely true for the piquetero movement. The

‘visible’ piquete, its frequency, as well as the mentioned debates surrounding it conceal its cultural and structural underpinning which only a focus on the movement can elucidate. Those who have ventured down this road have found the movement to be profoundly more interesting and substantial than the piquete. Some of these, moreover, have pointed out what became the *punto de partida* for my treatment of the piquetero movement: two of the MTD’s most resonating and pervasive demands, those over ‘territory’ and ‘autonomy.’ This language, ostensibly borrowed from Latin American indigenous movements, offers an interesting perspective into the piquetero movement.

Sometime around the early 1970s indigenous movements gradually began letting go of the predominantly economic-oriented self-classifications of *campesinos* [peasants] fighting for *tierras* [land], to begin identifying as *indigenas* [indigenous] fighting over their *territorio* [territory]. While many attribute this to anthropological interventions in the communities, reasonable people have also argue that, given the growth of the state apparatus along with the influx of colossal loans from international lending institutions during this period, the change in discourse came as a reaction to the state’s venture into -or increased presence in- indigenous regions which had hitherto been relatively uninfluenced by the state. If indigenous movements demand a territory within which they can remain autonomous from the state’s politics, society and economics for reasons of their *otherness*, what insight can this provide into the piquetero movement? It seems to me that this insight is much more significant than many would imagine. Just as it did for the indigenous, the active constructing of auto-governed spaces and communities within the territories in which they are rooted has become a constant activity and preoccupation for the piqueteros. How it is that these concerns emerge in the heart of one of the

world's largest urban metropolitan areas, and how it is that the piqueteros go about achieving their goals are the subjects of this chapter.

### **The Context**

The story of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a fabricated Creature who acquires an independent existence which no longer depends on the creativity of and threatens to destroy its creator, is often used as a metaphor for capitalism. John Holloway suggests, however, that thinking capitalism in Frankensteinian terms is less productive than thinking it from Jose Luis Borges' story 'Las Ruinas Circulares.' In this story a man creates another man, not in a laboratory but by dreaming. The man created, explains Holloway, "has all the appearance of being a normal man with an independent, durable existence, but in fact he is kept alive only by the constant creative activity, the dreaming, of the first man" (Holloway, 2005a: 173). Holloway maintains that in regards to capitalism, as in Borges' story, "we have created a society which appears to be totally beyond our control, but which in reality depends upon our act of constant re-creation" (Holloway, 2005a). The concern thus becomes not that of destroying society but a matter of doing-creating something else, "capitalism exists today not because we created it two hundred years ago or a hundred years ago, but because we created it today" (Holloway, 2005a). In essence this is at the heart of the piquetero's concept of social change: it is not about destroying an existing system but of ceasing to recreate it.

How does one cease to recreate this inauspicious system? To this question the piqueteros have dedicated much effort in understanding, debating, and translating into practice. The answers at which they have arrived is that to escape the cycle of re-creation one has to create something *different*; that is, in order to stop recreating capitalist social relations, division of labor, times and communities they have to create qualitatively *different* alternatives. The question then is where to find the substance from which to create this difference. To begin with,

the fact that the actors in question experience a particular kind of third world urban poverty and live in city-spaces very different from those familiar to even the most well-wishing bourgeois doctrinaire points to the fact that their lived experiences are already very different from the rest of society's. These differences, I argue, make very profound impressions on the organizations; the way they organize, the goals they have and the challenges as well as the opportunities they encounter are all profoundly marked by those different experiences. Scott has pointed out that actions are never spontaneous from the perspective of the participants. Can it be then that the organizations, the ceasing of capitalist recreations, as well as the piquete itself, are in many ways manifestations of the piquetero's already existing differences? I believe so. Put in the context of social change this is very reminiscent of Marx's declaration in *The Civil War in France* where he concludes that the working class had no "ready-made utopias to introduce *par decret du people*" and the struggle had to be directed toward an effort of "setting free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant" (Marx, 1871).

This chapter will both explore the setting in which the piquetero movement emerges and examine the movement 'from within,' that is, I will elucidate on what the movement looks like and represents to a piquetero. Subsequently I will begin to draw conclusions on the movement's relevance to the *desborde* of the neoliberal state.

### **The Movement's City**

The piquetero organizations emerge in Buenos Aires when, theoretically, the principal organizing apparatuses for the popular sectors had disappeared leaving those people in an alleged state of social decomposition. While it is true that those organizing apparatuses had entered a state of crisis, I believe that it is a mistake to assume, as Melucci does, that marginal people (the elderly or unemployed) "respond to crisis conditions only when [...] leadership is available" (Melucci, 1985: 53-4). One must take into consideration, however, that in Buenos Aires it was

not only those organizational apparatuses that had undergone dramatic transformations. At the moment when the piqueteros emerge, Buenos Aires itself was a very different place than ten or twenty years prior. Taking this into account, a discussion of the piquetero movement must begin with a discussion of the context within which they emerge: the radically transformed ‘popular’ sectors of the greater Buenos Aires. The processes that had transformed the city had restructured the urban economic, social, political and organizational experiences. A closer look at these changes will posibilitate a better understanding of the piquetero movement and their particular context.

Economically speaking, the changes that took place in Buenos Aires between the late 1970s and the late 1990s have been, especially in light of the crisis of 2001, thoroughly explored. These changes coincided with a “dramatic shift from the import substitution industrialization model of development to the new free market model inspired by orthodox economics,” a shift that had “major consequences on society in general and on urban society in particular” (Portes and Roberts, 2004). The key features of the export-oriented activities included the extensive privatization of state enterprises, the deregulation of goods, services, and labor markets, fiscal adjustment based on drastic reduction of public expenditure, restructuring and downscaling of state-supported social programs, and the end of state-sponsored enterprise (2004). Consequently, the urban labor markets were significantly altered. Market-friendly policies privileged the decline of the public sector which had been previously a key source of middle-class employment as well as the closure of formerly protected ISI industries, the key source of employment for the working-class (2004). In addition, the government adopted labor “flexibilization” policies that removed a number of legal protections from workers, blurring the line between the formal and informal sectors.

By the mid 1990s the predicted increase in labor demand from export-oriented industries and ‘naturally’ occurring improvements in wages and work conditions (the so-called ‘trickle down effect’) bared little with reality (2004). These processes had led to soaring unemployment, a significant rise in the informal sector and a decrease in the quality of existing jobs as a result of flexibilization and deregulation. For the country as a whole, the unemployment rate doubled during the 1990s and in Buenos Aires, it went from 3% in 1980 to over 20% in 2001 (2004). While the formal and protected working-class employed in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area had decreased from close to half of the economically active population in 1980 to less than one-third in 2001, the informal and unprotected working class rose from 13% to 34% of the economically active population during the same period (2004). These numbers are accentuated if we consider that the poverty rate in Buenos Aires increased from less than one decile in 1980 to 38% in 2002; Argentina had gone from being one of the most egalitarian countries in the region to resemble their neighbors’ traditional economic inequality (2004).

Though these structural economic changes are impressive factors in the city’s development during this period, they only begin to grasp the extent of its transformation. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the city’s transformation, as well as the emergence of the piquetero organizations, I will highlight three other processes that took (or are taking) place simultaneous to the economic restructuring.

### **Politics in the Margins**

Both the decline of the ‘working class’ and the emergence of territorial movements (which will be dealt with in this chapter) can not be understood as separate from the mutations of Peronism and Peronist party politics. During the 1990s Peronism began losing ground in its capacity and effectiveness as new forms of territorial collective actions exposed the deteriorating relationship between Peronism and the ‘popular’ world. As we have seen, beginning in 1945 and

on through the first electoral defeat of the Partido Justicialista at the end of the military dictatorship (1983), peronism continued having the capacity of organizing the day to day experiences of the popular sectors (Svampa, 2005: 166). Nonetheless, during the 1990s peronism ceased to be the place from where the 'popular consciousness' was articulated (2005). Throughout this period, as inequality levels multiplied and ideological divisions amongst parties became reduced to differences in ways of implementing a single socioeconomic model, Svampa argues, peronism ceased to be an active mechanism in the popular understanding of their social reality and the Peronist popular consciousness began to come undone (2005: 167).

In addition, as an effect of the increase unemployment and the 'forced entrepreneurialism' of the exploding informal sector, the Peronist party began to implement new forms of political intervention into the popular world. Between 1991 and 1997 the urban landscape went losing its traditional features, that is, as it became an industrial graveyard lined with small businesses. Peronist politics in the *barrios*, because it no longer had factories to organize within or even homogenous working class neighborhoods which to organize, tended to be reduced to an almost exclusively assistential dimension, thus distancing itself from its traditional ties to political militancy and labor union activism (2005: 183). In their place the party began implementing a sort of 'affective clientelism' (understood as a type of clientelistic relationship based on a 'random convergence' of interests between party and client coupled with an 'affective' relationship manifested through an identification with local party leaders) increasingly rooted in territorial networks and organizations. These networks and organizations are 'territorial' in the sense that they reorganize the party's political function around local mediators (*punteros*) who referee the distribution of goods within a very local or 'territorial' problem solving network (Auyero, 1997).

As these practices took root in Buenos Aires the limits of this ‘affective clientelism’ began to be exposed through the growing contradictions between ‘territorialized’ clientelistic networks and an emerging anti-clientelistic discourse from within some of the popular sectors they were supposed to contain (Svampa, 2005: 191-2). Moreover, as this anti-clientelistic discourse expanded it would be constructed in confrontation, recognition and negotiation with the state’s new administrative structures and the *punteros* (local party representatives) (2005: 192). While the emergence of this discourse will be discussed later, it is worthwhile to mention that, with the clientelistic practices increasingly discredited, the incipient MTD organizations would build off of those same territorialized practices in their development of a new militant *ethos* (2005: 191). Nevertheless, political and organizational changes were not the only changes taking place within the *Porteño* popular sectors. As we will see in the following section, important urban demographic changes which help reveal the complexities of the piquetero’s emergence as well as the Peronist machine’s deterioration accompanied and conditioned these changes.

### **City of Slums**

While it was being economically remodeled after a neoliberal archetype, Buenos Aires did not escape parallel trends in global urbanism. With regard to the rural / urban distribution of the world’s population, we are currently witnessing what Mike Davis, author of *Planet of Slums* (2004), describes as a “watershed in human history. For the first time the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural” (Davis, 2004). According to Davis’ calculations, cities “have absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950 and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week. [...] The global countryside, meanwhile, has reached its maximum population and will begin to shrink after 2020. As a result, cities will account for *all* future world population growth, which is expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050” (Davis, 2004). Though these statistics may appear sensational, they nonetheless point to

important demographic developments that have had direct affects on the popular sectors in Buenos Aires.

Classical social theory from Marx to Weber believed that the great cities of the future would follow in the industrializing footsteps of Manchester, Berlin and Chicago (Davis, 2004). However, the more common and ‘perverse’ urban boom contradicts orthodox economic models which predicted that the negative feedback of urban recession would slow or even reverse migration from the countryside. As poverty and inequality in Buenos Aires grows, so does the population. With a population of just over 12 million people in 2000, Buenos Aires is expected to grow by about a million people within the next decade (United Nations, 2002). Moreover, Davis estimates that “three-quarters of the burden of population growth will be borne by faintly visible second-tier cities and smaller urban areas: places where, as some researchers emphasize, ‘there is little or no planning to accommodate these people or provide them with services’” (Davis, 2004). The reality for most of these urban settlers is even more ominous if we consider that, while urbanization continues to rise, it has long since “been radically decoupled from industrialization, even from development *per se*” (Davis, 2004). In Argentina, Buenos Aires’ rapid growth since the mid twentieth century “has long outpaced the ability of the government to plan and provide for even basic human needs” (Keeling, 1997: 197). The slums (or *villas miserias*) of Buenos Aires best resemble not the working class slums of industrial or semi industrial cities of our recent past, but those of a place that have “suffered more from the problems of de-industrialization than industrialization” (Davis, 2004). What one finds in these places is a mass of people who have been excluded from any sort of significant ‘formal’ participation and, in the case of many parts of Latin America, will probably never again<sup>1</sup> hold a

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<sup>1</sup> That is, assuming that they have held a ‘formal’ job before. Unemployment strikes particularly hard on the youth in Latin America

formal job. They are, according to Davis, the territorial expression of the increase in marginality and extreme urban poverty.

