THE EMERGENCE OF NEW POLITICS IN ARGENTINA:
DECEMBER 2001 AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSEMBLIES

A Thesis

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by

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A Mamá y Papá
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INTRODUCTION

If something happened in this strange summer of banging pots, pickets, of presidents that fall everyday, of fear, joy, uncertainty and coincidences, was that we started to think that reality is something that can be changed, something that we need to change if we want to survive, we started to ask again what kind of country we wanted, and to assume that with our effort, time and even good luck we may be able to make it come true. It is a new road that can lead us to many places or to no place at all.

Martin Caparrós, Journalist.¹

December 19th, 2001, 10:41 PM: President De la Rúa addressed the country on live television declaring the state of siege to put an end to the food riots that for the first time have reached the City of Buenos Aires. By 11 PM thousands of disappointed Argentineans began to spontaneously take to the streets. Banging pots and pans, singing the national anthem, waving white and blue flags, they all marched together towards Plaza Congreso and Plaza de Mayo.² That same night at 1 AM Economic Minister Domingo Cavallo resigned. The following day citizens marched again in spite of government repression that was determined to prevent the take over of the main square. The result: at 7 PM President De la Rúa resigned and abandoned the Government Palace in a helicopter. The uprising left thirty three deaths along the country.

¹ Caparrós. 2002:1.

² Plaza Congreso is the square in front of the Palace of Congress, and Plaza de Mayo is the main square of Buenos Aires in front of the Government Palace.
The events of the summer 2001 in Argentina represent the eruption of a new concept of “the political” emerging in opposition to the vertical, unaccountable, and self-referenced notion of politics prevalent at the time. During the 1990s, politics was going through a deep crisis due to a combination of diverse processes like the increased mediatization of the political arena, its isolation from the citizenry, increased corruption cases involving politicians and the excessive delegation of tasks to the hands of technocrats. This situation in time discouraged citizen participation and involvement in political matters. Politics was loosing its centrality to the economic arena. The fact that this same decade saw the most dramatic and fast implementation of neoliberal reforms in the region is not a random coincidence. The so-called crisis of the political that is often referred to in the literature, was in Argentina’s case, intrinsically related to the neoliberal plan.

While the depolitization process that came with a neoliberal model of society increased throughout the decade, in 2001 people’s distrust towards politics reached a point of no return in which the disinterest in politics turned into a full participation in politics, but this time, through a political process of a different kind. The crisis of the political had turned into a crisis of representation. People no longer lived in political apathy subsumed in their personal affairs; on the contrary, a wave of political involvement invaded the country. People were gaining politics back, but in their own terms. The success of neoliberal policies in voiding the political process of all meaning made representative democracy an easy target for attack. Hence, this new political participation that flourished with and after the December 2001 revolt came together with a direct questioning of the notion of representation.
Even when previous expressions of opposition to the old politics can be traced through the 1990s –like the movements for truth and justice\textsuperscript{3} or the *Piqueteros\textsuperscript{4}*- it was not until the 2001 popular uprising that not only the crisis of representation reached its highest peak of tension with the turning down of the President, but that a search for a concrete alternative to the crisis of the political was finally launched. Until then, the movements against the old politics limited itself to express its rejection or at most to suggest some reforms. The actor that embodied the search for an alternative and thereafter articulated a new concept of politics was the Neighborhood Assembly.

The new politics, as opposed to the old one, is one based in horizontalism and participation, one where citizens regain the center of the stage and become protagonists. If in the turbulent days of December, 2001 it first emerged as an unarticulated outcry against verticalism, corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, and isolation of the “ruling class,”\textsuperscript{5} it later began to be defined and denominated, among other things, as deliberative, bottom-up and/or participative democracy. In its most radical form, the new politics calls for the installment of a system of non representation through direct democracy. The Neighborhood Assemblies embrace within them all these possibilities.

So far, scholars have been writing about the crisis of the political and of representation during the 1990s (Borón 2002; Strasser 2002; Cheresky and Blanquer

\textsuperscript{3} These movements, as it will be explained in further sections, demand the investigation of specific crimes that went unsolved and the prosecution of those responsible.

\textsuperscript{4} *Piqueteros* is the generic name used to refer to the movements of unemployed workers. The origin of the name is related to their main means of action that is the picket (*piquete* in Spanish) or roadblock.

\textsuperscript{5} The term “ruling class” (*clase dirigente* in Spanish) has been used by the people to signal those in power against which they were protesting. It involves not only the politicians but also judges and union leaders.
2003.a; Cavarozzi et al. 2002; Fazio 2002; Pousadella 2003.b), and some studies focused on the 2001 events have slowly begun to appear (Dinerstein 2003; Ollier 2003; Levitsky et al. 2003.b; Peruzzotti 2002.a and 2003; Petras and Veltmeyer 2003). However, much of the literature that is available lacks a scholarly analysis and can be best described as journalistic; documenting the various events without attempting to place them within an overarching theoretical background.\footnote{There have been, for example, many chronicles and essays on the events of December 2001. See Bonasso 2002, Kohan 2002, Colectivo Situaciones 2002, Bleichmar 2002, Camarasa 2002.} The few scholarly studies that have been published agree on viewing the uprising of December 2001 as an expression of the crisis of representation (Svampa 2003.a:147; Dinerstein 2003; Peruzzotti 2002.a and 2003). As regards the Assemblies in particular, only two books and a few articles have been published (Bielsa et al. 2002; Dinerstein 2003; Delamata 2003; Pérez et al. 2003; Di Marco et al. 2003). Given the few existing studies centered on this movement, this thesis aims to deepen their understanding and to encourage further research on them. The acknowledgement of their key role as embracing and developing the new notion of the political seeks to place the assemblies back in the center of attention and suggest that despite a steadily dropping participation rate since the early days of their creation, they contain the seed of what could be a new emerging political system.

In the context of the crisis of representation the focus of this thesis is set on the emergence of a new notion of politics. An introductory section will succinctly define the methodology and concepts that will be used, and the relational approach of Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (henceforth MTT) in which will be based the analysis of the episode of contention of December 2001. The thesis will then explain the crisis of the political and its transformation into a crisis of representation, making special
emphasis in its relationship with the neoliberal economic program, and tracing the first expressions of opposition to the old politics. It will further move to analyze the birth and evolution of the new concept of politics through the examination of two moments. The first is the December uprising itself, where we are in presence of a yet unarticulated version of the politics to come. A second moment involves the creation and development of the Neighborhood Assemblies, with deep roots in the December uprising. In the two years that they have been active, the new politics was articulated and enounced; and went through a redefinition process that continues today. Here the thesis aims to analyze the evolution of this concept through the life and actions of the Neighborhood Assemblies. Finally, a conclusion will include some thoughts about the potential and future of the new concept of politics.
CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY, CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

1.1. Methodology

Given the current character of the events analyzed in this thesis, the scholarly literature is somewhat scarce. A deep analysis of the events of December 2001 and the Neighborhood Assemblies required then to get in touch with the protagonists of this story. From November 1st, 2003 until January 15th, 2004 I visited the city of Buenos Aires to do field research.

