

# RUPTURES IN IMAGINATION: HORIZONTALISM, AUTOGESTION AND AFFECTIVE POLITICS IN ARGENTINA

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In this article, **Marina Sitrin** will explore a new social creation in Argentina, sparked by a popular rebellion which began in December, 2001. Different from so many social movements of the past, this rebellion rejected political programs, opting instead to create directly democratic spaces. This new social relationship has become commonly known as *horizontalidad*.

## Introduction

A mass demonstration sings collectively ‘Oh, que se vayan todos, que no quedan, ni uno solo’ (oh, that they all must go, that not even one remains). Public art reads, ‘Ni Dios, Ni Patria’, ‘Autogestion’, ‘La Solución: Autogestion’, ‘Nuestro Suenos no Caben en Sus Urnas’, ‘La Verdadera Democracia Esta En Las Calles’, ‘Nunca Mas, No Te Metas’ and ‘Ocupar, Resistir, Producir’ (translated as ‘Neither God nor Country’, ‘Self Management’, ‘The Solution: Self Management’, ‘Our dreams do not fit in your Ballot Boxes’, ‘The True Democracy is in the Streets’, ‘Never Again will I not be Involved’, and ‘Occupy, Resist, Produce’).

These are expressions of grassroots mobilization and direct democracy from hundreds of thousands of middle class and recently declassed urban dwellers who have organized themselves into neighborhood assemblies in Argentina. This article will consider some of the stirring and enduring changes that have taken in place in Argentina in recent years, particularly in the period after December 2001 when a total economic collapse precipitated millions of people taking to the streets. Within two weeks, this popular response to macro-economic mismanagement resulted in the collapse of five consecutive governments, while simultaneously creating new horizontal assemblies designed to meet local community needs. The interview selections in this article are drawn from the oral history I published in Spanish and English (*Horizontalidad: Voces de Poder Popular en Argentina*, Chilavert 2005, and *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*, AKPress 2006). The vast majority of interviews are based on

relationships that I established, and maintain with participants in autonomous social movements and collectives throughout Argentina. Most interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2005.

These new assemblies rejected and reject hierarchical government and instead adopt forms of direct democracy and horizontalism. They enabled workers to take over and run hundreds of workplaces, from clinics and supermarkets, to print shops and daily newspapers. In addition, indigenous communities have been supported in reclaiming their land and unemployed workers have protested successfully in order to demand unemployment subsidies, while working together in their neighborhoods to feed the community through communal bakeries and kitchens, provide popular education and schools, and other essential services. These movements of resistance and solidarity relate to one another on a fundamental level, as they are not trying to take state power, but instead seek to create alternative ways of living.

Throughout history people have looked to one another when formal institutions are laid bare by reorganizing and reshaping their lives and communities. This is usually done in a way that is more caring and mutually respectful than was evident before. For example, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001 in New York, individuals looked to one another for help and solidarity rather than looking to institutions. Parks were transformed into spaces for public conversations, and this form of mutually supportive behavior has repeated itself frequently throughout history (Solnit, 2005).

I am sure that each person reading this can think of instances when we have looked to one another for mutual aid and support in the absence of formal institutions. This is not how we are taught to behave, but this break between the perception and reality of human interaction can shift people's imaginations and ways of being so that they begin to organize differently as was the case in contemporary Argentina. For most people here it was not only the economic crisis that produced fundamental grassroots change, but a rupture in their relations with the state, and a period of reflection and understanding in which they viewed each other differently and helped to develop a new society. Severe economic troubles had affected the vast majority of Argentines for years before the period of total collapse. While the freezing of their bank accounts in January 2002 was a key moment for the middle class, workers in both the unemployed and indigenous communities had felt the effects of economic crisis for years, even lifetimes. The economic crisis served as a process of rejecting structures of power and antiquated ways of relating to one another. When people in Argentina spoke of what had so profoundly changed their society, most pointed to altered

personal connections, or *horizontalidad*, rather than increased economic distress. Similar processes of societal change have taken effect in other parts of the world over the last decade and they are considered in the next section.

## **Contemporary rise of prefigurative politics**

Over the past ten years the world has been witnessing an upsurge in prefigurative revolutionary movements: movements that create the future in the present. These new movements do not create party platforms or programs. They do not look to one leader, but make space for all to be leaders. They place more importance on asking the right questions than on providing the correct answers and resolutely reject dogma and hierarchy in favor of direct democracy and consensus.