By some estimates there may be more than quarter of a million slums on earth. Whereas the “classic slum was a decaying inner city, the new slums are more typically located on the edge of urban spatial explosions” (Davis, 2004). Regardless of their spatial separation from the ‘formal’ city, they nonetheless pose several challenges for the state. States have always “endeavored to map complex or old cities in a way that would facilitate policing and control” and “make urban geography transparently legible from without” (Scott, 1998). That is, from the state’s point of view illegible city spaces, where “the knowledge of local citizens is especially privileged vis-à-vis that of outsiders” represent “a reliable resource for social and political autonomy” (Scott, 1998) and, consequently, a challenge to the state’s authority and supremacy. The *villa* thus poses a very serious problem for the state: these spaces within which the ‘chaotic’ design, lack of simple, repetitive logics or even street names and numbers become ‘unpatrolled’ “social site where the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant are least able to reach” (Scott, 1990: 120). In Santiago, Chile, the military dictatorship (1973-1989) bulldozed shanty towns and evicted potentially ‘radical’ squatters forcing poor families into *allegados*, doubled or even tripled-up in the same [state constructed] rented dwelling (Davis, 2004). While even such drastic measures did not eliminate the ‘problem’ of slums completely, their neighbors in Argentina have been less capable in managing the slums. In Buenos Aires, as Grinberg (2005) explains, “the growth of this sort of space has been constant since the seventies.” In 1995, 60,000 persons lived in the shanty-towns of Greater Buenos Aires, the vast majority of these located in the outskirts of the federal district. In 1996 there were 470,000 people inhabiting the *villas miserias* (McSherry, 2001). As of late 2006 it was estimated that there are over 1,144,500

people living in the slums of Buenos Aires (Cornejo, 2006). What is more, these shantytowns were once temporary places of residence but in recent decades, given rising unemployment, income inequalities and poverty levels, they have progressively become permanent sites of residence (Grinberg, 2005).

### **Changing Character of the *villas***

Over the years urbanization projects have, it would appear, converted many of these *villas* into quasi-'traditional' *barrios*. On top of the natural 'chaos' of the initial unplanned constructions, "streets were sketched and improvised shacks have disappeared under bulldozers to give way to cement and order" (Alarcón, 2003). However, the imposed outline and its facade only give the impression of being a genuine *barrio*. It is, as Alarcón explains, only the *villa's* affable disguise: behind the veneer of the visible homes, this façade inevitably gives way to the *pasillos* [passageways] leading to the improvised settlements of the *villa*." Behind every entryway, he continues, "hide a sea of tin shacks enhanced over the years with makeshift walls of cinderblocks or bricks" (Alarcón, 2003). That is, hidden behind even the best disguise of a 'legible' *barrio* lie the 'sea of tin shacks' whose design, construction and arrangements remain untouched by the state or market.

The existence of the *villas* in Buenos Aires can be traced back to the 1930s where they served as the destination point for Argentina's internal and European immigration into the city. For much of their existence they had served the purpose of a transitory living arrangement between the migrant's arrival and eventual relocation, probably into one of the city's many working class neighborhoods (Bastia, 2007). Today, however, given the mentioned demographic changes the *villas* have lost their transient character and have become not only a place where immigrants continue arriving, but also a place where people establish permanent residence. An important factor not to be overlooked, and one clearly evident in any discussion of

the piqueteros (especially discussion originating outside the piquetero organizations), is the stigmatization and physical separation between these places and the rest of the city. The profound socioeconomic fragmentation and polarization of Buenos Aires contrasts starkly with cities such as Río de Janeiro where one has a clear view of the *flavelas* from the cities' luxurious high-rises.

In Buenos Aires during the past decade and a half the appropriation of distinct spaces by corresponding social classes underwent an important intensification. A “person belonging to the middle class,” it is reasonably argued, “can go months or years without even seeing a *villas miserias* which they would have to go outside their daily circuit to see” (Cerutti, 2004). The growing socio-spatial segmentation and appropriation of spaces – the *villas miserias* on one side and the *countries* or *barrios privados*<sup>2</sup> on the other – was accompanied by some 2 billion dollars in private investment between 1991 and 1998 toward the construction of highways that would “take the ‘affluent’ sectors from their high-rise offices in the city center to their gated communities without having to come in contact with the suburban poor” (Cerutti, 2004). Meanwhile, the traditional working class neighborhoods, increasingly spatially and economically distant from the middle class neighborhoods, are transformed into *desocupados* [unemployed] neighborhoods. Toward the end of the 1990s the un and sub employment levels in some of these places came to encompass just about the entire economically active population (Cerruti, 2004). Without a means of income even paying the bus fare to leave the *barrio* became impossible; they lived, in many ways, in an economic enclosure (Cerruti, 2003). Buenos Aires became a model

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<sup>2</sup> Two main dominant processes have taken place, with local specificities and variations among metropolises in the region. The one I do not discuss is “peripheralization” into selected gated communities of high income groups. These wealthy groups moved from the center to the periphery seeking open, safe and isolated spaces (Cerruti, 2003). After the upgrade of the northern highway in the 1990s, the number of gated communities (or ‘*countries*’ as their known in Argentina) along the road more than tripled, reaching 500 by the year 2001 (Duren, 2006).

where territorial borders, associated with socioeconomic levels much more than anything else, became hegemonic ushering in what Cerutti calls “a social ghetto” (Cerutti, 2004).

The shift between the shantytown as a place of temporary dwelling and the shantytown as a place of established permanent residence is significant for several reasons. As Auyero explains, even in shantytowns that have been around since the late 1930s the “devastating effects of the growth of unemployment and underemployment during the 1980s and 1990s” are ushering in “a *new marginality* spreading within these *old territories*” (Auyero, 2000: 99). This condition of ‘new marginality’ as discussed in the previous chapter,<sup>3</sup> coupled with the growing permanency of the slums as places of residence, have become a permanent feature of the lives of an important segment of the poor in Buenos Aires. It is no surprise, then, that the Peronist party be forced to find new mechanisms for organizing the popular sectors. Moreover, considering the changes in the political life within the popular sectors, we can also begin to see how ‘territoriality’ within their organizations begins to play an increasingly important role. With the loss of political representation and meaning, the growing segregation between the shantytowns and the rest of the city, and the shantytown’s increasing population, we can begin to establish a connection between these qualitative changes and the new forms of popular organization and identities (Cerruti, 2005: 29).

### **The Popular Design**

After considering some of the important economic and demographic changes that took place during the 1990s we have a better understanding of *where* those anti-clientalistic ethos emerged. However, the questions of *how* and *why* of their emergence remains ambiguous. My

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<sup>3</sup> We can recall that mass of people whom the state decided it no longer had any use for; in other words, as Agamben has argued, the modern *Nuda Vida*. That is, in their most extreme forms the violent institutions are said to be producers of a ‘*nuda vida*,’ a reduction of the subject to its biological state, an inert body trapped in the intimacy of survival, reduced to absolute passivity and objectivity of its condition.

sense is that to begin to answer these questions we must take a closer look at these still enigmatic places. To be precise, there seems to be a relationship between the 'slum design,' its 'organic' nature and the emergence of an anti-clientelistic territorial organization.

David Harvey quotes Robert Park in saying that the city is "man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in [...]. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself" (Harvey, 2003). Reflecting on this statement it becomes evident to me that an assessment of the 'interiority' of the slums in Buenos Aires can shed important light on the organizations that emerge from within them. Those who have undertaken similar tasks have concluded that there exists some form of 'informal social networks' that assuage the chronic economic insecurities *different* from those social networks found in the rest of society (Lomnitz, 1977; Alarcón, 2003; Skewes, 2001; Moreno, 2000). Moreover, this seems to be the only plausible answer to the question posed by economist Asdrubal Baptista: "Why is it that, given the harsh economic indexes and deteriorating incomes amongst the popular sectors, the streets aren't overflowing with the corpses of starved poor people" (Moreno, 2000: 173)? That is to say, if everyone adhered to the market's logic the world would have long ago become an inhabitable place. What this points to is the existence of "an economy that is not constructed around the logic of earnings and losses" (2000: 173) and consequently a spatial-architectural construction (or territory) that facilitates this '(re)making' of the persons who adhere to this 'other' economy.

If we accept that persons give form their social space and, in corollary, those social spaces give form to the persons who live within those spaces, it then seems constructive to take a look at

the particular design of the *villas* or slums, that which anthropologist Juan Carlos Skewes calls *el diseño popular* [the popular design]. Cristian Alarcón (2003), who lived in one such slum for two and a half years while conducting a sort of ethnographic fieldwork, said of his impressions upon being accepted into the community: “*me vi sumergido en otro tipo de lenguaje y de tiempo, en otra manera de sobrevivir y vivir hasta la propia muerte.*” When one enters the *villa*, Alarcón tells us, one enters into a “labyrinth of passageways lined with small internal territories, veiled sectors and walkways [...] that from afar appears to be a *barrio* but up close is entirely *pasillos* [passageways]” (Alarcón, 2003). In similar observations Juan Carlos Skewes, an anthropologist who also attempts to write from ‘within’ the slums, describes the slum’s ‘popular’ spatial and architectural design as an organic feature which “embodies the residential habits of its residents and [...] guarantees certain protections that make the sector’s survival possible” (Skewes, 2005: 270). Through examination of the acoustic and visual dimensions, as well as the internal organization of the shantytowns, Skewes (2005: 256) concludes that within these “irregular settlements the spatial design serves the functions of auto-protection and of regulation of the interior life of the shanty-town.” One of the common features of the *villas*, he argues, is that “the entrances don’t give clues of what is within. The settlement is literally hidden, there is no way of looking in from outside” (2005, 262). This is an invisibility that, as Scott has argued, “is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power” (Scott, 1990: 183). A vital function of this ‘insulation’ is that it serves to divide and protect:

The borders regulate the relationships between the locals and the outsiders. [...] The physical structure permits the definition of borders that, together with separating spaces of greater or lesser intimacy, allow for the separation of those who have ‘access’ and those who don’t. In this way, the settlement’s borders create a space that permits the negotiation between the locals and the ‘others.’ Within the settlement, the locals become visible, recognizable and responsible only to each other (Skewes, 2005: 264).

Audiovisual signals, which outside the slums are tools all but exclusive to the state/market (traffic signals, police sirens, factory bells, etc), also play an important role in the slum's internal organization and protection. Here, upon entering "one is seen before one has the opportunity to see anyone else and, if it were necessary, a series of audio 'signals' are deployed to mobilize residents" (2005: 265). In reference to these audio signals, which at times are friendly and at other a sign of danger, Maria Teresa, a local of Skewes' *settlement*, said: "I feel as if the settlement is alive," highlighting the differences between her and the neighborhoods of the affluent sectors which she compared to cemeteries (2005: 265). Once inside the slums, an outsider is confronted with long and intimidating passageways "lined with walls and wooden fences" where it is almost impossible to "distinguish between the private, the communal, and the public" (2005: 260). The spaces within the *villa* are clearly distinguished (as far as the locals are concerned) between those "restricted to the locals [and] persons close to the residents" and the handful of 'public' spaces "used by those from the neighboring shantytown" (2005: 262). The 'private' areas, which from the outsider's perspective harbor "an authentic labyrinth of stealthy movements" (2005: 262), are crammed with "shortcuts, private yards, secret passages, and other hidden areas" that are all at once "juxtaposed, reciprocally infiltrating each other" (2005: 262). As Skewes explains, this division between 'private' and 'public' in relation to the 'outsider,' along with the conjugation of the 'private' and 'public' within the slums, allow for "segregating themselves from the city which allows for their anonymity, generating a system that privileges the local" (2005: 265).

