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Argentina

Highways of struggle

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New micro-political movements are awakening the world. They are not revolutions. Consciousness and silenced voices of protest are being aroused. New forms of insurrection are being born right now, on the margins. Outside of what had been predicted. "You're able to do it," they seem to insinuate, now you can do it. (Eduardo Pavlovsky).

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Argentina_roadblock-2.jpg]

Argentine workers set up road block

This article is a contribution to the discussion of the social movements that are driving the protests in Argentina today, movements in which the old syndicalist and political identities are being reconfigured and mixed with new actors, where new voices are making room for the complaints of social sectors, hitherto pushed into misery as a result of the policies of neo-liberal "restraint", allowing them to be heard. Today, the highway blockades in the north-east of the country are bringing into the light a dark side of Argentina, that of the bankrupt regional economies with their armies of unemployed, the ignored demands of the Indians and the small peasant producers who are without land, and the demands of the young people without a future.

Some Images of Tartagal, in the province of Salta, Argentina, November, 2000

Scene One

Two workers have chained themselves together and sprinkled themselves with naphtha oil. They say they are prepared to set fire to themselves if they are not rehired by the electrical company, E.D.E.S.A. They have been sacked for no obvious reason.

Scene Two

Laid-off workers from the transport company Atahualpa close highway No 34, protesting the firing of several co-workers and about low wages. They are said to be the authors of the highway blockades: "we are shutting the highway, it is ours", they say.

Scene Three

A woman with her small child in her arms demands work. She is a single mother. She states she is at the highway blockade because she can find something to eat there.

Scene Four

Indian people block the highway and issue forth demands for land, social help and food: are we or are we not all Argentineans?" they ask.

Scene Five

A man about fifty years old, said to be an ex-employee of Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales (YPF), is shirtless and wears a headband. He declares: "Before I had everything here, I had work, then after privatization nothing was left...everything went, the gas and petroleum were taken away from us, nothing remains here."

The highway

The images above were seen on Argentinean TV over more than ten days from the beginning of November 2000. How are these differing messages being understood, in that many demands are being made? What do the highway blockades mean for all the inhabitants of northeast Argentina?

– In "Scene One": the workers are now prepared to die if they are sacked.

What do workers for Tartagal, Abra Pampa and the Cutral Co. or Matanza do if they are faced with being sacked? What can be done - to say it better - in a country where more than one third of the population is having serious difficulty finding a job? Is it absurd to think of workers setting themselves on fire to get a job, especially if one of them is the father of a large family? Death or the highway? In recent days, the highway blockades have come to be seen as one of the few "successful" protests. The highway is like a mirror in which those excluded from the system can be seen.

– In "Scene Two": A company (in this case a regional transport company) owes more than six months of wages and dismisses its workers.

Where is the "highway" where this worker's voice will be heard? He also knows that the company is in a crisis and that his future is tied to it. This is the case for thousands of workers in small and medium sized companies being closed or shut down due to bankruptcy, or as in the majority of cases, the process of "downsizing". The "highway" becomes a bullhorn regarding the regional crises for workers and small businesses.

– In "Scene Three": A woman who reaches the highway blockade to find a popular stew that will allow her to eat, at least today. An urgent immediate demand: food.

The social situation is hard, in particular for single women, who may have several children, and whose mate may have gone to look for work because there is none where they live or because of a crisis in the marriage. The arrival of the hand of misery and lack of work, shatters a family's plan of life. Women are adrift, without help from the state, and have hungry children. The highway is seen as a place for food.

– In "Scene Four": Various native groups demand the handing-over of land, eternally promised by various governments, and ask for social help and respect for their culture.

The various Indian groups, (the Wichi, the Toba, the Chorote, the Chulupi, the Chiriguano and the Coya) who live in the highlands, the foothills of the Andes and the land of the El Gran Chaco, have been the main influences in the socio-productive history of northeastern Argentina (Trincherro 2000). From their lands, gas and petroleum were extracted, and the multi-national companies have exploited and commercialized their labour and their sweat. This exploitation made the previous intense development of charcoal production and the growth of the impressive sugar agro-industry possible. Today they demand that which was always theirs: the land. And they aspire to be respected as a group that existed prior to the formation of the national state. The "highway " is seen as a space for intercultural confrontation.

– In "Scene Five": The company, Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales once provided jobs for tens of thousands of workers but today, almost a decade after its privatization, 80% of this vast workforce is unemployed. Today these workers see themselves as the "unemployed workers of YPF".

The old identities which bound workers to the job through union demands achieved by decades of struggle, became but an interlude, a space of resignation, for the classical union movement which expressed this for many "labourers" who were largely betrayed, having been transformed into a company union or into an appendix of the boss. The "highway" blockade can be seen as an expression of new forms of struggle.