Where are these new social movements located? They can be found in the autonomous Zapatista communities of Chiapas, Mexico, where indigenous communities organize autonomously from the state, working to meet their basic necessities while using consensus-based decision making to create themselves anew. They are also in the mass organizations in rural Brazil, where the landless movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST) has been reclaiming the land and reconstructing their communities. They are in the shanty-towns of South Africa, where ‘poor’ women and men use direct action and direct democracy to take back electricity, housing, water, and other resources denied them by corporations and government. They are in India too, where thousands of people are coming together to protect the environment and prevent the construction of dams, using mass direct action and participatory decision making. They are the indigenous groups in Ecuador and Bolivia that are resisting privatization and helping to prevent environmental destruction through mass blockades and mass democracy. They are in the social centers in Italy, providing direct services and meeting spaces for those involved in direct democracy projects. They are in the many direct action groups in Eastern Europe, working to abolish borders on the principal that no person should be considered illegal. They are also in the autonomous groupings around the USA and Canada, groups that begin with the assumption of consensus decision-making, anti-hierarchy, and anti-capitalism. These new movements are part of an international trend toward popular democracy and direct participation and yet operate at community levels.

The autonomous social movements in Argentina are yet another part of this global trend. They have constructed new types of networks that reject the hierarchical – ‘power-over’- template bequeathed to them by established politics in favor of organization on a flatter plane, with the goal of creating

a 'power-with' or more egalitarian model. Embedded in these efforts is a commitment to value both the individual and the collective and simultaneously, separately, and together these groups are organizing in the direction of a more meaningful and deeper freedom, using the tools of direct democracy and direct action. Together, they are constructing a new sort of popular power.

*Horizontalidad* is a word that has come to embody the new social arrangements and principles of organization that have resulted from these movements in Argentina. As its name suggests, it implies a flat plane upon which to communicate. It entails the use of direct democracy and strives toward creating non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian structures. It is therefore a break from vertical methods of organizing and relating. *Horizontalidad* is a concept embodying an ever-changing experience and months after the popular rebellion, many movement participants began to speak of their relationships as horizontal in describing how new forms of decision-making evolved. Years after the rebellion, those continuing to build new movements speak of *horizontalidad* as a goal as well as a tool.

Our relationships are still deeply affected by the power dynamics of capitalism and hierarchy, particularly in how we relate to one another in terms of economic resources, gender, race, access to information and experience. Until these fundamental social dynamics are overcome, the goal of *horizontalidad* cannot be achieved. In the face of these constraints, we need to pro-actively develop the networks and relationships that are required to achieve *horizontalidad*. While *horizontalidad* is the desired end, it also supports the process and provides the tools for achieving this ultimate goal.

I use the term autonomous to describe the social movements in Argentina because this is how they identify themselves. Autonomy distinguishes a person or group from the state and other hierarchical institutions, and is also used to reflect self-organization, autogestion, direct participation and democracy. This use of 'autonomy' is not meant to address, or reflect, any direct relationship to the autonomous Marxist currents.

The movements today are prefigurative and focus on social relationships in the present as well as the future. They differ markedly from past movements, which generally demanded reforms from the state or aimed to assume state power and introduce more enlightened government. The research and oral histories I conducted in Argentina showed that contemporary autonomous movements are placing their energies in enhancing their organizational structures and capacity, using *horizontalidad* and autogestion. Most of the movements are anti-capitalist, and some are anti-state, but their strategy for the creation of a new society is not grounded

in either state dependency or in assuming state control.

Over the past six years, the autonomous social movements in Argentina have begun to articulate new and revolutionary politics and engage in new forms of expression and organization. These movements comprise a mix of the political and anti-political with the former tied to the hierarchical structures attached to political parties making decisions for people and thereby taking away their agency. By comparison, Argentina's anti-political social movements are engaged in the politics of everyday life and have evolved more participative and horizontal forms of decision-making. These movements aim to create the future within the present, through new directly democratic relationships. They reject hierarchy, bosses, managers, party brokers, and *punteros* (leaders) and try to construct a better environment through *autogestionandose* (working together), in communities, neighborhoods, work places, schools and universities. While there are many differences in how campaigns are delivered here, I will focus below on some of the commonalities.

### **Why Argentina? Why now?**

Why have these new social movements emerged in Argentina over the past decade? Why the mediums of horizontalism or self-management? While there are many possible explanations, from the global context to the local, I will address one: the shift in people's individual and collective imaginations, a rupture that is part of a process of new understanding.

It is often argued, by social scientists, such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Charles Tilly, that there needs to be an economic crisis, famine, war, or other form of social upheaval to create a realignment in social relations, but it is argued here that this is not always the case. History has been littered with crises and traumas that do not result in prefigurative creation or forms of social rebellion. Sometimes there is a spark that helps begin the process of shifting ways of seeing and being. This was the case with the middle class in Argentina when, in December 2001, millions took to the streets and began to organize horizontally in response to the government freezing their bank accounts. However, this economic meltdown was not a catalyst for activism among unemployed workers' movements or the indigenous movements who had limited ties to the formal economy. These social groups were already engaged in actions designed to defend or retake their land that pre-dated Argentina's financial turmoil.