This privileging of the local through the conjugation of 'private' and 'public,' it seems to me, permeates through most or all factions of life within the slums. Recalling a scene described by Alarcón I return to Baptista's question. Alarcón tells of a daily occurrence in the *villa*, a

scene inconceivable in most of the cities' spaces: "when dinner time comes around the women begin their systematic collection and repayment of loans among their familiar neighbors [...]. These *madrazas*, in their search for whatever they can manage to resolve their family's hunger, go from walkway to walkway rescuing meager portions with such precision that demonstrates years of practice in the task of filling the family's pot, of fulfilling the immediate need of satisfying the stomachs of each family" (Alarcón, 2003). These women belong to a world that, at their devise, remains 'hidden' from the rest of the city; a world within which, given sheer need as well as its particular design, has (re)made its inhabitants in such a way that, from their perspective, render Baptista's question a nonstarter on the grounds that the 'economic indexes and deteriorating incomes' mean something very different to them than the rest of the city. Over the years they've built bits of cities and social relations on a logic fundamentally different than the one for whom those economic indexes have any relevance. These spaces in which life is truly a collective experience, with their 'different' social relations and privileging of the local, their transformation into increasingly a permanent place of residence and socialization, coupled with the processes of loss of traditional political representation and identity, I will argue, create territories that serve as breeding grounds for the 'new' anti-clientelistic ethos the *piquetero* organizations are impregnated with.

### **Movements and Territorialities**

As I have described above, the *barrios* which had once been the working class dormitories were transformed into "barrios of *desocupados*." In Buenos Aires, given the deteriorating economic conditions of the early to mid 1990s soup kitchens and similar enterprises abetting the basic needs of the poorest sectors of the population began to be established through traditional clientelistic networks. By the mid 1990s, with unemployment continuing to rise, the demands made on the state made from these *barrios* tended to be confined to traditional demands such as

“increases in the medicines, bus tickets, foodstuffs and similar products delivered to the community” (Cerruti, 2005). One of the first unemployed workers organizations established in the greater Buenos Aires was the MTD Florencio Varela in a city at the southern edge of the Buenos Aires province. In response to the state’s inactivity in providing sources of employment and the growing disenchantment with traditional peronist party networks, ‘la Verela’ “decided to imitate the piquetes of the country’s interior provinces. They installed themselves in a highway for several days pressuring the government into conceding several hundred *planes*” (2005). This triumph by the Varela influenced the agendas of many smaller popular organizations and the demand for *planes* quickly became generalized (2005). When the MTDs began demanding *planes* the beneficiaries were typically obliged to perform chores supervised by the municipality in compensation. The MTD organizations quickly realized that “every time an unemployed person received a *plan* they would leave the organization” without having been formally reintegrated into the workforce. “Those who attained their *planes* through the piquete would then go to work for the local governments or the clientelistic peronist party networks, the very people who they had confronted in the piquete” (2005). Given these circumstances, and what in hindsight has become recognized as a turning point in the MTDs history, they “began demanding that the tasks performed in compensation for the *planes* be carried out by their own organizations. [...] This not only permitted the members to remain organized, but also provided for the development of various productive and community undertakings such as the establishment of bakeries, brick building and cloth making workshops” (2005). This change allowed the organizations to shift their attention inwards. To be precise, their relationship with the state became increasingly focused predominantly on the proliferation of the *planes* while increasing attention was given to managing and safeguarding of their organizations at the

immediately local level: the *barrio*. What is more, this was undertaken in an atmosphere of confrontation with the state and peronist party which allowed for a growing separation between the MTDs and state/party as the organizations became solidified.

As the movements, rooted in Buenos Aires' poorest *barrios*, turn their focus inwards interesting things begin to happen. These spaces, having become "sites of antihegemonic discourse" (Scott, 1990), serve to further insulate the inhabitants from the state, parties and market. The social sites, moreover, are "bound by powerful mutual sanctions that hold competing discourses at arm's length" (1990: 135). Within these insulated places their inhabitants begin to develop, as Alarcón illustrated, "their own codes, myths, idols and social standards." Scott explains that this "isolation, homogeneity of conditions, and mutual dependence among subordinates" favors "the development of a distinctive subculture – often one with a strong 'us vs. them' social imagery" that, if cultivated, "becomes a powerful force for social unity as all subsequent experiences are mediated by a shared way of looking at the world" (1990: 135). Ultimately, "an identity takes root because it is here," within these spaces, "that the real, the imaginary and the symbolic are established" (Gonçalvez, 2001: ix). This 'us,' that is to say, this identity vis-à-vis both the rest of society and their own past as adherents of a political party and dependent on the state is by its very nature inseparable from the spaces within which it emerges; thus the MTD's emphasis on 'territoriality.' If the city's highways and bridges are the piquetero's theater, then the city's slums and *villas* are their backstage, the places where their identities and performances of resistance are germinated and rehearsed on a daily basis. In this way the MTD becomes, as one piquetera from the FTC Varela told me, "the social laboratories [...] where organizational forms are practiced and consolidate." The organization is, she

continued, “essentially the conclusions that have accumulated throughout our experiences and practices.”

### **The MTD Piqueteros (or, La Frescura Antisolemne)**

The piqueteros were not the only movements who responded to the critical situation of unemployment and poverty of the mid 1990s and on in Argentina. Buenos Aires’ middle class, for example, carried out (yet to an important degree fueled by the *corralito*<sup>4</sup>) their now emblematic *cacerolazo*. Other responses, if we think of the *clubes de trueque*, *asambleas barriales* and *fabricas recuperadas*, only to name a few, abound. The MTD piquetero movement is unique, however, given that they have gone further than any of these in developing an enduring and original response to their social and economic realities. El Vasco of the MTD de Allen-Río Negro, as a case in point for the piquetero’s distinctiveness, holds that “the slogan for 19 y 20 [the famous protests of December, 2001], instead of being the famous ‘*que se vayan todos*’ [they must all go] should have been ‘*los vamos a echar a todos*’ [we’re going to kick all of them out]” (Ferrara, 2003: 68). That is, after having arrived at the conclusions that the parties, state and unions no longer offered a viable plan for the future or frame for assessing the present, and refusing to stay locked into traditional clientelist networks (a development I have tried to reconstruct above), they have made the conscious decision to break with those worlds and construct their own; they no longer rely on the goodwill of politicians, as the ‘*que se vayan todos*’ slogan would have it, but take it upon themselves to construct change. As Sopransi and Veloso quote a member of an MTD organization, “we realized that we could not count on the state’s apparatus or structure, that *we were* the movement” (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> *Corralito* was the informal name given to a set of restrictive economic measures that effectively froze all bank accounts, initially as a short-term fix for the massive draining of bank deposits, in late 2001.

Given the severe difficulties faced by the urban poor, they have “found themselves forced to work collectively to care for their most elemental necessities.” What is more, these collective relationships “function as a ‘common sense’ to which the members permanently recourse to as a means of solving one’s small and large challenges, be it in everyday life or grand political action” (Zibechei, 2005: 44). Out of this cooperation arise forms of organizing and protesting with characteristics very different from those of traditional urban social movements in Argentina and Latin America.

The piquete itself, as I have argued, is merely the element of the movement that is visible to the rest of society. “The struggle,” which many overlook, “is fundamentally everything [the movement had] been doing before the piquete takes place. In effect, if a piquete is staged it is because the movement had spent a lot of time organizing it” (Ferrara, 2003: 48). This becomes conspicuous if we consider that, even though the piqueteros are visibly associated with the term *desocupado* [unemployed or inactive] they are, as the piqueteros say, “*desocupados muy ocupados*.” As Ferrara explains, “on top of all of a person’s normal routine [the MTD member’s] days are filled with activities, meetings, discussions and proposals relating to the movement” (2003: 50). Given that the piqueteros “live, work, raise children, discuss their methods and projects, plan the *cortes*, evaluate the results, eat and sleep together, all in a collective space without the interruptions of having to leave for work” (2003: 127), the integration of everyday life and the struggle becomes one of the organization’s essential characteristics. This characteristic facilitates a shift in perspective from the state (that hitherto idyllic place from which to think social change) toward a growing emphasis on the movement’s interiority, that is, the growing significance of that which already exists. This, as we will see, becomes the lynchpin for the MTDs organizational methods, motivations and goals.

## Organization

The MTD piqueteros organizations, characterized by their rupture with the organizational models of the traditional left (the party or union Leninist pyramids) as well as their criticisms of accepting planes as forms of yielding, surrendering to, or being co-opted by the state, define themselves as ‘*organización populares de base.*’ The organizations have a ‘territorial’ nature given that they organize around the basic unit of the *barrio*, that is, a territorial nucleus of usually of four or five squared blocks (Cieza, 2004). From an organizational standpoint they concentrate their efforts on developing along a few basic principles: horizontalism, direct democracy, autonomy and unity in struggle. Neca Jara, one of the MTD Solano’s publicly recognizable members, explains that:

Lots of people approach us because they are in need and not because they want to change things. [...] The first thing we tell those *compañeros* is that this is not a free check; we aren’t the government or a business offering work. We tell them that this is a space where we come together to reflect on our problems and see if together we can construct something. [...] Therefore, every *compañero* who approaches us first goes through a process of preparation, otherwise they might not understand the urgency and necessity of the struggle (Ferrara, 2003: 52).

The urgency and preparation Neca speaks of refers to the organization’s response to the long history and inculcation of clientelistic political relationships in the poor sectors of Buenos Aires. As another member of the MTD Solano explained, “since the beginning we’ve understood the necessity of constructing something new, constructing from within our reality something that we could all take part in” (Ferrara, 2003: 86). Constructing their organization ‘from within,’ that is, rooted in their territories and outside of the historical legacy and influence of the political parties and unions, as the MTDs understand it, is “a means of emancipation because our purpose is to not reproduce the hegemonic power relations, instead we opt for the formation of active subjectivities” (2003: 82). In a similar fashion Cieza (2004) explains that though “most people who approach the MTDs do it initially as a means of obtaining a plan,” before long “most

recognize the many much more profound reasons for being part of the movement.” It quickly becomes, he continues, “a matter of recuperating one’s self esteem as an individual and as a class.”

The piqueteros have enjoyed considerable success in constituting themselves as subjects who identify as piqueteros, an identity that is far from the traditional workers union subjectivity (Cerruti, 2005). Their model of organization, one that transcends the merely public-political, implies not only the inclusion of the individuals into a collective toward which they feel some camaraderie with, but more importantly the (at least partial) appropriation and internalization of the cultural and symbolic compound that functions as the collective’s emblem (Branchesi, 2004); specifically, once one has joined the piquetero movement it is difficult not to *become* a piquetero. Understanding themselves as piqueteros in opposition to *desocupados* implies “a gesture of auto-affirmation as opposed to a sense of deficiency. [...] It is the recognition that being *desocupados* does not imply depending on others to solve your problems” (Branchesi, 2004: 14); It is the same sense of *becoming* and of dignity that has inspired great movements in the past.

As mentioned previously, the MTDs are territorial organizations rooted within a *barrio*. Usually the *barrio* will be represented in the organization’s name, hence MTD Solano, Guernica, Allen, Lanús, etc, all *barrios* in the greater Buenos Aires. For the members of the organizations the barrios are the “spaces where their lives elapse and where one finds most aspects of interest to them. Their work, family, *compañeros*, assemblies, meetings, *mate* rounds, workshops and *comedores colectivos* [soup kitchens] are here.” It might be said, moreover, “that the piqueteros do not merely live *in* these spaces but truly *inhabit* the barrios” (Ferrara, 2003: 120). As Neca illustrates, “over the last five years [1998 – 2003] we have been noticing that many peoples

personal experiences, very proper to their homes and families, slowly begin to change as they interact more and more with the movement” (2003: 110). The organizations territoriality, furthermore, highlights the shift in location of the struggle; if from outside it appears as if the struggle is fought on the city’s avenues and bridges, in actuality the central struggles are fought far away from the piquete in the depth of the *barriadas*, in their workshops, in the sheds where they meet and discuss their subjects, necessities and ways of approaching them.