The main approach used in the field was a participant observation methodology. I began attending the weekly meetings of two Neighborhood Assemblies and taking part in their activities: marches, popular referendums, open radios, street theatre, lectures, micro-businesses, etc. The timing for the trip could not have been better. It coincided with the two year anniversary of the December uprisings which opened the debate within the Assemblies of which would be the best way to honor this date. I was therefore a privileged witness of long and active discussions around the meanings they assigned to these events. I conducted interviews with some of the members of these assemblies and also participated in many informal conversations with them that provided me with key information. In my involvement with the Assemblies I also had the opportunity of holding interviews with members of the Piqueteros –whose demands they support and with whom they coordinate actions- and of small leftist political parties. All interviews
were in-depth conversations with open-ended questions focused on their participation on the movement, their previous political activities, and their opinion about the political situation of Argentina since the December 2001 uprising. The interviews to the members of the Assemblies were held in a very informal way usually taking notes and not using a recorder so as to provide a relaxed and casual environment, and after I have spent some time participating in their meetings so as to increase their level of confidence and openness in their answers. Most of them were very generous with their time, allowing for long conversations to take place. The names of the Assemblies and of their members are not disclosed and changed when necessary to keep their confidentiality.

1.2. Concepts

_Crisis of the political_

While the crisis of the political is a notion commonly used among journalists and academics to discuss the situation of politics in the world and specifically in Latin America and Argentina at the end of the century, only few of them offer a definition of what it implies. One exception may be found in Portantiero. Conceiving politics as “la creación, reproducción y transformación de las relaciones sociales” he defines the crisis of the political as “la incapacidad que tiene la política para fijar metas para dar rumbos a la sociedad” (Pousadella 2003.a:138). This incapacity that is highlighted by Portantiero may be related with an aspect that is usually cited when referring to the crisis

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7 Even when there are certain aspects of the crisis of the political that can be found in other developing countries and in advanced industrial democracies –like the mediatization of politics- there are some characteristics that are especially relevant in the Argentinean case. This will be discussed in following sections.

8 “the creation, reproduction and transformation of social relationships”

9 “incapacity of politics to define goals to give society its orientation”
of the political and that is the subordination of politics to the economic realm (Roberts forthcoming; Svampa 2003.a:145; Pucciarelli 2002: 25; Álvarez 2002.a:28; Borón 2002).

The lost of the centrality that politics used to have in the organization and design of a society is the key element of the current crisis. A nuanced version of this argument is presented by Alfredo Pucciarelli. Even when acknowledging the existence of a crisis of the political he warns us that politics remains as central as always. “La política no dejó de ocupar ni por un instante su tradicional rol estratégico en la fijación de metas y contenidos, pero esa política, basada en ideas, elaborada de diagnósticos y proyectos se convirtió en práctica de un solo sector de la sociedad, se elaboró en secreto, y fue, además, privatizada. Lo que antes era parte de un bien público por excelencia, se transformó en su contrario”10 (Pucciarelli 2002:40). According to Pucciarelli, the crisis is centered in the privatization of politics.

Intrinsically related to this subordination of politics to economics, other elements appeared to contribute to the crisis of the political: mediatization, isolation and self-reference, corruption, and technocratization. First, the mediatization of politics -a global phenomenon not limited to Argentina- implies the use of the media as the main resource of communication with the represented, acquiring specific relevance during election times. This development has gradually transformed electoral campaigns into marketing campaigns where the image of the candidates is often more relevant than the political discussion of substantive issues (Pucciarelli 2002:53-66; Svampa 2003.a:145; Pérez et al. 2003:203). More importantly, complex political issues are necessarily reduced into “black

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10 “Politics has not left its traditional strategic role in establishing goals and contents, but this politics, based in ideas, built upon diagnosis and projects, has become a practice of only one sector of society, performed in a secret way and has been also privatized. What used to be part of a public good par excellence, has become its opposite.”
and white” sound-bites or simplistic dichotomies. Second, the process of isolation of politicians from society and the consequent practice of a self referenced politics is frequently cited among academics (Pucciarelli 2002:42; Cheresky 2003.b:25). This corporative behavior of politicians protecting their own interests as a group while ignoring those from the represented generated a feeling of rejection that was expressed in the notion of “the political class” that people began to use to refer to politicians (Cheresky 2003.b:26), i.e. the citizen’s interests are at one level and the politicians’ actions in another, with no connection between them. The third element closely related to the previous one is the high level of corruption evidenced among politicians. Though this may not be a new development, the frequency and level of corruption scandals requires the inclusion of this aspect of the crisis. A fourth element is the reliance on technocrats that politics has shown lately. The renunciation of politics to deliberate and decide on certain issues -mainly the ones related to economic policies- in favor of technocratic teams is one of the big indicators of its subordination to economics.

Crisis of representation

A main concept key to this definition is the one of representation. As Scott Mainwaring argues in his forthcoming book on the crisis of representation in the Andes, many definitions of representation can be found in the scholarly literature, but most of them tend to be broad or nebulous. This thesis will therefore adopt the narrow definition of representation proposed by this author meaning “a principal-agent relationship between A and B whereby B acquires the capacity to act in behalf of A with her consent, and presumably on behalf of A’s interest”(Mainwaring forthcoming). Democratic

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11 As it will be analyzed later, the Senate Scandal is an example of how far corruption has reached in the Argentinean political system.
representation then implies that voters are the principals, and the elected politicians are the agents, elections being the mechanism that inaugurates the relationship of representation. This distinction between principals and agents also imply a delegation of tasks between political authorities and citizenry.\textsuperscript{12} The word “presumably” in the main definition relates to an intrinsic problem of democratic representation. Given the periodicity of elections, representatives have some autonomy as regards voters and they will not always act on their behalf. Hence, a proper representation of voters’ interests depends not only on elections, but also on what may be called accountability mechanisms that are developed to monitor representatives between elections.\textsuperscript{13} As Enrique Peruzzotti frames it “the central question addressed by the concept of accountability is precisely how to regulate and reduce the gap between representatives and represented, while simultaneously preserving the division of labor” (Peruzzotti 2003:3). The notion of accountability mechanisms is especially relevant since when talking about the crisis of representation in Argentina the malfunctioning of the existing mechanisms is a central feature.

The notion of crisis of representation is a recent term as it relates to Latin America but it has been used already to refer to the decline of trust in democratic institutions in the advanced industrial democracies (Mainwaring forthcoming). Mainly since the uprising of December 2001, the term started to be used repeatedly in Argentina by journalists and scholars to describe the current political situation of the country. It is

\textsuperscript{12} In the Argentinean constitution this division of tasks is established in article 22 “el pueblo no delibera ni gobierno sino por medio de sus representantes” (the people do not deliberate nor rule but through their representatives).

\textsuperscript{13} The notion of accountability mechanisms includes elections but is much broader. See the categories in following sections.
not until the events of 2001 that so clearly denote a crisis of representation that retrospectively academic works began tracing back this crisis to the emergence of earlier social movements and protests like the *Piqueteros*, local provincial revolts or the movements for truth and justice (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2000.b.; Auyero 2002; Di Marco et al. 2003; Pérez et al. 2003; Delamata 2003). Notwithstanding its broad use, it is hard to find in these works a single definition of a crisis of representation. Along with Scott Mainwaring this thesis sustains that a crisis of representation “entails the subjective perception by the represented that the putative terms of the principle-agent relationship of delegation are being broken” (Mainwaring forthcoming). While this definition bases the crisis in a subjective element, the objective indication of a crisis of representation can be found in the absence, erosion or malfunctioning of the accountability mechanisms. This is then a general definition to approach the case study. The analysis of the crisis of representation in Argentina, its particularity and rationale will be covered in following sections.