How can something that is supposed to be homogenous but is not be explained or revealed? The old social identities, such as the trade-union movement: permanent, solid and crystallized by history have been replaced by fluid identities, inter-mixed and precarious, as precarious as is the labour market and the uncertainty that threatens each Argentinean. Now there is no centre that organizes society and from where it might be possible to analyze it, at least not easily. Everything has been turned into jelly, blurred, uncertain and with no future horizons that could serve to defer the expectations of the present. More than the historically constituted actors, such as the union movement, what exists today is the ephemeral shape of rebellious actions, more characteristic of the pre-capitalist "crowd", than the classic workers' movement that emerged at an earlier juncture by natural aggregation, to disappear (in many cases) after the protest stage. (Lazarte, 2000).

We remember the shape that the protests took at the beginning of the 1990s: supermarket lootings which were characterized as "disorders" and the disturbances by the people of Santiago in December 1993, characterized as "riots", that is to say, "primitive" forms in the scale of social protest (Inigo Carrera, 1998). It is in this sense there is a need to situate the highway blockades as a unique form of struggle as they are at a higher level of protest, (not as inorganic as the "looting") and that in the case of the highway blockades in the north east of Argentina, they achieved the unification of various players with diverse demands (lack of work being one of the key demands) but they still did not achieve a defined organizational form which would allow them to overcome the urgency of immediate and short term demands (job schemes, food, medicines, etc.)

The conflicts of the past were organized around powerful poles of mobilization, which had strength, and which were clearly identifiable and one knew with certainty who were the agents in the conflict. Today it is more blurred. The unemployed workers arrive at the "highway", impelled by the pressure of their desperation, their hunger, the misery of a system that excludes them and keeps pushing their great majority "downhill". The conflicts arise in many cases as "an explosion" and even, in certain circumstances, are converted into catalysts for other conflicts about unkept promises or as a result of the crises of the political parties, etc.

Gabriel Vommaro expressed it in an article. "The boredom of daily life," he said, "the outbreak of new and natural social conflicts (the heterogeneity of poverty, inequality, exploitation etc.) together with the effects of the use of genocide by the last dictator, were some of the most important factors in the emergence of the space created by the social movements (tied to the defence of human rights, the struggle around the act of just living, to the movements of the unemployed, of gender, of neighbourhoods, anticapitalist, etc.). So, these are at the same time an expression of the growing complexity of the social problems and of the impossibility (or incapability, or lack of will, etc.) of those who say they love the countryside to deal with such issues as political problems. The weakness, for many reasons, of the unions has also left a space for this kind of social politicization." (Vommaro, 2000).

Even though much of the leadership had been formed on the picket lines and the highway blockades of recent years, it had not been part of the old traditions of struggle in the manufacturing-industrial workers' movement where the leaders had been located; so they were, in the main, ephemeral. The organization of the earlier blockade movement was weak, and in many cases non-existent. (Many of those who participated in the blockades of these last years were ex-employees of Altos Hornos Zapla, Ingenio Ledesma and Ingenio la Esperanza and the Mendieta in Jujuy,

and in Cutral Co., connected to YPF, and the industrial wire company of Rosario, La Matanza etc.) (Ogando, 1998)

The crisis...some numbers from northeast Argentina

The decrease in production, because of the policy of "restraint", implemented by the Menem regime and deepened by the Alliance government, wreaked havoc in the economies of the peripheral provinces of north-east Argentina, such as Jujuy, Salta, Tucuman and Santiago del Estero, further deepening the crisis of these provinces, where there is a history of impoverishment for thousands of families. The provincial governments, weakened by the continual loss of autonomy and taxes, and with a strong element of internal corruption, became mere executors of these restraint policies imposed by the central authority.

The highway blockades are thus the manifestation of a social struggle and the "theatre" where the needs of a sector of workers who have been purged from the production cycle can be seen. This "new form of capitalism" is characterized by the exclusion from it of the great mass of the population. (Therborn, 1999) The unemployed, the newcomers (youth who have never worked because they cannot find work) and the older unemployed (field workers, miners, petroleum exploration workers and ex-government workers, etc) are the great protagonists of a story of a struggle that is still unfolding. But we must remember that unemployment is not merely a scourge for those who suffer it, but it is the middle ground which will be used by the different business sectors in their negotiations with their employees.

Unemployment must be seen as inherent to the system, as Nicolas Inigo Carrera, a researcher pointed out, " The growth of unemployment and the related overcrowding, fulfills the function of the reserve industrial army and constitutes one of the conditions for the reduction in the value of the work force. According to FIDE wages, in real terms, fell 33% between 1985 and 1993."