A novelty of the piquetero movement is that “the organization is the goal and not a platform from which alliances or niches of power are established” (Branchesi, 2004: 11). Horizontalism and direct democracy have become emblematic features of the MTD organizations. Horizontalism, a form of organization that does not acknowledge hierarchies or representative structures built atop a system of direct democracy where representative positions are randomized and rotate often, is constructed in direct opposition to traditional vanguardist leadership. As one of the movement’s characteristics *sine qua non*, this acts as reassurance for participation and the dispersion of power. In many ways they have turned social struggle on its head: the struggle is not for power but against power. The principal adversary is no longer the state or military’s repressive forces but that which Raul Zibechi (2003) has called “the state within all of us.”

### **De-institutionalization**

No longer struggling over jobs, inclusion or a more meaningful citizenship, these organizations response has been to demand *autonomy* while they *arrancan* [the act of taking forcefully] *planes* from the government; *planes* which they then put to work collectively toward their *emprendimientos* [workshops] within their *territories*. This implies much more than a discursive shift. The piqueteros have developed a response that opens the doors to reflecting on

their circumstances, their problems and their futures in their own ways and times, that is to say, they have opened the door to *becoming* piqueteros.

Some argue that by rejecting their condition as passive subjects the movement has identified and sustained a class conflict in the midst of a society paralyzed by ‘privatized subjectivities,’ a conflict which has at its heart the struggle not over political power but the creation of new and *different* subjectivities. I find it fruitful visualize this process of subjectivization (i.e., the social construction of the individual subject) from the perspective of Italian psychiatrist Franco Basaglia’s theory of ‘deinstitutionalization.’ Based on Marxist and Freudian concepts that challenge traditional understandings of the self, this framework understands human individuals as entities “constructed by, and not simply reflected in, a culture’s social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices” (Taylor, 2001: 397). For the historically marginalized ‘others’ (women, homosexuals, people of diverse races and ethnicities, unemployed, etc), by adhering to the hegemonic culture’s social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices they have been negated a spaces for self-definition and have thus been trapped in a process of normalization; a process which has lead to the institutionalization of ‘falsely conscious’ subjectivities such as female patriarchs or marginalized poor who willingly and passively have been ‘included as marginals.’ As director of the Gorizian hospital’s psychiatric ward, in 1961 Basaglia carried out a wave of transformations that “brought about [...] the breaking away from an ‘*avant garde*’ by refusing to fulfill the ‘mandate of the cure and surveillance’ entrusted to them by a repressive society” (Guattari, 1996: 42). A key figure in the anti-psychiatry movement, Basaglia had developed a “community culture” scheme that deeply modified the relationship between the hospital personnel (who were formerly in charge of “granting privileges”) and the patients. “Reaching a consensus” between the ‘avant

garde' personnel and 'mental' patient, he concluded, answered "to the ideal of the panorganization of neo-capitalist society" and as such was merely "a belated adaptation of modalities of social control of pathological behaviors to the methods of [capitalist] production" (Guattari, 1996: 43). For Basaglia and others, the "negation of the institution" became a goal in their efforts against those social institutions which had had, in their view, "become more effective than police" by "uphold[ing] normality at any price" (1996: 45). "Our actions," explained Basaglia (1976: 167), "can only take on a *negative dimension* that would be simultaneously an act of destruction and of prevailing [...] over the violence and exclusion inherent in the socio-political system."

Basaglia's 'violence' refers to the 'symbolic violence' (to borrow Bourdieu's concept) of society's silencing and naturalizing institutions that directly or indirectly manage our management and use of time, distribution and use of space, politics, work, knowledge and power. This means that, in the face of society's institutions (understood in the broadest sense), it was only through a process of 'destructive' de-institutionalization, of escaping capitalist society's violent institutions and normalizing forces, that those historical 'others' could recognize and escape the "components of institutional life and their genealogical relationship with the socio-political system" and thus "integrate *different* social actors on a path toward radical social transformation" (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004). What maintained these people as subjects has in many places vanished and the existing symbolic order is crumbling, taking its subjective conditions with it. At the same time, however, this process has to also take into consideration the active role played by the piquetero organizations. "The destruction of society's transversal institutions by way of the liberation of the social creative imagination," argue Sopransi and Veloso (2004), "is the base for the development of a counter-hegemonic

transformation.” The piquetero’s recognition and negation of those power and normalizing structures, therefore, can be understood as the result of a process of profound transformation which they, by rejecting their passive subjectivities as *‘desocupados,’* have been active players in.

This process can not be considered separately from another important demographic change that I have hitherto ignored. The protagonists within the piquetero movement are predominantly women and youth, the majority of whom never held a stable job or have experience in union/party political and social struggles of the decades past (reliable estimates approximate that between 60 and 80% of MTD members are women (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004)). The fact that women are “the great protagonists, the first who approach the movements and walk out onto the highways or bridges is due, not to a given genetic condition, but to her ‘traditional mandates’ in a crumbling patriarchal society with high unemployment indices.” Men, who’s “traditional role as the family’s economic provider is most affected and demoralized” with the social, economic and political changes of the past few decades, “feel pressured and depressed by the situation and frequently evade, either physically or emotionally, their social responsibilities falling prisoner to his depression or tries to find quick-fixes to his problems which generally end up aggravating his situation” (Cieza, 2004: 94). The narratives that are produced from within the poorest sectors of the city and the movements (Alarcón, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004; Solano, 2002; Torres, 2006) confirm the disappearance of the masculine image from what was once the symbolic of social change. I maintain that the overwhelming female participation leaves its mark on the organization’s characteristics precisely because the piqueteras ‘speak’ from a traditionally double subjugated positionality. Consequently, “they encourage the dissemination of power, they contribute an enormous preoccupation for community-focused-work, and vehemently infuse

personal aspects of their lives (their histories, frustrations and dreams) into the movement's common spaces" (Cieza, 2004: 95); elements vital in the construction of the new subjectivities.

Given that, as Sopransi and Veloso quote Žižek and Jameson, the "contemporary social imagination's horizon no longer permits us to consider the idea of capitalism's eventual demise" (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004),<sup>5</sup> the significance of a process attempting to imagine *other* possibilities and *other* forms of social relationships is not minor. They imply a manifestation of an otherness which is itself a gesture of autonomy and resistance in the face of the existing social order. The MTDs, having taken up the challenge of imagining the unimaginable 'other,' "reveal the limits of structural unemployment as a means of social discipline and weaken unemployment as a challenge to class consciousness" (Branchesi, 2004: 9). Their destruction, overcoming and creation are processes that find their point of departure in the relationship between a collective imagination (that is, the possibility projecting alternatives on an institutionalized order) and a material construction (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004). The product of these processes has been the piquetero's de-institutionalization of their space, work and time.

## Space

The concept of space becomes of central importance to the piqueteros for reasons of their 'territorial' nature. The members of the MTDs live and produce within the same spaces, overcoming the traditional rupture between one's place of work and life's other places. De-institutionalization in this sense is understood a 'destructive' process that permits the constructive recuperation of the piquetero's spaces. As we have seen, within the piquetero's territories the streets are reappropriated by the organization and turned into settings for meetings

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<sup>5</sup> As Basaglia maintains, the administrators of the violence of power, a 'violence' that is both suffered without being explicitly assumed or directly assumed by those who exercise it, "prepares individuals for the acceptance of their conditions as objects of violence, assuming as fact that, moreover than the diverse modes of acceptance one can choose, being an object of violence is the only reality permitted to them (Basaglia, 1976: 133)."

and fairs while the traditionally closed and centralized spaces of political decision-making and organizing are unfolded onto the community's open and public spaces. The traditional mechanisms (i.e. architecture, urban design, police, etc) employed by the state and market for the control of open spaces are rendered feeble by the MTD's organizational characteristics and the spaces where they organize. The Deinstitutionalizing of space, that is to say, the creation of a 'territory,' provides the basic material requirements for organizing and the symbolic propping of a collective identity. The piqueteros in this way become "the first strategic response in a globalized world that advances a reorganization of urban and geographic space (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004).

## **Work**

Another of the piquetero's uniqueness's is that, even though it may be at a very basic stage, they have begun to produce. They have ceased pressuring the state for jobs and created their own, complete with their own divisions of labor, organization and rhythms. As is the case with their organizational structures, these 'jobs' (*emprendimientos productivos*, as they refer to them) also embrace peculiar and communitarian tendencies. Their *emprendimientos* include small scale community farming, *comedores populares*, cloth recycling networks, metalwork shops, the construction of ovens, as well as services such as the improvement of streets, public buildings and homes within their territory. These *emprendimientos*, chosen by the organization in relation to the organization's necessities, shorten the distance between production and necessities. The piqueteros produce for their community, that is, they produce for themselves.

In addition to simply choosing which *emprendimientos* to engage in, the piqueteros have also invented the modes and times of their work. Their organizations avoid fordist/taylorist divisions of labor, hierarchical structures and production times. In their place they have implemented "horizontal relationships and group co-responsibility, thus outstripping the

centralization of the control over production” (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004). This is possible given the MTDs rejection of ‘work’ understood as a purely physical wear unconnected from the collective’s necessities. Instead, the piqueteros place emphasis on the diversion and orientation of activities toward their necessities. Holloway (2005a) explains that:

The emancipation of work means the self-determination of work. This implies some sort of council organization, some form in which people come together to determine what to do and how to do it. [...] Its central point is the insistence in the collective self-determination of doing. This means the rejection of leadership from outside, the acceptance that people here and now, against all their problems, weaknesses, neuroses, and habits inculcated by centuries of domination should determine their own activity.

Within the emprendimientos “informal relations predominate, conversations about topics relevant to the community, the socialization of things related to the movement, debates regarding the vicissitudes of the organization of the task at hand, that is to say, it is an expression of the integration of the quotidian and work” (Ferrara, 2003: 93). This emancipation of work “leads into a different time, a different grammar, a different intensity of life. The emancipation of doing is the movement of anti-fetishization, the recovery of creativity” (Holloway, 2005a: 178). The deinstitutionalization of work, intimately interwoven with the struggle for the reappropriation of creativity and self-organization, produces “a richness shaped by social desires and not by capitalist appropriation, a richness that is not appropriated by capital” (Holloway, 2005a: 179). Rather, it is a creative richness created and appropriated by and for the organization. By generating their own times, rhythms, organizations and objects of work they escape what has historically been amongst the state and market’s most powerful of the ‘violent’ normalizing institutions.

## **Time**

Time is the undercurrent of all aspects of life. Doing, speaking, thinking and communicating are all conditioned by the time one –conscious or unconsciously- adheres to.

Taking control of ones times, it seems to me, is the first step in taking control over ones individual and collective subjective awareness. Sergio Tischler claims that the state is “the political master of time as reification.” The state, he continues, fashions a time that “opposes, fragments, contains and undermines the struggle for time as a human need” (Tischler, 2005: 139). In a corresponding manner, capital “is characterized, amongst other things, by the production of a temporality that is uniform and continuous” (2005: 131). Class struggle, on the other hand, “produces, in antagonism to capital’s conception of time, its own temporality – a time [...] of individual human needs” (2005: 131). In this context the struggle over the political economy of time becomes, rightly argued, “one of the most important sites of the struggle for human emancipation, if not the most important” (2005: 139). Likewise, any “revolutionary conceptions that leave this important dimension aside expose themselves to a reifying impoverishment” (2005: 131).