As the notions of the crisis of the political and that of crisis of representation have been frequently used without defining the process they refer to, they many times have been considered interchangeably concepts. However in this thesis they name different processes. Though the two crises – of representation and of the political- are inherently intertwined and sometimes hard to separate, the crisis of the political is broader than the crisis of representation. The above description shows the different phenomena it involves. The crisis of the political is also previous to that of representation. During the evolution of the crisis of the political, politics looses its centrality. However the system has not been
questioned yet. It is only when the incapacity of politics reaches a certain level that people perceive their interests are not represented and the crisis of representation begins.

**Old politics**

“Old politics” can be characterized by focusing on two dimensions: the elite and the citizenship level. On one hand, the political system shows signs of isolation, nepotism, corruption, technocratization, concentration of power, self reference, verticalism, bureaucratization, exclusion, corporatization, and mediatization. On the other hand, citizens show apathy, demobilization, lack of interest, participation or involvement in politics.

Scholars have come up with different names to describe the old politics usually highlighting one or some of the characteristics mentioned above. Emphazing the marginalizing effect of this kind of politics on social groups, Strasser refers to this system as a “socially limited democracy” (2002:53) while Pucciarelli calls it an “exclusionary democracy” (2002:15). In this same line of thought Acuña talks about Argentina as evolving towards a “dual democracy” or a “neoliberal democracy” (1995:370). In a working paper of the scholars Perez, Armelino and Rossi, they refer to the 1990s political situation as a “neoliberal delegative democracy” (2003:202).

**New politics**

What will be referred here as new politics implies a direct challenge to the characteristics of the old politics, implying in principle an opposition to all that was mentioned before. It may mean different things when defined from a political system or citizenship perspective. When Vice president Carlos Álvarez resigned his position in De la Rúa administration he did so as a criticism of “old politics” and advocating for the
return of the centrality of politics over economics. By this he meant a system where political parties and representative institutions will regain their ability to articulate demands, mediate between groups and decide over the basic orientations of society (Álvarez 2002.a:19-33). A citizenship oriented perspective will define the new politics placing the emphasis not so much in political parties but on citizenship participation and involvement.

However, given the seriousness of the breakdown of the representative bond, in December 2001 citizens went beyond claiming a broader participation in politics through representative institutions and channels. The new politics that was born from the uprising and consequent organization of the people was one where citizens gain the center of the stage and become protagonists. They reclaim the exercise of politics conceived now not as an activity exclusively related to political parties, but one that is inherent to the essence of citizenship (Di Marco et al. 2003:249). Horizontalism, non representation, non bureaucratization, autonomy, bottom-up and self management became the basic principles from where to build a new political system. As it was previously mentioned in the introductory section, this new politics can range from more moderate forms as deliberative or participative democracy, to more radical versions that claim the establishment of direct democracy.

1.3. The Relational Approach

When analyzing the episode of contention of December 2001, and its precursor movements, MTT’s relational approach will be used. This section will justify the choice
made and define some concepts within the theory that will be used in the analysis of these events.

The field of contentious politics has been until the late 1990s dominated by three theoretical perspectives: structuralist, rational choice and culturalist. The structuralist tradition focus on the study of conditions that are assumed cannot be shaped by actors. Scholars explore the relationship among actors in the context of structural factors. In its orthodox version, rational choice theory claims that human beings are rational individuals that maximize their interests and advantages at any time or place while being fully informed of all alternatives. In the field of contentious politics, this theory focuses mainly in how collective action takes place and what are the material incentives for an individual to take part in it. Finally, the culturalist perspective turned to the notions of culture and identity as their center of attention. They sustain that the dominance of economic and political factors in the other approaches, shaded the importance of the cultural element. They therefore define social movements as economic, political and cultural struggles. The basic goal of movements is to claim the right to live according to their cultural and political identity.

MTT found that none of the prevailing approaches could explain contentious politics by themselves. In this sense, in 1998 they came together and decided to embark in a project to design an overarching synthesis that would permit a deeper comprehension of the issue at stake (MTT 1996 and 1997). Acknowledging the relevance of the analysis of structures, these three authors took structuralism as a point of departure adding elements of rational choice and culturalist approaches.
During this process they realized that the classic social movement agenda focused in analyzing each movement through concepts such as political opportunities, mobilizing structures, collective action frames and repertoires of contention, had its limitations. In their own words, this theory focuses on static rather than dynamic relationships, it works best when centered on individual social movements and less well for broader episodes of contention, (...) led to more emphasis on opportunities than on threats, more confidence in the expansion of organizational resources than on the organizational deficit that many challengers suffer, it focused inordinately on the origins of contention rather than on its later phases (2001:42).

In their book Dynamics of Contention they therefore developed a new approach that they called Relational. Within this new perspective their main goal is to identify the mechanisms that make the above mentioned variables of the classical model interact in a way to achieve a dynamic image of the chosen episode of contention (2001:43).

The classic perspective, with its main focus in the concept of political opportunities says little about the beginning of the December uprising. The revolt has been described by most journalistic and academic analysis as a spontaneous phenomenon. As will be explained in following sections, there was no existing movement that perceived the political opportunities and encouraged social mobilization. Rather, the movement was created during the mobilization process itself. Therefore, the relational perspective which places its focus on the interaction and communication among people as “active sites of creation and change”(2001:22) is much more appropriate to explain these events than previous approaches. Additionally, this theory allows to link the two moments of expression of the crisis of representation. The social ties that emerged among
people that took to the streets on December 19 and 20, 2001 were the beginning of the construction of a new social actor: the Neighborhood Assemblies.

MTT’s theory focuses on the identification of processes and mechanisms that interact to produce the episode of contention which is being analyzed. It is therefore necessary to define these two concepts. Mechanisms are, according to these authors, a “delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (2001:24). Processes are “regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar transformations of those elements” (2001:24). MTT make no qualitative difference between both concepts, on the contrary they think about them as forming a continuum. The following analysis developed in future sections will identify two main processes as responsible for the events of December 2001, while explaining the inside mechanisms in each of them.
CHAPTER 2
CRISIS OF OLD POLITICS

The crisis of the political evolved in Argentina into a crisis of representation. Some aspects of the crisis of the political described in previous sections can be found in other countries, even in advanced industrial democracies. However, the interesting fact about this case is the way the crisis of the political evolved into a deeper questioning of the essence of political representation. For many years the incapacity and inefficiency of politics was matched by a growing political disinterest coming from the citizens. However, a crisis of representation where people would directly question representative institutions was slowly developing. The first section of this chapter will proceed to describe this last phenomenon. The second and final section will look at the role neoliberal economic policies had in the development of the crisis of old politics.

2.1. The Crisis of Representation

When defining the crisis of representation, two elements, one subjective and one objective were identified. The subjective aspect of the crisis –the perception by people that there is a crisis- can be measured by resorting to public opinion surveys that look at the trust and respect towards representative institutions and politicians. The data offered by Latinobarómetro surveys evidences a deep crisis of democratic institutions. In table 1 it is possible to view the increased dissatisfaction of people with the way democracy
works. The level of satisfaction was very low (20%) in the midst of the 2001 uprising. The lowest level of satisfaction (8%) can be found in the 2002 survey. This was also the lowest record when comparing with other Latin American countries (Página 12, October 2002). This poll was taken in April and May 2002, a time when the spirit of the uprising was still fresh and the Assemblies were thriving and working on the “reinvention of democracy.” At the same time, this was a stage where the transitional government was struggling to manage the economic crisis, and the level of uncertainty was very high. These factors may explain the low satisfaction.