There are many similar examples of people changing their social landscape and organizing in prefigurative ways like the Zapatistas in Chiapas. The autonomous communities did not result from a moment of

crisis, but developed because people began to see the truth of their situation and organized themselves accordingly. Their break from the past was not due to a financial collapse but rather a change from within the communities themselves based on the process of changing their character and worldview.

## **Rupture as a process in creating new relationships**

In the oral history compiled as part of my research, I titled the opening chapter ‘Context and Rupture’ because it reflected how they had come to be involved in these new entities. The interviewees wanted to convey a background, a history or context to their involvement while also stressing the lack of a defining moment for their mobilization.

The term ‘rupture’ recurred frequently in my interviews, and I began to realize that this was one of the many new words and expressions - like *horizontalidad*, *afectividad*, and *autogestión* - coming from the movements to describe the disconnection with the past. Although it was not a commonly used word in Argentina, ‘rupture’ assumed a new meaning to describe a new circumstance or phenomenon much greater than just the ‘moment’ and all its implications. People spoke of rupture as a break, but also, and simultaneously, as a freeing or an opening thus capturing the new energy created by changed circumstances. This seems to be the case in Argentina in the context of the economic collapse on 19 and 20 December 2001 when a state of siege was declared and millions of people took to the streets in protest. The enduring nature of the protest suggested a rupture with the past given Argentina’s comparatively recent history of brutal dictatorship (1976-83) when over 30,000 people (mostly social activists, students and trade unionists) ‘disappeared’. In the course of this extended rupture with the past, five governments were toppled and protestors risked confrontations with police but, most importantly, people broke a history of silence - ‘no te metas’ (don’t involve yourself) – a phrase often used during the dictatorship and the years after the so-called ‘democracy’ was restored.

The effects of this rupture extended beyond street action to a change in consciousness and in relationships with others. For example, Paloma, a woman in her 70s, described to me how she lost her fear, and recovered her memory, saying that ‘now we are advancing. Our advances although small, go...little by little, but they go’ (Sitrin, 2006:24). In the post-December 2001 period, people began to meet one another on the street and formed neighborhood assemblies. As Ezequiel, an activist in a neighborhood assembly, said:

“...What began angrily, with people coming out on the street in a rage, quickly turned joyful. People smiled and mutually recognized that something had changed...It was a very intense feeling that I will never forget” (Sitrin, 2006:26).

Carina, a university graduate student described what took place in the moments of the 19 and 20 December and what it meant to her:

“It was a reconnection with something that was lost. Many ways of being social had been lost...one of the first things we regained with the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> was face-to-face interaction. We regained our community” (Sitrin, 2006:29).

Rupture is therefore not only a break in the sense of time and place, but a shift in people’s imaginations from which new social relationships emerge that can be autonomous from forms of institutional power. This new way of perceiving and experiencing revolution is based in different conceptions and practices of power.

The new social movements created through the rupture with the past can not be defined in exact terms, precisely because of how they are organized and operated. For example, they do not organize on the principle of ends and means given the importance of adaptability of process which enables the movements to change their objectives. As John Holloway, author of *Change the World Without Taking Power* and *Zapatistas: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, writes:

“If the revolution is not only to achieve democracy as an end, but is democratic in its struggle, then it is impossible to pre-define its path, or indeed to think of a defined point of arrival. Whereas the concept of revolution that has predominated in this century has been overwhelmingly instrumentalist, a conception of a means designed to achieve an end, this conception breaks down as soon as the starting point becomes the dignity of those in struggle. The revolt of dignity forces us to think of revolution in a new way, as a rebellion that cannot be defined or confined, a rebellion that overflows, a revolution that is by its very nature ambiguous and contradictory” (Holloway, 1998).

Prefigurative politics, in the context of Argentina, involves creating horizontal relationships, actively organizing against oppression, and respecting diversity. It also means creating alternative forms of exchange, education, culture, art and medicine. Achieving these aims does not require

that we withdraw from society to create the perfect microcosm in isolation but rather that we open more spaces for debate and exchange toward organizing and transforming society. Therefore, the means are the ends as long as they are moving in the direction of social transformation and freedom.