The piquetero’s deinstitutionalization of state/market times materializes out of two interrelated phenomenon: “the integration of the times from diverse spheres of everyday life and the newfound respect for ‘their own times’” (Sopransi and Veloso, 2004). If effective, this deinstitutionalization is a movement against the profound fracturing of alienated work-time and the subject’s other life spheres, a division imposed by a time instituted by capitalist modes of production (2004). The question thus arises of how a collective can come to dispose of -and generate- a time that serves the purposes of the organization and not the market, mass media, the state, etc. To be precise, a time that permits higher levels of integration, facilitates the reorganization of the fragmentation imposed by the market’s needs and decelerates its velocity opening the possibilities of more carefully perceiving and reflecting on their situation, thus creating instances of encounters among people which would permit them to share, dialogue, and

foster a collective creativity. This ‘different’ time, argues Ferrara, would “permit us to focus our attention on ‘different’ objectives and modalities, in this way becoming a fountain of alternatives to the mercantilist subjectivity” (Ferrara, 2003: 101).

Slowing down time is the first victory toward emancipation because it signifies the establishment of the conditions that makes possible the expression of a ‘different’ subjectivity. I share with Ferrara the experience that “to see the piqueteros calmly moving about throughout the day pausing for *mate*, the incidental remark, not losing their calm when unexpected problem arises, is at times unnerving for those who can’t be too long without looking at their watch” (2003: 105). A scene very similar to the one Ferrara describes was, in fact, one of the most telling moments in my experiences in the piquetes. I had been invited by one of the organizations to join in *cortando* the Pueyrredón bridge, the principal route connecting the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and the southern part of the greater Buenos Aires. After the organizations had arrived and assembled in an avenue in the vicinity of the bridge I expected a quick march onto the bridge. However, it soon became clear that I was alone in my assumption. Between pauses to clear traffic, reorganize, and whatever other reasons we paused for reasons that remain a mystery to me (usually the news of why we were pausing never arrived, nor did anybody generally ask), I found myself thinking “how can it be that three (four, five, etc.) hours have passed and we are still not in place?” What was more surprising, though, was that I was the only one who seemed to notice, much less mind. Chatting about family, friends, the *barrio*, and every now and again the reasons why they were protesting, all while the *mate* kept making its rounds, it took me a good while to get over my preoccupation with time. The piqueteros, after all, given in part their condition as ‘unemployed,’ are “not contained by a timeframe hovering over its head. Since the piqueteros don’t lose days at work or risk being fired they are able to stay in

the piquete for extended periods of time” (2003: 40). It would be much later until I realized that in their lateness “is how the piqueteros go constructing, unhurriedly, with a certain harmony in their movements and an unyielding sense of security, a time that in place of dominating is inhabited by them” (2003: 105). It may be that their very condition, not only of ‘unemployed,’ but also the disproportionate participation of women and young who never held ‘formal’ jobs, works in their favor by helping them escape the inculcated time-urgencies that are, for instance, hurrying to work, chasing down busses, rushing during work, etc. Moreover, there exists the dynamic of a common experience, as highlighted by Alberto of the MTD Solano, whereby as he describes: “when I lost my job where I worked 18 hours daily and joined the movement I discovered my family and the *barrio* [...] now we realize that time is ours and that we have to do things in accordance with our times” (2003: 106). The piqueteros demonstrate a unique and vital conquering and subordination of time to the collective’s necessities.

### **The Piquete From Within**

The piquete has been heralded as a novel and effective means of social protest. Novel and resourceful indeed; with unemployment rates as high as they are, factories running at 30 or 40% their capacities and the traditional strike no longer an option, many have argued that in today’s world it is the only way the ‘working class’ can attack the mercantilist system and the systems juridical bases. Understood in this light the piquete can be read as a direct attack on one of capital’s fundamental necessities: the circulation of goods and people. As Ferrara explains, “you cut the free circulation of commerce, impede the realization of business transactions [...] and the capitalist system’s authority is called into question. [...] Capitalism could not hold out for too long with continuous *cortes de ruta*” (2003: 38). However germane these arguments may be, there is nonetheless another side to the piquete.

The piquete is a simultaneously exciting, trying, terrifying and rewarding experience. Ferrara explains that for those who carry out the piquete, specifically “those inhabitants of the poorest *barrios* gathered in their precarious shacks,” the piquete is not only a choice “between the security of staying at home and the risk of confronting the state’s repressive forces, but they also choose between misery and dignity, many times even between life and death, between making of their suffering a defeat or converting it into resistance” (2003: 87). Equipped with their masks, wooden sticks and numbers, they set out on their journey. The piqueteros arrive, by bus or train, to the chosen sites: the city’s congested streets, highways and bridges on what would otherwise be a busy weekday. For the duration of the piquete they employ a different kind of organizational scheme. If they were to stick with the organization’s otherwise universal horizontality “they [the police] would walk all over us,” a piquetero explains. On the same note, however, he explains that “if you bring the form of organization used in the piquete, more vertical and with *responsables*, to the *taller de reflexión*, ¡a las dos reuniones te dan una patada! [...] To produce we organize one way, for our education another, for medical attention another, and for our military defense another” (La Fogata, 2005). This militarily defensive organization is an essential component of the piquete. Those at the head of the piquete are normally a group of some 100 to 200 of the younger males. They are masked and usually armed with rocks and a wooden bat shaped instrument; guns and any type of offensive weapons are forbidden by the movement. This sector of the movement leads the piqueteros onto the chosen site, constructs and keeps a constant watch the piles of burning tires which act as the piquete’s borders and whenever possible act as the physical and communicative intermediaries between the police and the piqueteros. Orlando, a member of the MTD Solano’s defensive forces describes his experience: “when I put on the mask I feel as if I were someone else, [...] a new person, it’s a

feeling of liberty, or lots of things that are inside you. [...] When you stand in front of the cars and force them to turn around, it's beautiful" (Ferrara, 2003: 129).

Despite of the hazards, due in large part to the fact that there is simply no one or place to leave the kids with, the piquete is a family event. Once the piqueteros have secured the makeshift borders and are 'safely' in position, the families settle in for their stay. Entire families and neighborhoods begin to go about seemingly routine tasks. They set up makeshift daycares, they, in an emulation of their precarious housing, erect temporary 'homes' out of plastic sheets and tents, with blankets delimiting each family's 'private' space, piles of logs and firewood are turned into makeshift stoves; they eat, cook, drink *mate*, sleep and chat; the community's life is recreated in the piquete. The highways and bridges become, Ferrara explains, "a public space that a multitude of *barrios* convert into their settlement and to where they transfer the quotidian" (2003: 41).

A notable element of the piquete is that, despite the controversy surrounding it, within the piquete the legitimacy of their occupation of 'public' spaces is never questioned. This shows, I believe, that the piqueteros have become so far entrenched in the new counter-hegemonic and auto-determined collective identities and subjectivities that the debates surrounding them don't enter into their internal discussions. As a unified subject the piqueteros "are able to think of themselves as having a history, a present and imagine a future. [...] This opens the space for the hope in a future where everything can be different, establishing in consequence a horizon that guides their actions" (Branchesi, 2004: 10). Thus, as Ferrara argues, the struggle is not over institutional or hegemonic power, but "over a creative potential, the human capacity to invent" (Ferrara, 2003: 66). It is a struggle "whose success is not judged, as they were in the twentieth century, by the parameters of territorial hegemony or political control. Disposing of one's own

times, that is, to adhering to the times and schedules established internally and free from fixed terms is considered a victory” (2003: 63). Moreover, the piqueteros act conscious that every step taken toward the construction of new ways of asserting their lives is a step away from clientelistic relationships” (2003: 50) in a broader effort to find alternative ways of being through the liberation of their collective imagination. How else can we understand the piquete, then, if not as a re-territorialization of those *other* social relations in a literal -as well as figurative- clash over territory? That is to say, the piquete is the supreme -symbolic and physical- recuperation of space, time, and *different* way of being.

### **Exclusion, Otherness and Autonomy**

Since the early to mid 1990s party and union politics began to cease being perceived as a legitimate form of political representation for an important segment of Buenos Aires’s popular sectors. Some have gone further to describe this as a process whereby “the crisis in representation leads to a draining of the political authority which then erodes the system’s democratic institutional functionality” (Germano, 2005: 13). In relation to the established social and political order this erosion has resulted in the outdated of the status of the city’s poor as ‘marginalized,’ that is, a condition where people are still inside the stratification system of society though find themselves in a situation of nonparticipation in various social dimensions (Germani, 1980). The city’s poor have become, it is now commonly argued, ‘excluded.’ Roberts define this condition as a “second-class citizenship in which disadvantage derives from the differentiation produced by the institutions of the state” (Roberts, 2004); in other words, structural unemployment in its current levels (what Viviana Forrester (1997) has called the “*horror económico*,” or Dussel’s (1998) *principium exclusionis*) embody a state of exclusion that constitutes modern society’s ethic in regards to the market, politics and citizenship. Venezuelan anthropologist Alejandro Moreno explains that marginality “was a concept in some ways open to

hope,” that is, “it assumed a margin or borders between two groups of people, and borders one had the possibility of crossing.” Exclusion, on the other hand, “refers at the same time to distance and enclosure, it has replaced the image of the border with that of a wall and created an in and outside” (Moreno, 2000: 164). This dichotomy is one that separates a person’s life possibilities in relation to “the market and citizenship, a citizenship that is inseparable from the market” (2000: 164).

Moreno, however, questions the usefulness of these dichotomous classifiers in the contemporary sociopolitical situation. Asking the questions of “Who speaks of exclusion, and from where do they speak?” he concludes that “it is apparent that the discourse of exclusion is always pronounced from the positionality of and by the ‘included.’” He goes on to make the case that, moreover, “‘market’ and ‘citizenship’ are systems of regulations [...] that, given their strong internal coherence tend to conceive of themselves as the only perceivable and possible options” (2000: 165). Marginal, excluded, citizen and market turn out to be categories developed from within a given system that inherently negate the possibility of thinking anything beyond their own limits. In opposition to this there exists what has been called a “postmodern project” which aims to “reject the modernist notion of a unified, rational, and repressive subject and attempts to make possible the emergence of new types of decentered subjects, liberated from [...] the terror of fixed and unified identities” (Best and Kellner, 1991: 78).<sup>6</sup> Regardless of how one labels this “project,” it provides the space for thinking in terms of “a multiplicity of economies and citizenships, where each human community has the right of being different” (Moreno, 2000: 169). The tensions between those classifiers (marginality and exclusion) is that,

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<sup>6</sup> This ‘unified and rational’ modernist notion is well captured by Moreno’s observation: “reading any economist or political analyst one would have to conclude that either we do what they have unanimously decided [...] or what awaits us is certainly much worse” (Moreno, 2000: 166).

as the piqueteros have shown us, there exists a way of conceiving the self and the supposedly 'excluded' collective that transcend those concepts but that, thinking within the mind frame of 'excluded' or 'citizen,' have no space to exist. That is, adopting the language of included vs. excluded and citizen vs. non-citizen, there is no space for the very real 'other,' in our case the piquetero. As Moreno explains, those 'others' "perceive themselves as a community. [...] They live in places where the *barrios* better resemble a traditional *pueblo* than a sector of the city" (2000: 170). Within these *barrios* "they identify with and practice a notable level of autonomy from the rest of the city. They neither reject nor despise, nor do they praise the city; they do not perceive their autonomy as marginalization or exclusion but as the natural way of coexisting" (2000: 170). In the case of the piqueteros, moreover, actions such as the development of their *emprendimientos productivos* and the construction of economic networks based on reciprocal solidarity strengthen the communal autonomy vis-à-vis the state and market.

Life within these territories "is something outside of modernity's scope of possible comprehension." Defining those beings as marginal or excluded overlooks not only the community's "system of economic relations that do not adhere to the rules of the market," but also overlooks entire subjectivities that "do not conceptualize itself as an autonomous individualized being [...] and who is easily cataloged as premodern and destined to disappear. [...] But this being is neither premodern nor postmodern; she is simply an 'other' in relation to modernity" (2000: 174), those who Moreno has labeled *homo convivalis*. This otherness, even though it is 'external' to the state and market logics, is by no means isolated. The 'other,' or piquetero's, world "constantly comes into contact with the state and market although this does not imply that it allows itself to be consumed by it" (2000: 174). The piquetero's struggle for control over their territories, that is, the struggle for not being consumed by the state/market,

understood in this context as a struggle for autonomy, is one of the piquetero's most distinguishable features. It was the "form they had found to overcome the traditional division of labor between the party and the masses" which they found "at a moment when the immense majority of the left's party structures had collapsed exposing their incapacity in overcoming the corporatist union practices and dependency on the state" (Zibechi, 2005a). Autonomy and territory become the means by which the piqueteros focus their day to day activities toward the effort of constructing a piece of the world in which they want to live.