TABLE 1

PEOPLE VERY AND FAIRLY SATISFIED
WITH HOW DEMOCRACY WORKS
IN ARGENTINA
1995-2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Survey</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Latinobarómetro press releases from these years.
In the same 2002 survey, when asked about the level of trust in specific institutions, Argentineans showed an overwhelming level of distrust in them (see table 2). The interviewed had the option of choosing one of the following categories: a lot, some, little or no trust at all. The results shown in this table reflect the percentage of people in the last category, thus reflecting the level of crisis the political system was undergoing. It is worth mentioning that when compared with other Latin American countries, in the 2002 survey Argentina evidenced the biggest percentage of distrust towards government, Congress, the Judiciary, big business, banks and political parties (Página 12, October 2002). As it can be seen in table 2, though most institutions share a similar level of rejection, it is necessary to highlight that 95% of Argentineans do not trust political parties, the main vehicle of representation in the current democratic system. Only 5% of those interviewed replied they have little trust and 0% showed some or a lot of trust in them (The Economist August 2002; Encarnación 2003).

The increase of distrust in institutions that can be seen through a comparison of the 1996 and 2002 surveys works here as an indicator of the growing questioning of representative institutions. Even when the levels of distrust were already high in 1996 -an average of 75.06%-, the overall average raises more than 10 percentage points to reach 86.75% in 2002. The increase in some of the categories is worth mentioning. Distrust in Congress and the Judiciary raised almost 20%, and that of political parties raised 15%.

The objective element of the crisis of representation relates to the non existence, erosion or malfunctioning of the accountability mechanisms that are supposed to fill in the gap that exists between representatives and the represented. Guillermo O’Donnell differentiates between vertical and horizontal mechanisms (1998; Peruzzotti 2003:4).
TABLE 2
PEOPLE WITH NO TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
IN ARGENTINA
1996-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judiciary</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big business</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>75.06%</td>
<td>86.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Página12, October 2002; Latinobarómetro 1996

Vertical accountability mechanisms relate to the vertical relation that exists between voters and politicians -the principal and the agent as referred to in the representation definition. Hence, the vertical accountability mechanism is the election. Through the vote the represented can hold the government accountable by punishing or rewarding it in the next electoral competition. Horizontal mechanisms are those institutional channels as the check and balances, the division of power, and the due process. In the case of Argentina,
the ways all of these accountability mechanisms are working are an expression of the crisis of representation.

The vertical mechanism –the vote- is the only one working correctly. Elections have been free and fair since the return of democracy in 1983. However, the way elections have developed in the analyzed period may provide evidence of the crisis of representation. In this sense, the legislative elections of October 2001 are an unavoidable reference. As Isidoro Cheresky frames it “las elecciones han sabido recoger el cuestionamiento de los canales que ofrece y en ese sentido pueden albergar la crisis de representación” (2003.b:48).

The initial signs of the evolution from a crisis of the political to the crisis of representation are evidenced in this electoral process. It also expressed the first attempt of people to do something about it and regain politics back. These elections showed the highest percentage of absenteeism and protest vote in the political history of the country, a total of 42.6%. Those who did not show up to vote reached a 24.58% of the registration lists. This data should be analyzed in the light of the fact that Argentinean law qualifies voting as a duty of every citizen sanctioning the non compliance with this rule. As for the protest vote (blank or nule), they represented a 23.99% of the emitted votes. The average of blank votes in legislative elections from 1983-99 has been 3.04%, reaching the highest record on 1995 with 5.97% (Fraga 1999:35). In October 2001 one every four Argentineans rejected the options that were offered in these elections by either voting blank or casting a nule vote (Cheresky 2003.b:46). The retrospective analysis of these

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14 “Elections have been able to internalize the questioning of their own channels and in this sense they manifest the crisis of representation.”

15 This data does not include the nule votes but it is still relevant since these have always been insignificant in previous elections.
results had unanimously connected this rejection of representation with the uprising of December (Peruzzotti 2003:17; Pérez et al. 2003; Cheresky and Blancher 2003.a; Pousadella 2003.a). It has been considered the first sign of a crisis that the government chose not to acknowledge at the time.

In one of this analysis, Enrique Peruzzotti distinguishes abstention from the protest vote (Peruzzotti 2003:17). He considers the abstention as an exit strategy, showing an anti-systemic behavior. In contrast, he sees the protest vote as a way of expressing the prevalent rejection towards politics but through the process of voting. It is also worth highlighting however another way of viewing these voting strategies. The abstention vote may be reflecting not an anti-systemic attitude, meaning a precedent to the claims for non representation that will be clear in the December revolt but may also be a sign of the incremental disinterest in politics among the population. At the same time, the level of abstention, though higher than in previous elections, has not increased that much. The average of absenteeism in legislative elections has been of 20.4% since 1983 (Basset 2003,57). Maybe this was the reason why the current administration did not react to these results. However, the novelty in these elections was the protest vote and as such, it could be considered the first step towards taking politics back. Casting a null or blank vote showed the will of the people of getting involved in politics while retiring the consent to the prevailing political practice. As Cheresky states “el voto propiamente negativo invita a considerar el conjunto de la reacción como crisis de representación, puesto que se pone en evidencia un reclamo de carencia política, es decir que se busca una
representación pero se expresa insatisfacción con las alternativas que se proponen"\(^{16}\). The negative vote, not the level of absenteeism, had been a sign the government mistakenly ignored.

In the case of horizontal mechanisms of accountability, it is clear they have not been working properly during the whole decade. The first one to draw attention to this fact has been Guillermo O’Donnell’s with his famous concept of delegative democracy (1994). In this way he raised the issue that in Latin American democracies the concentration of power in the hands of the executive prevents horizontal mechanisms of accountability from being activated, Argentina under the Menem administration being a leading case. This notion has created controversy inspiring further research on this issue. Some scholars have challenged O’Donnell’s notion by showing that in the Argentinean case the power of the president did not reach a major level of concentration and that the Congress and/or the judicial system still had some decision power and could limit the actions of the executive (Llanos 2001; Helmke 2002; Jones 2001; Peruzzotti 2001.a).\(^{17}\)

While all these studies show evidence that horizontal mechanisms were still working in Argentina during the 1990s, it is interesting to note that in all the mentioned cases the legislative or the judicial were not necessarily embracing nor pursuing the people’s interest against the president’s will. They were on the contrary pursuing their own

\(^{16}\) “The negative vote (nule or blank) invites us to consider this whole reaction as a crisis of representation since this evidences a political claim, meaning that these voters are looking for representation but expressing dissatisfaction with the alternatives being offered.”

\(^{17}\) Gretchen Helmke argues that Supreme Court judges appointed by the president based on loyalty and friendship are not always responsive to him. She shows how once the president in office begins to lose power, dependent judges start distancing themselves from the weakened government that appointed them favoring the positions of the government to come to secure their survival. Mark Jones and Mariana Llanos focus their studies on the relationship between the executive and the legislative highlighting cases where the latter imposed a check on the president’s will.
interests against those of the president. When the crisis of representation reaches not only the executive but also the legislative and judicial branches of government, the horizontal mechanisms of accountability may be used to rule over the clash of personal interests between them. Even when they may be working to check each others’ power, if the link between the representatives and the represented has been seriously damaged, these mechanisms mean nothing to the citizenry. Supreme Court judges are voting against the president that appointed them watching for their own survival (Helmke 2002:302). Congress is amending the budget proposed by the president to ensure that their provinces have enough money to perpetuate their provincial clientelistic apparatus. The institutional mechanisms may be working but in a self-referenced way that points out to the crisis of representation. A clear example of this self referenced and corporation behavior is the Senate Scandal.