Although prefigurative politics do not have a program they allow for the introduction of new practices as we have seen throughout history from the current autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas and the Regantes in Bolivia, to the Paris Commune and the Spanish revolution. There have been similar instances of labor and community driven initiatives, from the worker Soviets in Russia to the Shora in Iran, and previous labor movements in the history of Argentina and Chile. These examples have combined prefigurative politics, rupture as a timeless opening, and the formation of non-governmental, communal powers that have not aimed to assume control of the state or its institutions. Raul Zibechi summarizes this process in *Genealogía de la Revuelta* (Genealogy of a Rebellion), an analysis of the activities and politics in Argentina in the months following the popular rebellion of December 2001:

“What really changes the world is to learn to live other ways, in a more communitarian way...Fraternity is what is key in social change, not war, not even class war” (Zibechi, 2003:18).

## **Creating the new relationships**

New social relationships have been formed as a part of this break with the past characterized by enhanced communications through horizontal structures. People broke with traditional forms of delegation and hierarchy; something that remains deeply entrenched in most societies and was particularly pronounced in Argentina with its profound history of clientelistic relationships (Auyero, 2001). This transformation in Argentinean society was described by a *compañera* in the unemployed workers movement of Allen, south Argentina, in the course of a discussion with other *compañeros*:

“It’s not just about moving from a position of powerlessness to one of power – at least in the sense that someone can start producing subjectively. The movement...or the spaces that the movement creates, are in some ways the spaces where you can transform your own existence and have another way of interacting with people” (Auyero, 2001).

Similarly Paula, a woman in her late 30s, who was exiled during the dictatorship and is now a participant in her neighborhood assembly as well as feminist and GLTTB (gay, lesbian transgender, transsexual and bisexual) groups, explains what she sees as important in the changes taking place; changes in people and how they relate to each other in their daily lives:

“The best part of the assemblies is that they let people do politics in a different, non-partisan way. This new relationship has given way to very deep changes in people’s subjectivity. The way people get together in their neighborhood now and talk about things, the way they listen to each other and value every person’s opinion equally, is profoundly important. ... I believe we are constructing a new way of being political, which is really positive. If the assemblies disappeared, it wouldn’t be so terrible. I say this because there is something happening in people right now – a real change” (Sitrin, 2006: 216).

The movements in Argentina today reflect how people’s relationships and identities have changed in the process of this new social creation and popular participation in movements. Many people described the process as an almost circular change that goes from the individual to the collective, then to the changed individual and back to the changed collective. Individual and community reflection on what has been termed *subjectividad* (subjectivity) and *protagonismo* (protagonism) has revealed that people are regarding themselves as social actors for the first time in their lives and capable of agency as part of the new politics. Martin, who had not been politically active in the past, explained the political awakening generated by the assemblies:

“In different places – not just in this country, but throughout the world – I am thinking of people in movements in South Africa, Ecuador, all of us that were in Porto Alegre at the World Social Forum, and so many more in different places all over the planet. We all feel the simultaneous need to change the way that we exist in the world in relation to politics... We are creating new ways of relating to one another. No one knows exactly how to do it. It is a collective process. No one is going to come and tell us how to do it, and it’s exactly this process that is so beautiful... This new political action is based on trust and it wakes up people’s emotions. I believe that this is a revolution that is happening now. You can see it all over...” (Sitrin, 2006:218).

## Conclusion

The autonomous movements in Argentina, like so many emerging around the world today, are based on creating new social relationships and communities now, while simultaneously creating new societies and relationships in and for the future. They are movements with a different conception of time and place and see the individual and the collective as inter-connected. Individuals are free, autonomous and part of a collective. Relationships are created wherein people do not have power over others and decisions are made face-to-face. Needs are not only met, but new concepts as to what constitutes needs and how to fulfil them are created.

The autonomous movements in Argentina are profoundly inspiring and one of the lessons we can draw from this is in changing how we organize and become pro-active agents of change rather than waiting for domestic or external events to motivate us into action. We need to create the change we want to see in our day-to-day relations, with a vision and movement towards total social transformation. This means thinking about new relationships in all areas of our lives: in our neighborhoods, militant groups, workplaces and schools. Activists engaged in the social movements in Argentina are clear that they do not have a template or easy solution that can be passed on to others. What they do offer, however, is an opportunity to listen to their experiences, to become inspired, and to reflect critically on what that might mean in our own lives.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge the first person to write extensively on the use of this the term was Wini Breines in her writing on the politics of the 1960s and what she saw as a different way of thinking and organizing in part as a rejection of the centrism and vanguardism of the US Communist Party, as well as other vanguardist and centrist organizations. She writes: ‘The term *prefigurative politics* is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as parts of the new left leadership, and may be recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics...The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that ‘prefigured’ and embodied the desired society’. Breines, W (1989) *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968. The Great Refusal*, Rutgers University, Piscataway, pp. 6.

<sup>2</sup> With Emilio Sparato, a participant in the movements in Argentina, we wrote an

article that dealt specifically with the use and meaning of new words and expressions coming from the new social relationships in Argentina (*Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, web link: <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/new3/index.html>).

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