### **The *Desborde* and the Crisis of the Neoliberal State**

Since 1994 the Zapatistas have illuminated the continent -and the world- with an uprising that did not have as its aim the conquest of power. As previous revolutions did, they had as their goal the construction of a 'new world.' However, as Subcomandante Marcos says, "*no es necesario conquistar el mundo, basta con que lo hagamos de nuevo nosotros hoy.*" Francisco Ferrara holds that "the Zapatistas' most lethal attack was not on the Mexican governmental forces, it was against the libraries, the manuals, the established *saber revolucionario.*" The Zapatistas demonstrate the importance of constructing autonomies (community, municipal, and regional) from below. They have shown that it is possible to –at least on small scales- build non-bureaucratic forms of power on the basis of rotational representation (Zibechi, 2006: 22). As a result of the neo-liberal restructuring and other changes taken place in Buenos Aires over the past thirty years the Piquetero movement has transferred the center of the social struggles from the unionized workers to the unemployed and marginalized. They have demonstrated that it is "possible to struggle and win without state apparatuses, *caudillos*, vanguards or party leaders, and that organization does not have to be constructed as a tombstone weighing over the popular sectors [...] but instead organizing by taking as the point of departure what already exists in the

daily lives of the poorest: expanding, enhancing and deepening those daily practices” (Zibechi, 2006: 22).

According to Zibechi the Bolivian ‘wars’ over water and gas (2000 and 2003) have also set an example for successful movements organized on “the *inexistence* of vanguards and organizing apparatuses, the realization of victorious insurrections organized and directed bypassing all institutions (union, party or *campesina*).” The Bolivian experience has proven that to struggle and triumph “it has sufficed with what already exists: basically, the urban communities and neighborhood associations” (Zibechi, 2006: 23). What is essentially different is that the organizations in which everyday life is incrustated have been the same organizations that bring about the struggles and rebellions. What this means is that the ‘new world’ promised by twentieth century revolutionaries in reality already exists, to some degree and stage of development. I agree with Zibechi when he argues that within the territories that the movements inhabit exists the setting for the formation of the ‘other world(s),’ worlds “not only new but different from the actual one, established on the logic of a different kind of construction” (2006: 23). We are again reminded of Marx’s declarations in reference to the Paris Commune where he concludes that “the working class [...] has no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. [...] They have no ideals to realize, but to *set free* the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant” (Marx, 1891: 56).<sup>7</sup> The image of

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<sup>7</sup> In his work Marx did not use the terms ‘spontaneity’ or ‘spontaneous.’ These were introduced into Marxist thought by Kautsky and Lenin in a state-centered derivation of Marxism (Guerin, 2003). The terms used by Marx to refer to those ‘spontaneous’ processes were *selbständig* (for it self, or from its own initiative) and *eigentlich* (proper/inherent); that is, what exists on its own. Marx’s work is rooted in the idea of the ‘auto-activity’ of the working class and the term ‘naturally’ in reference to how that activity emerges. These three concepts (set free, auto-activity, and auto-organization) pertain “to the same conception of the world and of social change: that which sustains itself in the idea that processes [of social change] are produced naturally [...]: from their own internal dynamics (Zibechi, 2006: 25).” Influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought “the revolutions [of the twentieth century] have not given birth to new worlds because the revolutionaries intended to construct the new world from within the state apparatuses; [...] Even with their best intentions the lesson is that states are not an adequate instrument in creating emancipatory social relations (2006: 25).” It has been the case that the subject of revolutions “ceases to be

*setting free* is crucial both for an understanding of the piqueteros as well as their relationship to the *desborde*. It assumes, contrary to the logic of twentieth century movements built around social change, that “the ‘new’ society is not a thing or place that one reaches, not something that is conquered - consequently it is not something that is ‘out there’ nor, much less, is it something that can be implanted” (Zibechi, 2006: 24). This reading of Marx and social change presumes that change will come through a *setting free* of “the latency-potency that nests in the world of the oppressed” (2006: 24).

The piquetero’s is a world with other times, codes and organizational relations that do not respond to the state’s governing logics or the market’s organizing forces, yet exist in the entrails of the system. Given their dedication to social change and revitalization of methods, many - myself included- have come to consider them a *frescura antisolemne* for their rupture with the traditional left’s statist and fundamentalist orientations. What happens, then, when these other worlds are begun to be set free as I argue is the case with the piqueteros? During those moments, Zibechi explains, the organizations dissolves institutions and “the society in movement, articulated from the interiority of their quotidian, break with the mechanisms of domination, they tear the weavings of social control, dispersing the institutions; [...] These moments act as flashes of lightning capable of illuminating the subterranean sociabilities submerged and hidden by the veil of the everyday inertia” (2006: 33). In other words, the piqueteros actively and consciously move in the opposite direction of the neoliberal state’s attempts, by means of focalized *planes* which integrating the marginalized as marginal, accompanied by a process of ‘normalization’ which attacks their otherness, of ‘putting things in order’ and channeling life into a legitimate

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mobilized society and passes to be the state, or the party-organization, or whichever divers form of combination between these (2006: 27).”

consensual frame.’ They struggle, not as subordinates asking for inclusion but as new and different subjects struggling to maintain their differences. Autonomy becomes key to their struggle toward the construction of a-other society which means, essential, the *setting free* of those different social relations and subjectivities which are at the heart of that other world. The state is thus *desbordado*, on as small scale as it may be. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this is the moment at which the state and capital are forced to (re)consider qualitatively reconfiguring themselves to accommodate to the changing landscape. The welfare state and the neoliberal state employ qualitatively different mechanisms of governing and social control; that is, the differences between logics behind the neoliberal *planes* and the welfare state are not a matter of degree. It is a qualitatively different relationship between the state and the population. It seems to me that as the movements solidify and the demographic evolution of the city advances this *desborde* will become more visible and pose a serious challenge to the state. This captures, nonetheless, only a snapshot of reality. Matt Ridley (1993), writing on the evolution of the human species, described the evolutionary process by referring to the image of ‘the Red Queen.’ This is an image borrowed from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* where the Red Queen, running about, finds that her surroundings are ‘running’ in the same direction. Put into evolutionary terms “it takes all the running you can do,” according to Ridley, “to keep in the same place.” In an evolutionary setting constant development is needed just in order for a species to maintain its place relative to the systems it is co-evolving with. In a similar fashion for both the piquetero movement and the state continuous development is needed to either escape the state’s normalizing institutions or bring the movement and its territories under control. As the Red Queen tells Alice, “Here, [...] if you want to get somewhere else, you must

run at least twice as fast as that!” I have good faith that the piqueteros will not stop running anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Piquetero Literature**

The piqueteros entered into the horizon of academic literature in the United States in the wake of the Argentine economic crisis of 2001. Nearly all of this literature places the piqueteros, along with other contemporary Latin American social movements, in the context of ‘new social movements’ theory (Alcañiz and Scheier, 2007; Wolff, 2007; Villalón, 2007). Also, they tend to agree on the suggestion that social movements in Latin America “transcend the expectations of the mainstream ‘transition to democracy’ literature which interpreted social movements as a temporary outgrowth of the suppression of conventional politics [...] that would fade again with the return of electoral democracy.” Instead, this perspective attributes the rise in social movement activity to “a specific response to the advance of neoliberal globalization within the process of nominal democratization” (Stahler-Shold, 2007: 5). Moreover, this body of literature has concentrated on the Piquetero movement’s incapacity to maintain continuity, ‘radicalness’ and strength in exerting macro-political pressure. There is also a concurrence regarding the significance of the December 2001 protests understood as a milestone in the movement’s trajectory; Stahler-Sholk, for example, speaks of “the Piquetero’s eruptions [...] in the wake of Argentina’s financial crisis” (2007: 5).

In their recent article “New Social movements with Old Party Politics,” Alcañiz and Scheier focus on a specific Piquetero organization, the Movimiento Territorial de Liberacion (MTL), as member of a larger piquetero coalition, the Bloque Piquetero Nacional. The MTL is an offshoot of the CTA with historical connections to the Communist Party (PC). The central thesis of their article is to “explain the emergence of particular coalitions” (Alcañiz and Scheier, 2007: 161) amongst Piquetero organizations, as well as inquire into their collective “ability to

make their demands heard” (2007: 160). They understand the central tenants of the MTL to be the rejection of neoliberal capitalism, the belief in alternative models for labor organization, a distrust of the traditional political institutions, and a revolutionary interpretation of the events of December 2001, though they accept that "to a great extent, the whole Piquetero movement shares this ideology” (2007: 161). They also focus on the MTL’s demands for autonomy, though this is understood merely as autonomy from the traditional unions and political parties. Their article describes how the MTL and the PC maintain a close yet unofficial relationship where several of its members and many of its leaders are in some way “affiliated with the PC” (2007: 165). Central to Alcañiz and Scheier’s understanding of the MTL and the Piquetero movement at large is the significance of the December 2001 uprisings in Argentina. In fact, they argue, "the emergence of the Piquetero movement can be understood only against the backdrop of the failing Argentine economy of 2001” (2007: 162). In such a reading of the events, December 2001 thus "constituted the beginning of a social revolutionary uprising [that] allowed [for] the radicalization of segments of the Piqueteros movement” (2007: 159).

Jonas Wolff’s article “(De-)Mobilizing the Marginalized” (2007) argues that the piquetero movement’s “internal dynamics [...] were crucial for [their] successful mobilization in the first place, [yet] at the same time, help explain their vulnerability to division and clientelistic integration” (Wolff, 2007: 1). The Piquetero movement is described as a "paradigmatic case" amongst the "social movements that succeeded in mobilizing marginalized sectors" during the socio-political crisis that have challenged institutionalized democracy in recent years (2007: 1). Wolff focuses on the seemingly contradictory observation between recent events turning hitherto marginalized people into "crucial political actors" while politics have been "highly successful in ‘taming’ [the marginalized] without really giving in to their demands” (2007: 2). By the end of

2003, she argues, the movement was "generally regarded as 'in crisis' and [has] yet to recover their former strength;" the established political system has shown "remarkable capacity [...] to react and adjust to contentious challengers 'from below'" (2007: 2). As the argument goes, the movement's "radical rejection [of neoliberal politics] with a pragmatist orientation toward the local community and concrete needs [...] limited their possible role as protagonists of macro-political change" (2007: 3). She concludes that "the capacity on the part of these new movements to exert political pressure by mobilizing masses and blocking highways has contributed [...] to important [though only piecemeal] adjustments of the democratic regimes in question." The piquetero's success, alas, remains "largely confined to piquetero leaders' participation as individuals in parliament or governmental offices [... given] the capacity of the Peronist party to adapt to changing circumstances and to absorb contentious social forces" and on the whole limited given that "the social category of 'unemployed workers' does not represent a viable social cleavage on which to build distinct political organizations" (2007: 27).

Finally, Roberta Villalón's article "Neoliberalism, Corruption, and Legacies of Contention: Argentina's Social Movements, 1993-2006" follows the "innovative grassroots wave of social and political contention" that "created alternative means of dissent and organization that displaced traditional institutions [...] as the main channels of societal representations" (Villalón, 2007: 139). She argues that, while the Piquetero movement is a product of the "negative consequences of neoliberal reforms, embedded in a long-standing crisis of institutional legitimacy, an inspired by a rich legacy of social and political activism," the institutionalization of the movement by the government "contributed to its growth and longevity but lessened its radical character and its potential to become a competitive governing force" (2007: 139). Villalón attributes the rise of the Piquetero as well as other popular movement to the

combination of the “deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions related to the implementation of neoliberal reforms” and “a long-standing crisis of the legitimacy and efficiency of conventional societal channels of representation and a long tradition of political participation and activism” (2007: 140). Though the movement has been successful, according to Villalón, in “re-creating their role as citizens by demanding that their rights be respected,” attaining “employment programs” and bringing about “the resignation of politicians” (2007: 149), they “seem to have fallen into a classic trap for social movements: reducing their radical potential as they institutionalize and gain legitimacy” (2007: 152).