When in the October 1999 presidential elections an Alliance of the Radical Party and the new progressive political party FREPASO came to power –under the formula De la Rúa-Álvarez- they did so in a political campaign devoid of any meaningful debate on socio-economic issues, with a platform based solely on claims for honesty and the “purification” of politics. In June 2000 a renowned journalist\(^\text{18}\) made public the fact that many Peronist Senators have received money in exchange for their favorable vote to pass the labor reform law proposed by the administration. When instead of beginning an in-depth investigation, President De la Rúa not only denied the veracity of the claims but also promoted the suspected Minister of Labor to General Secretary of the Presidency, Vice-president Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez resigned. This move broke the Alliance leaving only the Radical Party in power. In the people’s view, De la Rúa’s actions came to

\(^{18}\) Joaquin Morales Solá, journalist of the newspaper La Nación.
consolidate the idea that politicians act as a corporation and that they will cover their backs when they are in need. The eruption of what was called the “Senate Scandal” evaporated all illusions that this newly elected governing coalition could bring about political change. This is the main reason why one specific scandal during this new administration had more impact in the increase of distrust towards politics than the innumerable corruption cases under Menem’s rule (Peruzzotti 2003:15). Even when people reacted with more political apathy and disinterest, this corruption scandal had a relevant role in that while confirming the people’s belief that “all politicians are the same” it introduced the idea that no change could be expected from democratic alternance of power. Isidoro Cheresky saw in the Senate scandal the beginning of the divorce between political institutions -operated by mechanisms of solidarity among politicians that acted as a corporation- and the public opinion (2003.b:25). Moreover, Portantiero highlights the message that the resignation of Vice-president Álvarez was sending to the people: it is impossible to change old politics from within (2002:91). If this perception had no immediate consequence, it helped lay the ground for the search for non-institutional or anti-systemic means of expression and change.

2.2. Neoliberalism and Politics

As has been mentioned in the conceptual section, the crisis of the political can be generally defined as the subordination of politics to the economic arena. If politics loses its centrality, it is worth determining what is taking its place. Scholars usually point to the market as the one assuming the role of articulating social relationships (Borón 2002:167),
but it is necessary to signal “who” exactly the market is in the 1990s and early 2000 in Argentina.

The structural reforms that the country went through in the 1990s implied a transfer of assets from the working and public sectors to the business sectors, hence the strong support for the neoliberal program that the latter expressed throughout these years. This process involved the liberalization and deregulation of the economy, the flexibilization of the labor market, the privatization of public industries and services, and the reduction of the state apparatus. While most business sectors were in favor of these general economic measures that translated into the weakening of the state, the disarticulation of labor unions, and the prevalence of the market, not all were equally benefited by other set of specific measures, like the opening of the economy or the fixed exchange rate (Acuña 1995:356). When Carlos S. Menem took power in 1989 he established strong ties with certain economic groups that remained prevalent until the 2001 crisis notwithstanding the change of the ruling party in 1999. From the early days of his administration, Menem forged an alliance with traditional sectors of the national economy with commercial and financial interests, foreign lenders (international institutions and banks), orthodox technocrats and foreign firms (Schvarzer 1998). For those important business sectors that were being affected by the new policies, the government offered a participation in the privatization process that guaranteed them unusual high profit rates (Acuña 1995:357). These special considerations were not taken

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19 For an in depth analysis of the main beneficiaries of the economic policies during the 1990s and the relationship between national and foreign economic groups see Basualdo 2000.

20 For example, the economic groups like Perez Companc and Techint that were the traditional providers of the state did not loose in the privatization process since they kept important shares of the state companies. These benefits are not limited to those who were main state providers. SOCMA, Roggio, Soldati and Loma Negra also became part of the privatization process. See Basualdo 2000:82.
for powerless social actors affected by the new economic policies. From now on, those business sectors that benefited from the neoliberal program will be referred to as “main economic groups.”

Most scholars agree on the fact that in Argentina the crisis of the political started in the 1990s, and is usually associated with the Menem administration (Cheresky and Pousadella 2001:274; Cheresky and Blanquer 2003.a:12; Svampa 2003.a:145; Delamata 2003:164; Di Marco et al. 2003:243). Since this was the time when neoliberal policies began to be implemented in the country, it is interesting to analyze the relationship between neoliberalism and the crisis of the political and representation.

The neoliberal economic model, though first imposed by the military junta in the 1970s, witnessed a deepening in the 1990s through adjustment policies pursued by the Menem administration to start a process of structural reform. Though usually perceived solely as an economic program, neoliberalism also had its own political and cultural consequences.21 Its impact went far beyond the social and economic consequences of its policies. It not only increased the level of inequality and poverty in the country,22 but also “significantly redefined the politico-cultural terrain” (Escobar 1998:21). The relationship between state and civil society has been reshaped and notions of representation and citizenship were given new meanings.

In the light of an economic model that promotes the shrinking of the state and the creation of a market oriented society, the political system could not remain unchallenged.

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21 It is a matter of debate which of them – if the specific economic measures or the culture of individualism, depolitization and consumerism - left worst wounds in the Argentine society.

22 See data on the social and economic consequences of neoliberal policies in the 1990s in the following pages.
Neoliberalism suggests a minimalist conception of the state directly challenging the notion of representation. If through the deregulation and liberalization of the economy the state is left with hardly any power to legislate or rule on those issues, it is therefore harder to address the interests of the represented in those areas. The reduction of the state implies the renounce by the government to rule over conflicts among the different social actors (Sidicaro 2001:66-74). This task is now passed on to the market regarded as full of virtues, even though they are still hard to see (Cuello1998:132). As regards civil society, neoliberalism helps create a society of atomic individuals, struggling for their daily interests with the final result being the perpetuation and maintenance of the status quo. According to Escobar, citizenship and civil society are conceived under neoliberalism mainly in terms of the integration of the individual into the market (Escobar et al. 1998:1).

The crisis of representation is therefore profoundly intertwined with the establishment of a neoliberal economic program by the government. Much has been written about neoliberal programs in Latin America, its economic and even social consequences, but there are only a few studies that have recently begun to look at its effects at the political level. A first example can be found in Kenneth M. Roberts’ work. In his forthcoming book he establishes a link between neoliberal economic policies and the transformation of political representation. If the previous economic model that prevailed in Latin America during most part of the 20th century -Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI)- was characterized by corporatist bonds between labor movements and parties or states, the new economic model –neoliberalism- is one that weakened previous collective forms of association encouraging more personalistic and electoral
forms of political representation. When analyzing specifically the Argentinean case Roberts states that neoliberalism had a profound impact in the political system showing how the country went from mass based political parties to machine professionalized parties.