At the beginning of the 1980s, unemployment in the Argentinean Republic was around 3%. By 1990 it was at 6%, but from then on it grew rapidly immediately after the implementation of President Menem's policies, reaching 18% by 1995, and fluctuating around this level until now. If we add other data to this, such as distribution of income, the situation is even more alarming.

With the implementation of these restraint policies, an important polarization of wealth can be seen to have taken place with an appropriation of a greater portion of the income each time by fewer and fewer people. In Argentina, 20% of the richest people have 52.9% of the income, whilst 20%, the poorest, have only 4.5%. This polarization shows us that a small portion of the population is improving its situation and earnings in an extraordinary way while millions of people are becoming more impoverished, losing their jobs or finding themselves with uncertain or badly paid work:

In the northern provinces, this polarization has reached grotesque proportions. (Ogando 2000)

	Province of Jujuy	Province of Salta	Province of Tucuman
Unemployment:	19.2%	13.8%	19.9%
Under-employment:	15.8%	15.6%	17.3%
Population (NBI):	44.2%	22.5%	29.9%

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Provincial debt in millions of pesos:	741.5	649.5	1,145
Average family income:	\$123	\$150	\$141

The phenomenon of the highway blockades has to be seen as the face of this misery, expressed in the above figures. Within each of the above percentages can be seen the faces of the sacked workers, the mothers without food for their children, the exploited and poorly fed Indian people, all the protagonists we write about at the beginning of this article.

The highway blockades gives expression to a feeling of unrest which has seized the Argentinean people. It is derived from the perception they have of their country, of the policies of those who govern, of the dominant elite, an image that has been formed slowly over the years through life experience and the information that is brought to them daily through the media. There are depressing and outrageous stories of corruption, impunity from the law and enrichment: accusations of fraud; denunciations of the police, accusations of corruption in the political class; failures of banks which had been endowed with public funds; reports of fortunes crookedly acquired; fraudulent companies and corrupt judges, immoral salaries, etc. (Lazarte, 2000; Petras, 2000).

The material conditions of existence along with the above television images have been slowly fermenting in the collective consciousness of those sectors who have been beaten down by the restraint policy, overlaid by a feeling of helplessness in front of the abuses and the impunity of the powerful; a suppressed fury after years of disillusion, a growing unrest, that was only waiting for an opportunity to explode into open conflict. The highway blockades are more than a manifestation of this "unrest", which is often expressed in the burning of business offices, municipal and political buildings, as has happened in the San Martin region, in November, 2000, in the province of Salta.

Along with the denunciations on television every day and the sight of corrupt neighbours, who with impunity, show off their money plundered from the public coffers, we see new forms of protest, the hammering of saucepans in the street by protestors, marches that are carried out in total silence by the participants, highway blockades...by social groups and collectives who drive the struggle forward, in many cases, outside traditional structures, to where it appears as if they are not doing much to direct the protest because they look so spontaneous.

There is a strong feeling of personally experienced injustice amongst the poor, by those excluded from the system, who understand that the government's economic policies have only benefited the rich. It is a population that almost does not believe in anything, a victim of so many unfulfilled promises made under the cover of glib demagogy and electoral marketing.

The inhabitants of northeastern Argentina sense that the social costs imposed by the government's policy of restraint have been too severe and are without any relationship to the sacrifices they have made. Even more so, the two thirds of the population who live in poverty are beginning to understand that their sacrifices nourish and will nourish the wealthy, with profits for the few, who never lose or make sacrifices. To struggle against this reality comes to be one of their tasks. "Everything went, the gas and petroleum were taken away from us, nothing remains here," said an unemployed YPF worker.

The "highway" has become a space with multiple significances, such as a source for food, as a bullhorn for the protestors, as an expression of the conflicts and ethnic demands, as a mirror of all those excluded from society.

Those involved in the highway blockades, even though only timidly asking for bread and work "leaving many questions unanswered" open the door for different protagonists to enter with a variety of other demands. Are they

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questioning the system? Yes, because in these struggles, many in the micro-political social movements who have very precise grievances, such as those of the unemployed, or the Indian people, express the idea that it is possible to struggle, that it is possible to resist and to win, at least partially, for now. (According to Pavlovsky)

"Emancipation cannot simply be understood as the results of the struggle: it is the process itself which is the same as struggle," stated Holloway in one of his conferences in Argentina. Within this framework all these struggles can be summed up. The protagonists of the highway blockages with their struggles and demands make visible that which is hidden: the social effects of the governments' policies of restraint which dominate us: the first step in overcoming a beaten-down subjectivity, tired of the answer, "nothing is possible".