My research on the piquetero movement does not necessarily contradict these works. Instead, one could argue, my research both approaches the movement from a different direction and focuses on a different segment of this ‘movement of movements.’ Even so, it does seem to me that the constrictions of the mentioned research -considering the vibrant diversity of literature on the piqueteros produced within Latin America- does not reflect a narrowness of the movement but one intrinsic in the researcher’s research paradigms. That said, I think it a mistake to argue that the emergence of the piquetero movement must be understood against the backdrop of the 2001 economic crisis (Alcañiz and Scheier, 2007) and that piquetero’s success remains confined to piquetero leaders’ participation as individuals in parliament or governmental offices (Wolff, 2007). The piquetero organizations emerge well before the 2001 crisis; moreover, by 2000 they had already held the first national piquetero congress in La Matanza, Buenos Aires. If there is a backdrop for understanding the piquetero movement, as I have tried to show, it is Argentina’s changing socio-political and economic context of the 1990s. Also, reducing the piquetero’s index for success to macropolitical influence is problematic to say the least. On one hand there are many piquetero organizations that do not include macropolitical change or influence within

their objectives. On the other hand macropolitical reforms instigated by the piqueteros may very well not be in their favor; that is, the state reacting against the piqueteros can be interpreted by the piqueteros as a sign that, the state's actions notwithstanding, things are going well for them.

What is more, flirting with the concept of autonomy while at the end of the day defining it simply as autonomy from the traditional unions and political parties (Alcañiz and Scheier, 2007), along with the piquetero's understood as a potential competing governing force (Villalón, 2007) point to a perspective that, from the standpoint of my thesis, misses the piquetero's originality in relation to Argentine, as well as Latin American, social movements. Moreover, conceptualizing the piqueteros as the beginning of a social revolutionary uprising is, I believe, remnants of a prevalent wishful thinking following the December 2001 protests which, as I have mentioned, are well-remembered in large part due to the overwhelming participation of the middle class. Also, it seems that this is a reflection of an analysis of the piqueteros using the same categorization used to understand twentieth century social movements; categorizations that the piqueteros challenge. If nothing else I have attempted to demonstrate the necessity of new frameworks and models for understanding the piquetero movement; frameworks and models that escape the historic gaze on the macro-political as well as seek alternatives to fixed understandings of 'radicalness' and achievement. A case in point is the assertion that 'unemployed workers' do not represent a viable social cleavage on which to build distinct political organizations (Wolff, 2007); naturally it does not, yet, as I have argued, piqueteros does.

### **New Social Movements**

New Social Movements (NSM) are understood to be 'new' in that they represent emerging "post-materialist values and redefinitions of equality and citizenship that have supposedly shifted the locus of organizing from traditional unions and parties to new, amorphous groupings around values such as civil rights, environmentalism, gay rights, feminism, and planetary survival in the

nuclear age” (Stahler-Shold, 2007: 7). The newness of NSMs, according to Melucci, resides in the fact those movements “have shifted toward a non-political terrain: the need for self-realization in everyday life.” In this respect, he continues, “social movements have a conflictual and antagonistic, but not a political orientation, because they challenge the logic of complex systems on cultural grounds” (Melucci, 1989: 23). Moreover, it is argued that “the political systems we have inherited from the liberal tradition are inadequate for representing the present forms of conflict” (1989: 73). Situating the current wave of Latin American social movements in historical context, Stahler-Shold recall that “whereas revolution was a prominent feature of the Latin American agenda from the 1960s through the 1980s, now we speak the different language of social movements, civil society, and contentious politics” (2007: 9). NSMs thus “provide a forum for social movements to publicize the basic dilemmas and problems of complex societies and to express the concerns and demands of civil society” in an effort to “force the established policy-making bodies to be more accessible and responsive to the needs of citizens” (Melucci, 1989: 8).

A ‘social movement’ in this context is considered to exist when three conditions are met: the existence of “a form of collective action which involves solidarity,” a collective that engages in conflict “in opposition to an adversary who lays claim to the same goods or values” and “breaks the limits of compatibility of a system” (Melucci, 1989: 29); this is the difference “between a drunken individual shouting anti-government slogans in the street, a trade union strike and a broad mobilization against nuclear policy” (1989: 24). Additionally, NSM theory was also an attempt to escape the ‘political reductionism’ and ‘myopia of the visible’ which ignored the way in which “the visible action of contemporary movements depends upon their production of new cultural codes within [the] submerged [...] reality of the movements before,

during and after the events,” thus limiting the analysis of movements to the political system (1989: 44-5).

Though Melucci's, as well as other NSM theorists, have taken vital steps toward a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary social movements, a consideration of the piquetero movement necessitates a distancing from this perspective for a number of reasons. This is not to say that the piqueteros do not have much with NSM theory's description of movements. The conclusions NSM theory arrives at, however, have proved unhelpful in approaching the piqueteros. For one, NSM theory can not think social movement activity outside of 'civil society.' A central question in Melucci's analysis is how "molecular forms of action [can] be prevented from being reduced to marginal forms of expressiveness" (1989: 73). That is, Melucci seems to believe that to have relevance marginal forms of expressiveness must have non-marginal consequences. In a world where "conflicts no longer have winners" (or, in effect, losers) but instead "may produce innovation, modernization, and reform" (1989: 78), these new social movements had produced "measurable" and "visible" effects in that they initiated "institutional change through political reform, [...] produced certain changes in the left-wing or progressive political organizations," and "more importantly [...] resulted in the emergence of a new generation of skilled personnel in the key communications media" (1989: 75). I have showed in this thesis how and why focusing on these kinds of 'reforms' does not capture the dynamics of the piquetero movement.

Moreover, there are other issues that arise between NSM theory and the piqueteros. These tensions are associated with Melucci's assessment of the non-affluent marginalized. These 'peripheral' groups (the elderly and the unemployed), given that they live in places with a low density of social networks and little available resources for leadership, according to Melucci,

“respond to crisis conditions only when [...] there exists a high density of active social networks and organizations, and when leadership is available;” leadership, that is, that comes from the middle class reacting “to developments that threaten their former social positions” (1998: 53-4). Placing the petit bourgeois at the vanguard of social movement action is troubling on many fronts. One can imagine that this is a consequence of NSM’s position as a “reversal and denial of Marxist orthodoxy” (Plotke, 1990: 114). According to this reading, since orthodox Marxists criticized new movements “for lacking sufficient revolutionary potential,” the space was opened for sympathetic analysts to affirm those movements transformative potential (1990: 114-5). Those NSM analysts went on to make the mistake, according to Plotke, of “overstat[ing] the novelty of the movements it analyzes, selectively depicts their aims as cultural, and exaggerates their separation from conventional politics” (1990: 113). This, together with the rising political and economic significance of the middle class created the conditions where “the petite bourgeoisie have achieved a new significance” (Eder, 1985: 875).

Klaus Eder’s commentary on the affinities between NSM theory and “the modernization of society” provide a useful backdrop to this discussion. The middle class, he argues, “are compelled [...] to individualization” since they “do not have any possibilities of collective defense against the market (and bureaucracy): the social-structural position of the new middle classes makes of its members perfect consumers who have to fight for status on the diverse markets” (1985: 876). Moreover, the middle class does “not have [...] any criteria which can be made equally binding for everyone.” After all, “nobody can be forced into [market induced] happiness” (1985: 877). Therefore, in modernized societies, he continues, “instead of one central collective actor (the proletariat), several different collective actors can be identified” (1985: 871). Under NSM theory modern society is understood to be principally characterized by

a growing middle class and access to the global market. The problem with this is, however, that “the petite bourgeoisie never made history -neither as lords nor as serfs. On the contrary, their fate is dependent on the conflict between the lord and the serf” (1985: 875). Yet, “it is the petite bourgeoisie who express the collective protest of the NSM [theory]” (1985: 874). What is more, Eder argues that this kind of protest is a “continuation of an old logic of collective protest, the logic of moral indignation [...] institutionalized in the form of various, more or less stable countercultures” (1985: 879) such as the peace, women’s and Green movement. The piqueteros are, it seems to me, in many ways external to this. A social movement theory which I have found more useful to approaching the piqueteros is Touraine’s ‘Societal Movements.’

### **Societal Movements**

Alain Touraine, who’s earlier work on labor movements has left him uncomfortable with ‘new social movements’ theories, distinguishes between three types of collective action: the type involving social demands and occurring at the level of organizations, a second type involving political crisis occurring at the level of institutions, and a third type “that responds to conditions in a deinstitutionalized society in which common beliefs no longer unify and where the Self is fractured.” In the former two “the language is political, [...] a population may rise up with strong demands, but they have few chances of raising consciousness by fostering an understanding of the situation of even an ideology” (Touraine, 2001: 437). On these types of collective actions Touraine continues:

The actors’ consciousness focuses on their own situation, on calculations for proving the validity of their claims, justifying demands about living standards or the strain of their work, or making comparisons with people in other socioeconomic categories. There is no reference to power relationships, or to the society’s basic cultural orientations. Nor is there a reference to a social Subject, or to conflictive relations about the social uses of a cultural model, or to shared cultural orientations (2001: 438).

The latter form of collective action Touraine terms ‘societal movements.’ These base their collective action “on a collective determination to acquire fundamental cultural resources such as knowledge, recognition, a model of morality, and, most especially, the will to become a Subject” (2001: 437). At the heart of these movements one finds a defense of “a way of putting moral values to use that is different from the ones its social opponent defend and try to impose” (2001: 440), “a conflict between social actors contending over the social relations whereby a society reproduces itself” and “an idea as to how the Subject is joined to the societal movement” (2001: 438). In other words, a societal movement can be understood as a ‘society in movement,’ that is, a social movement that “changes places” by “rejecting the place that has been historically assigned to [its members] within a determined social structure while looking to amplify their spaces of expression” (Gonçalves, 2001: 81).

The concept of societal movements highlights the necessity of an alternative to defining the social actor objectively as a socioeconomic category. In a departure from the analytic categories that have predominated social movements research thus far, a societal movement “does not aim at changing the relative position of individuals on a scale of revenue or power.” Instead, a societal movement seeks “to rally a dominated, alienated, ‘fragmented’ Subject” (Touraine, 2001: 441); a Subject that cannot be “reduced to the pursuit of individual interests or pleasure” or “separated from a societal movement” (2001: 442). In opposition to social movement theories that measure a movement’s success in macropolitical terms, a societal movement “stops being a movement [...] if it loses its autonomy and becomes a social resource in the hands of political leaders” (2001: 442), that is, if it becomes institutionalized. Additionally, the “anti-social and sometimes destructive behaviors” commonly associated with societal movements, the piquete for the piqueteros, work to “erode the state’s logic of power”

(2001: 439), thus creating the conditions for “social relations and actions emerge that [...] are capable of commanding political actors and resources instead of being used by them” (2001: 440).

The piquetero movement not only fits comfortably within the framework of ‘societal movements,’ but this theory also offers a useful language with which one can approach an analysis of the piqueteros. Its value lies in the ability to think outside institutionalized politics and perceive the formation (and importance) of Subjects that were created and inhabit a social ‘space’ different from the one imposed by the state.

### **The State’s Response: ‘Progressive’ Politics**

Some piqueteros insist that the government becomes distressed when “‘those on the bottom’ begin to organize and discuss, understand and think about politics on their own terms.” This is because, they argue, when this happens “the poor stop depending on the governors who do politics through planes and begin (at least trying) to manage, through their own means, the things they need” (Branchesi, 2004). If we think in terms of neoliberal mechanisms of social control as discussed in the second chapter, they are absolutely correct. Though it may still be too early to have the hindsight necessary to draw concrete conclusions, it seems to me that we can begin to speak generally of the relationships between the piqueteros and a visible and qualitative change in the method and form of governing by the state.