In his book “La Nueva Matriz Política Argentina” Carlos H. Acuña addresses the impact that the economic reforms of the 1990s had in the political system and in its relationship with the different social actors. In this way, as Roberts, he also contributed in the study of how neoliberalism is affecting democratic representation. Writing as early as 1995 he was able to acknowledge that Argentina was in the way of consolidating its democracy, but a democracy with very particular characteristics. Acuña states that Argentina may become a neoliberal democracy –defined as a regime that bases its governability and stability in the political and economic exclusion of popular sectors, or a dual democracy –one in which the elites and dominant social groups in alliance with a strategic group of the popular sectors excludes the rest of the people through disarticulation and neutralization of their collective action capacities. Whether Argentina will follow one or the other path, “la tendencia (...) actual es la consolidación de una democracia excluyente y fragmentaria con respecto a los intereses sociales mayoritarios” (1995:371). Finally, Philip Oxhorn and Graciela Ducateilezer ask themselves what kind of democracy can survive the circumstances imposed by neoliberalism suggesting some characteristics of the new democracies in Latin America like the concentration of power and the lack of accountability, are related to the neoliberal economic policies (Oxhorn and Ducateilezer 1998).

23 “The current trend leads towards the consolidation of an exclusionary and fragmented democracy as regards the social interests of the majority.”
Roberts’ argument is useful to prove the link between neoliberalism and representation. However, the present thesis is based on the assumption that in Argentina the effect of neoliberalism went beyond transforming political representation into a new kind. This kind of professionalized and marketing oriented political party that Roberts is talking about is at the core of the problem introduced here. This new style of political party isolated from the people is the expression of the crisis of the political, and as such, has contributed immensely to the crisis of democratic representation per se, an issue Roberts does not elaborate at all. Similarly Acuña and Oxhorn, establish a link between neoliberalism and a new kind of democracy, but they do not explicitly refer to the crisis of representation. We get closer to linking neoliberalism and the crisis of representation in Pérez, Argelino and Rossi’s work on the Assemblies’ movement. When talking about this crisis they refer to the emergence of a delegative neoliberal democracy (2003:202) however that is the extent of their argument.

The direct impact of neoliberalism on the crisis of representation is hard to prove but there are certain indicators that may begin to show the link between both phenomena. Further research about their relationship should be encouraged. So far, this thesis resorts to three indicators as evidence of this link: a) the power of technocrats, b) the disarticulation of social actors taking unions as an illustrative example, and c) the socio economic marginalization of low and middle classes.

As regards the first indicator, technocrats are considered a key element in the implementation of neoliberal policies. The economic crisis Argentina faced during the 1980s and the need to negotiate the external debt propelled technocrats to crucial roles in the decision making process. In this context, “responsibility for major economic policy
decisions rested in the hands of a small number of highly educated bureaucrats, most commonly with graduate degrees in fields such as economics and public administration from U.S. universities” (Teichman 1997:32). In Argentina, technocrats were in power all through the 1990s within the Menem administration. The most typical example is Harvard graduate Domingo F. Cavallo who served as Minister of Economy from 1991 to 1996 and was surrounded by a group of technocrats with similar profiles. After he implemented the convertibility plan\textsuperscript{24} that had an immediate success in the reduction of inflation, his power was so large that debates proliferated in the media about who was more powerful, Cavallo or president Menem. However, the technocratization of the government is not an exclusive characteristic of the Menem administration. Five economists were appointed by President De la Rúa as members of his cabinet, three of them in areas not related with economic issues such as Education, Defense and Intelligence (Borón 2002:175).\textsuperscript{25}

The power that technocrats can acquire represents a direct challenge to democratic representation. Their legitimacy is based on their alleged knowledge and expertise, but not on popular mandates. Economic efficiency in the neoclassical sense is the measure for all their policies. As noted by Kenneth Roberts:

\begin{quote}
The historical development of representative democracy in the West was heavily influenced by the efforts of subaltern groups to organize collectively to exert political control over market insecurities. In order to eliminate such controls, modern neoliberal technocrats have routinely suppressed or circumvented the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Through the Convertibility Plan the Argentinean peso was tied to the U.S. dollar in a fixed exchange rate that lasted for 10 years.

\textsuperscript{25} Machinea to Economy, López Murphy to Defense, Rodríguez Giavarini to Foreign Relations, Llach to Education and Santibáñez to Intelligence.
mechanisms of accountability that inhere in democratic organization (1996:115).

Judith Teichman goes beyond this to state that “technocratic decision makers regard political pressures as counterproductive if not illegitimate” (1997:32). In this way she describes how Cavallo and his team were not only ignoring societal forces like labor unions, but they did not even acknowledge the power of decision of other state institutions like Congress or the Presidency. This resulted in an exclusionary and concentrated decision making process that was authoritarian in nature (Teichman 1997:49). A similar view is offered by Atilio Borón when he states the appointment of Cavallo as Economic Minister by De la Rúa in April 2001 and the concentration of decision power in his hands represented an attack to democracy. Cavallo, who got a third place in the 1999 presidential elections was virtually ruling the country (Borón 2002:177). When neoliberalism propels technocrats to key positions within the administration, representative democracy and its accountability mechanisms cannot but erode in the process.

The second indicator relates to the disarticulation of the labor unions that took place together with the implementation of the neoliberal program. This represents the deactivation of a key entity of workers’ interests. Whether purposefully planned or as an indirect consequence of neoliberalism, the reduction of unions cannot be denied. In the early 1970s Argentina had 50.1% of its total labor force unionized. In 1995, only a 22.3% was participating in unions (Roberts forthcoming). Two factors contributed to this result: a) the reduction of the employed population, and b) the disarticulation of union power within the Peronist party (Powers 2001:46).
As regards the first factor, the privatization and consequent reduction of personnel of the state owned firms in the early 1990s largely reduced the working force. This led to high unemployment and to the development of a very active and growing informal sector that was not able to unionize. At the same time, Menem’s choice of neoliberal policies betrayed the original principles of the Peronist Party and required the disarticulation of the power of labor unions. Already in the late 1980s traditional mechanisms of union influence inside the party such as the block of the 62\(^{26}\) and the tercio\(^{27}\) were dismantled (Roberts forthcoming; Levitsky and Burgess 2003.a.:901). On top of this, Menem’s policies produced a division within the unions between those who favored neoliberalism and those who opposed it. Menem used his power to disarticulate the unions’ opposition by threatening to withdraw benefits like the control of health insurance funds and offering the union leaders loans or the transfer of the unions’ debt to the state (Acuña 1995:335,356). The success of his strategy is evidenced by the fact that in 1983, year of the return of democracy, there were 316 conflicts between the government and the unions, reaching a high peak in 1988 with 949 conflicts. In 1992, after the implementation of the main neoliberal measures of structural reform that were supposed to generate strong opposition from unions, the conflicts were only 281, gradually falling to 165 in 1998 (Lobato and Suriano 2003:134).

The third indicator is the increasing social and economic marginalization of people through the 1990s. In ten years, from 1991 until 2001, 1.5 million jobs were lost, implying a 422% growth in unemployment considering a 15.5% growth of the labor force.

\(^{26}\) The block of the 62 was a group of orthodox unionists within the Peronist Party.

\(^{27}\) The tercio refers to a mechanism by which one third of the party leadership and candidacies were taken by unionists.
The UNDP 2002 Report on Human Development shows that the relative variation of the per capita income between 1995 and 2002 in the whole country was an average of -19.6%. This sustained income fall deepened the distance between the 20% of the population at the top and the 20% at the bottom of the socio economic scale. The income breech between them doubled from 1995 (11.5) till 2002 (20.4). In this same time period the poverty line went from including 30% of the population to reaching 53% of it (PNUD 2002).

Implicit in the use of this indicator is the assumption that social and economic marginalization leads to political marginalization. Social and economic inequalities are always reflected in the political process. “The poor who are marginalized in the economy also do not have a voice in the polity, just as the rich who are dominant in the economy also have a strong political voice” (Nayyar 2003: 101). People in extreme poverty may have nor the education nor the time to dedicate themselves to political activities. Their right to vote is written in the Constitution but may be easily taken away for example by the establishment of clientelistic relations (Cheresky and Blanquer 2003.a:13). In this way, social and economic exclusion have a deep impact in representative democracy since the elected politicians do not need to represent this de facto voiceless people.

Neoliberalism contributed to the crisis of representation in more subtle ways. Some scholars sustain that neoliberalism had a hidden depolitization and demobilization plan (Pucciarelli 2002).28 Cultural developments of the 1990s as the creation of the citizen-consumer (Svampa 2003.c) and the emphasis on individualism nurture this vision

28 This is also the prevailing vision among the popular movements evidenced in all of the interviews with members of Assemblies and Piqueteros. They usually refer to the “genocidal plan” of neoliberal policies.
(Powers 2001). Pérez, Argelino and Rossi sustain that “el neoliberalismo trata que el conflicto estalle en el interior de las personas y no en las calles, induciendo la internalización de la crisis social como crisis de personalidad”\textsuperscript{29} (2003:244).\textsuperscript{30} Two other notions that were highly spread during the 1990s also point out to the probability of a depolitization plan. The first one refers to the condemnation of politics as immoral and corrupt encouraging political disinterest and defection among citizens (Cheresky 2003.b:28; Álvarez 2002.b:38). Unfortunately, the notion of politics as corrupt was easily validated by the corporative and self referenced behavior of most politicians. Secondly, the spread of the idea of “impossibilism” invaded the political discourse: “It is neoliberalism or chaos”, “There are no other alternatives”, “The social cost of our economic policies is unavoidable, is the natural consequence of globalized forces that are out of our reach” (Pucciarelli 2002:95; Borón 1999:237). According to Pucciarelli, the spread of these two notions were strategies promoted to create tolerance towards neoliberal policies, or what he called “consent by omission, resignation and impotence” (2002:80). Different sources agree that these two notions were promoted by the right wing think tank CEMA and by certain media associated with the main economic groups (Bonasso 2002:76; Borón 2002:172). While it is possible to see how such a plan will be instrumental for the implementation of neoliberal policies, no empirical prove of a concrete plan to promote political apathy can be provided here since it goes beyond the goals of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{29} “Neoliberalism tries to make conflict erupt inside of people and not in the streets, promoting the internalization of the social crisis as a personality crisis.”

\textsuperscript{30} This assertion is also found in my interview with a member of Parque Chacabuco’s Assembly.
CHAPTER 3
PRECURSORS OF THE NEW POLITICS.

As a result of the malfunctioning of horizontal mechanisms of accountability, people resorted to other ways of holding the government accountable. These alternatives were based in civil society. Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti have added to the previously mentioned accountability mechanisms (vertical and horizontal) the notion of societal accountability to include all those mechanisms that originate in civil society involving watchdog journalism, social movements and NGOs (2002.b). Social movements as one of these accountability mechanisms became the channel to voice the people’s demands in a time when representative institutions were in crisis. They can be considered the precursors of the new politics. In the following sections two key examples will be analyzed: the movements for truth and justice, and the Piqueteros. The goal will be to trace in these movements the elements of what will later become the new politics.

3.1. The Quest for Truth and Justice

Although the 1990s were a decade of depolitization and self referenced democracy, there have been some situations where these principles began to be challenged. Even in a time of individualism there have been certain abuses of power that generated popular mobilization. Three major cases where people organized themselves to demand truth and justice are being used as an example: the rape and murder of schoolgirl
María Soledad Morales in September, 1990, the death of Army private Omar Carrasco in March, 1994, and the assassination of journalist José Luis Cabezas in January, 1997. The rage these murders generated among people was motivated by the suspicion that in all three cases the authorities were involved in the cover up and mishandling of the investigations to protect the authors of the crimes.

The people’s response was to mobilize and organize around the demand of due process. The first element to highlight is that the general apathy was broken and people took to the streets to demand the end of impunity. Mobilization was first started by the victim’s close relatives and friends. It quickly extended to the victim’s neighborhood, city, province, and through the support of human rights NGOs and the media coverage the case finally received national attention. Both three cases successfully confronted old politics and had relevant impacts in the political system. In the case of Maria Soledad, the indictment of a provincial congressman as guilty for this murder ended with forty years of domination of local politics by the Saadi family. In Carrasco’s case, the investigation and the discovery of the Army’s responsibility in his death brought and end to compulsory military service in Argentina. As regards the case of Cabezas, his assassination opened the way for a deep police reform in the Province of Buenos Aires that, among other issues, gave for the first time the control of this force to a civilian.

Enrique Peruzzotti interprets these three cases as part of the politization process of civil society since the beginning of democracy that started with the human rights movement, continued with this second generation of civic movements that demanded justice, and ended with the popular uprising of 2001. The link he establishes between these three moments is based on the demand to “make representative institutions more
responsive and accountable to the public” (Peruzzotti 2002.a:3). Even when the present thesis does not share the idea that a politization process was active since 1983 with the return of democracy and continued with no interruptions until the current days, it is possible to take into account only part of Peruzzotti’s argument and acknowledge that these earlier movements do share elements of the December 2001 uprising. In a time when old politics remained unchallenged and political disinterest prevailed, these movements were the first to dare ask the political system for accountability.

It is true that the movements’ direct target was the judicial system. However, a questioning of the corrupt and unresponsive political system –a demand that resonates with the goals of December 2001- lies behind the demand for judicial independence and due process. At the same time, the 2001 uprising and later the Assemblies also made the judicial system one of their main targets. The questioning of the Supreme Court was one of their main demands, especially in the early months of 2002, repeatedly asking for their immediate resignation.

A research conducted by faculty of the University of San Martín sees in these early movements the direct precursor of the Assemblies since they represent a challenge to authority and the political system that was seen as responsible for these murders (Di Marco et al. 2003:19). The level of mobilization evidenced in these three cases deserves to be highlighted, specially considering the general apathy towards any kind of political involvement that prevailed during those days. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that these movements limited themselves to asking for accountability and never questioned the concept of representation. In this sense, they represent the first moment of
rejection of the old politics but do not go further on to challenge the whole system.\textsuperscript{31} They are only the first step in the way towards the uprising of December 2001.

3.2. Piqueteros: Politization of the Lower Classes

In 1996 and 1997 the first popular uprisings that will prepare the field for the 2001 revolt took place.\textsuperscript{32} Challenging the apathetic and depolitized political environment, the first opposition to the system came from the most unexpected place: the unemployed.

There are elements that allow establishing a connecting link between these early uprisings and the future Assembly movement. The local revolts that took place in Cutral Có-Plaza Huincul, Neuquén in 1996 and in General Mosconi-Tartagal, Salta in 1997 were among other things protests against the traditional political system, against the bureaucratic politics characteristic of political parties and unions. The groups that took to the streets during those days began to denounce the crisis of the political (Delamata 2003:163). It was the unemployed, the last among the excluded, that stood up and made visible their economic exclusion and consequent denial of their rights as citizens.