Much has been said on Latin America’s ‘shift to the left’ or ‘pink tide.’ In Argentina the Kirchner governments have popularly been regarded as “*gobiernos progres*” in reference to their ‘progressive’ politics. From the piquetero’s perspective their existence has meant at least two things. On the one hand, the ‘*progre*’ government’s ‘drowning’ of the organizations with planes

in an effort to decrease incentive for mobilization,<sup>1</sup> *villa* “urbanization”<sup>2</sup> and militarization<sup>3</sup> projects, growing criminalization of poverty<sup>4</sup> and alarming increase in cases of *gatillo fácil*<sup>5</sup> as

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<sup>1</sup> Kirchner’s policy towards the piqueteros has consisted in “applying, simultaneously, a whole range of strategies available to integrate, co-opt, discipline and/or isolate the universe of the piquetero movement, discriminating between the different wings and organizations” (Svampa, 2003). Since taking office he has gone about “reinforcing certain strategies through increasingly massive distribution of *planes* to the affected and mobilized population” the results of which “have been the integration of organizations through a populist matrix which involves the division and disciplining of the mobilized organizations” (2003).

<sup>2</sup> “The strongest evidence for the vital importance of autonomous social sites,” Scott argues, “is the strenuous effort made by dominant groups to abolish or control such sites” (Scott, 1990: 124). Jorge Teerman, Kirchner’s candidate in the 2007 elections for jefe de gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, promised to eradicate all of the irregular settlements in Buenos Aires within a year and a half of his victory (Cornejo, 2007). This ‘eradication’ takes place through an ‘urbanization’ of the *villas* where much of the space is bulldozed to make way for streets paved in straight lines and ‘logically’ intersecting patterns. This allows, as it is marketed, for the easy access of ambulances and fire trucks, though it just as easily allows for a ‘panoptical’ layout facilitating the presence of the city’s police. Also, in the process important sectors of the populations are relocated into alternative state planned and built, though nonetheless precarious, housing.

<sup>3</sup> The urban peripheries of the third world, Zibechi argues, “have become war zones” where states try to maintain ‘order’ by a process of isolating the poor from “normal society” (Zibechi, 2008). Zibechi takes as case in point the assertion that under ‘*progre*’ President Lula, Brazilian “army sources confirmed that techniques employed in the occupation of the Morro da Providência *favela* [slum] are the same ones Brazilian soldiers use in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti.” The reason for Brazil’s participation in Haitian peace-keeping, according to this argument, is “to test, in the poor neighborhoods of Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince, containment strategies designed for application in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and other large cities. Moreover, he claims that “Pentagon strategists are lending great importance to urban planning theory and architecture, since the peripheries are ‘one of the most challenging terrains for future wars and other imperialist projects.’” The advancement of military strategies for gaining control over third world urban peripheries and more importantly the infiltration of this thinking into Buenos Aires’s police force pose a very real problem for the not too long term future of the third world’s slums.

<sup>4</sup> “The criminalization to which militants from many social movements battling joblessness, homelessness and xenophobia,” argues Wacquant (2003), “cannot be understood outside of a broader pattern of penalization of poverty designed to manage the effects of neoliberal policies at the lower end of the social structure.” He continues: “the generalized increase of prison populations [...] is due to the growing use of the penal system as an instrument for managing social insecurity and containing the social disorders created at the bottom of the class structure by neoliberal policies of economic deregulation and social-welfare entrenchment.” Moreover, “the harsh police practices and extended prison measures adopted [...] are indeed part and parcel of a wider transformation of the state” where “transnational business and the ‘modernizing’ fractions of the bourgeoisie and state nobility, allied under the banner of neoliberalism, have [...] engaged a vast campaign aimed at reconstructing public authority.” Moreover, León Arslanian, minister of Justicia y Seguridad de la provincia de Buenos Aires, in September of ‘98 famously stated that “we will apply the doctrines elaborated by Giuliani [referring to ‘zero tolerance’]; abandoned warehouses will be converted into penitentiary warehouses (detention centers)” (Rodriguez, 2003). In Buenos Aires jails and the penitentiary system, as is the case with certain racial groups in the first world, have become a seemingly inescapable fate of a growing percentage of the poor urban youth.

<sup>5</sup> Krause (2005) argues that “despite efforts to prevent the continuation of repressive tactics used by security forces during the ‘Dirty War,’ police violence continues to plague Argentina two decades after the fall of the military regime. [...] The most notorious examples of the continuation of police violence can be found in the Federal Capital and the metropolitan area surrounding the city [...] The victims of police violence tend to come from poor neighborhood or from slums, and are most often young, male, and unemployed. [...] [During] the 1990s, the number of citizens killed by police personnel has risen [...]. In recent years, the number of civilians killed in confrontations

well as percentage of poor youth who are passed through the city's jails<sup>5</sup> have posed an important challenge for organizing among Buenos Aires's poorest sectors. On the other hand, the '*progre*' governments have been lenient enough toward the piqueteros to have stayed clear of large scale violent repressions.

Early in my research Raul Zibechi told me of an incident that occurred in a meeting to which he was invited shortly after Tabaré Vazquez took office in Uruguay in 2004. At this meeting between representatives of the Kirchner and Vazquez governments (two of the continent's referential '*gobiernos progres*'), an Uruguayan minister mentioned to his Argentine counterpart: "what a mess you guys have with those piqueteros." To this, the Argentine minister responded "No, what a mess we would have without the piqueteros!" At first this reaction struck me as counterintuitive. I came to realize, however, that this was the response of an Argentine state reacting to the corrosion of its clientelistic networks and its exhaustion of means of 'organizing' those 'chaotic and illegible' spaces that for the state are the city's slums and *villas*. Without the piquetero organizations to both organize those sectors and establish more or less stable representatives for the state to negotiate with, the state would be in a much more vulnerable position in regards to 'governing' those sectors of the city and population.

Conversely, at moments "the state perceives that the planes have been a 'grave error' since it is with these that the MTDs have consolidated and gained political weight" (Cerruti, 2005).

The piqueteros, on the other hand, can not wallow in the state's 'error' given that consolidating and becoming 'legitimate' is considered by the organizations to connote "turning our backs to

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with the Federal Police represent almost a third of total homicides in the Federal Capital. [...] Armed confrontations and the use of indiscriminate force on the part of the police has become the 'central axis of public security politics' in Buenos Aires and [...] the police have become trapped in a 'spiral of violence' in which any crime can lead to a confrontation that endangers the lives of suspected criminals, police agents and bystanders." As I mentioned in the second chapter, estimates hold that in the twenty years after the end of the military dictatorship Argentina has registered 2,114 deaths by '*gatillo facil*' or tortures in jails and detention centers; over one-fourth of these deaths occurring during the first three years of the first Kirchner '*progre*' government.

the interests of our members” since the “playing field of the institutions, governed by laws created in negotiations between the state and the bourgeoisie, are not places where we can express the decisions we have arrived at as a collective” (Cieza, 2004). As of now this uncomfortable, contradictory and delicate relationship seems to continue to define the state of affairs between the piqueteros and the state in the greater Buenos Aires.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Big Picture**

Though it is “exceptional that neighbors have decided to organize democratic and autonomously,” I agree that “it would be a mistake to read this rupture with traditional politics as absolute and generalized” (Cerruti, 2004). It is not generalized because it involves, until now, a minority of the popular sectors, nor is it absolute given that the process is not only arduous and difficult to measure, but runs into a number of complexities and unforeseen predicaments when put into practice. Traditional peronist politics not only erected a clientelistic social structure in the city’s popular sectors, they also constructed a clientelistic culture. It is true, as Auyero (1997) has called attention to, that this is not simply the case of favors in exchange for votes; this clientelistic culture is in reality an asymmetrical exchange (akin to many others) embedded within a personal relationships with a *puntero*, a relationship seamlessly inserted within one’s larger social networks. Nevertheless, Peronism instituted a very real and profound “‘common sense’ which assumed that many of one’s crucial necessities could be resolved through asymmetric bonds of reciprocity with political intermediaries (punteros) [...] who control the access to public resources” (Cerruti, 2004). Paradoxically, this peronist clientelist culture serves as a pole of attraction for the organizations that oppose themselves to it. In the piquetero organizations, Cerruti (2004) explains, “we have encountered many members who express a

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, while it is true that piquetero mobilizations have been in decline since 2004, it is important to remember that the movement is not in the piquete.

sense of frustrations because a person that may have already spent years in the organization may continue showing up to ask for food as if the organization were a *municipalidad peronista*.”

While at first sight “nothing could contrast more with that clientelistic culture than the MTDs,” the reality of the situation is much more complex. The piqueteros, it is said, break from the clientelistic logic because they demand without intermediaries. However, and this is an argument frequently made in relation to the MTDs, “in the process of demanding, obtaining amplifying and distributing *planes*, have the MTDs not become the new intermediaries” (Cerruti, 2004)? The big question is: in practice are the MTD’s, after all has been said and done, a real alternative to the traditional way of doing politics or do they simply proliferate the clientelistic culture? While this question will only have concrete answers in retrospect, there are a couple of ways we can begin developing hypotheses. First of all, there are different ways an organization (or party, union, etc) can play the role of intermediary. Enclosing ourselves in a dichotomy between peronist clientelism and absolute emancipation closes the doors to the multitude of possibilities reality has to offer and which, whether it is to our liking or not, people may prefer. What is more, not all forms of intermediaries are necessarily clientelistic; every organization has particular ways of managing their planes and levels of involvement they expect from their members. To situate all MTD organizations within a single intermediary model and all intermediary models within the mentioned dichotomy is from the outset a grave mistake.

After explaining their skeptical conclusions regarding the transformative potential of the piquetero movement to members of the MTDs, the piqueteros told Cerruti (2004) that “those who make up the MTD don’t do it simply because of the planes. It would not only be much simpler to obtain them through the *punteros* and the effort on one’s end would also be much lesser; we would not have to participate in the *emprendimientos* nor would we have to take part

in the frequent protests” (2004). This implies that the members have made the decision, after considering the easier access to resources through other means, to partake in a horizontal organization where they can express their concerns and collectively decide on what to do. This, I feel, is where the important questions lie: has there been a rupture in the subjective and cultural realities amongst the poor in Buenos Aires? What can this tell us about social organization and political participation in contemporary Latin America? Have the piquetero organizations been successful in transforming the identities of the popular sectors or are they the result of a larger cultural transformation? These questions have the potential of leading to interesting and pertinent future research.

As a result of their inability to comprehend the changes taking place not only in Argentina but throughout Latin America, their renunciation of the idea of working in reduced territorial spaces and their reduction of the political struggle to an electoral struggles (Cieza, 2004), the traditional Left seems to be in a particularly dire position for providing answers to these questions. Continuing with this logic, many have argued that the Zapatista, later the Bolivian indigenous and now the Piquetero movements have become an "inescapable and inspirational reference in the pursuit of social emancipation” (Zibechi, 2006: 21). These movements have shown, as the argument goes, that constructing non-state powers is not just possible but also desirable; that is, that “it is possible to construct that ‘other world’ which some of us have yearned for without passing through that nightmare which, for liberationists beginning with Marx, the state has always been” (2006: 21). The value of this theory is that it allows us to think of new types of institutions “that would not be machines of social control [...] but, on the contrary, be machines that facilitate and mobilize resources so that people could find new and better ways of cooperating” (Cerruti, 2004). Of course, that ‘other world’ remains elusive. If we

are too quick to disregard the statist rout toward social change and emancipation then we run the risk of trapping ourselves in other unproductive dichotomies.

After all the uncertainties and questions raised by the piquetero movement, nonetheless, some things nonetheless remain. If nothing else two things have become clear to me. The first is that humanity has not lost its potential to create. The second is, as Eduardo Galeano has already affirmed, that power is not as powerful as it has led us to believe.

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