\textsuperscript{31} Mainwaring and Viola think that in the 1980’s the human rights movement was an expression of rejection of the old politics. However, here the notion of old politics is strictly connected with the neoliberal project of the 1990s, which explains the lack of mention of these earlier movements. See Mainwaring and Viola 1984.

\textsuperscript{32} Local revolts occurred before these years, the largest being the Santiagazo in December, 1993. In this case, public employees, teachers, union leaders and retired people demanded their salaries and pensions unpaid for three months. However, these were mobilizations headed by public employees claiming the restauration of the political pact through which they will give political support in exchange for a job. Even when they questioned the corrupt provincial leadership, given their limited objective, they did not evolve in the creation of a social movement. They did not move further to question the legitimacy of the national government or its economic program. That is the reason why, even when they may be considered an important precedent as regards the repertoire that was used, they are not treated here since their objectives are not strictly related to the crisis of representation analyzed in this research project. See Delamata 2003:161; and Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b:24. See also Auyero 2002 for an opposite view. He believes that the Santiagazo marks the beginning of the division between the people and the corrupt politicians and through this process the different groups that participated united to create a social actor. However he acknowledges the ephemeral character of this social actor.
Even when these revolts did not question representation itself, their demands were announcing the deep erosion of the representative relationship. In Neuquen’s revolt, when the judge directing the gendarmerie asked for someone to represent the masses and negotiate with, they all replied: “Acá no hay representantes, acá está el pueblo (…) venga a hablar con el pueblo”33 (Auyero 2002:70). This statement evidenced how the protestors were building their own identity as the people, in opposition to the “political class,” considered corrupt and isolated from them (Auyero 2002:74). The people in Neuquén asked for the provincial governor to come to the highway and directly negotiate with them, overruling the authority of all municipal and local powers. This was a step towards questioning political authorities. However, this was only the beginning. The December 2001 masses will not be asking for anyone, but for the immediate retirement of all representatives (Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b:177).

Cutral-Có and General Mosconi-Tartagal were two traditionally prosperous towns due to the presence of the public oil industry, YPF.34 This industry has been the best expression of the national-popular economic model and the welfare state (Svampa and Pereyra. 2003.b:14).35 When YPF privatization was followed by massive reductions of personnel,36 the desolation of these former employees, whose lives were organized and dictated by the fact of being part of this industry led to the most tragic popular revolts of

33 “There are no representatives here, this is the people (…) come and talk to the people”

34 YPF (Spanish acronym for Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales) was the national oil company that was privatized on September 24, 1992.

35 YPF paid their employees salaries over the average, offered them modern housing, access to excellent health care and paid vacations. The welfare YPF generated went beyond its own employees, since it dynamized the economy of the whole region. See also Auyero 2002:32.

36 After its privatization in 1992 YPF reduced its personnel from 4,200 workers to 600 in less than a year.
the decade.37 This is the origin of the Piqueteros, who represented a major innovation in the scene of the social protest. Through the organization of roadblocks, unemployed workers were able to build a positive identity for themselves that led to the construction of a social movement (Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b:11).38 A new form of protest was articulating a new demand: jobs. However, this was not the only novelty. The chosen organization in the form of assemblies with horizontal decision making processes was part of their questioning of bureaucratized and vertical structures that characterized the old politics. In their case they not only have experienced the complete indifference of politicians towards their needs, but that of union leaders that betrayed them at the time they still had a job. To avoid similar situations in their new organizations, whenever the government wanted to negotiate with them their demands, as the people in Neuquén, they requested the officials to come to the roadblock and the assembly would then decide the terms in which the force measure will be lifted. The relevance of the assembly form is worth highlighting since it will be later diffused to the movement that was born in December 2001.39

While these mobilizations were taking place in the provinces, unemployment was also growing in the Gran Buenos Aires. In 1990 the unemployment rate was of 6%. 1993

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37 The privatization of YPF did not only directly affect the firm’s employees but the local economy too. Every job in YPF generated around 13 indirect jobs related mostly to commercial, financial and administrative services. Unemployment in Moscón-Tartagal reached 50% in those years. See Giarraca 2001:237-238.


39 Since those early days, the movement has grown and evolved into different sectors. Even when the challenge to union leaders and political parties has been a key element in their development, and their struggle for horizontalism and no leadership has been a central feature, the heterogeneity of the group now shows different models and strategies. There are groups associated with unions, others associated with left political parties and a third group that claims autonomy and is more faithful to the original principles. Inside these three categories there are different groups of Piqueteros.
saw the first big increase reaching 9.6%, while in 1996 it increased up to 18.8% (INDEC 2004). The change in the per capita income in this area between 1995 and 2002 was of -24.6% (PNUD 2002). The increased unemployment in the Gran Buenos Aires was not due to the privatization of specific firms like the cases mentioned above, but as a consequence of deindustrialization that though it was started in the 70s, saw its high peak in the 1990s. During the 1980s, in order to face the difficult living conditions, the surroundings of the city of Buenos Aires witnessed a wave of illegal occupations supported by religious base communities and human rights organizations. The popular classes were organizing themselves on a territorial basis and the neighborhood became a new space for the creation of social actors (Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b:36).

Even when as early as 1995 the first unemployed commissions and groups began to emerge in La Matanza, it was not until Cutral Có-Plaza Huincul and General Mosconi-Tartagal showed the efficiency of the roadblock and through this method created a new social actor with a positive identity, that these territorially based groups were able to successfully organize and become Piqueteros. The initial neighborhood organizations of La Matanza were used as the base for the new movement, evidencing what MTT called a process of social appropriation (MTT 2001:44).^42

^40 Former industrial district of the Gran Buenos Aires. Three Piqueteros groups are based here: Federación Tierra y Vivienda (FTV), Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC), and Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de la Matanza (MTD).

^41 Maristella Svampa highlights the importance of Cutral Co and General Moscón-Tartagal in the creation of a positive identity with the name of Piqueteros. Until then to be unemployed had a negative and humiliating connotation. Since these successful revolts, the world piquetero defines their identity in a positive way, a worker who is not ashamed of being unemployed anymore and who now fight for his and her rights. From an attitude of passivity and isolation, they move towards a space of collective construction, dignity and organization. See Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b: 46,135.

^42 “Challengers, rather than creating new organizations, appropriated existing ones and turned them into vehicles of mobilization….social appropriation is a mechanism that permits oppressed or resource-poor populations sometimes to overcome their organization deficits” See MTT 2001:44.
Other mechanisms are easily visible in the process of creation of this new actor. Through the mechanism of emulation -collective action modeled on the actions of others (MTT 2001:335)- and diffusion - transfer of information across existing lines of communication (MTT 2001:68)- the roadblocks expanded along the whole country. The ease with which this processes occurred had to do mainly with the chosen repertoire. The roadblock turned out to be a highly effective means of action since while it did not require the massive presence of protesters it caused major inconveniences interrupting the circulation of goods and people, which consequently granted them high visibility through the national media (Lobato and Suriano 2003:145).

With the spiral of mobilization that the first *Piqueteros* started in early 1996, old politics received a major strike. The lower classes were reclaiming politics for themselves through a new innovative way. In their rejection of the old politics they moved a step forward. As they created their own organizations the *Piqueteros* laid the foundations for the new politics to come. The chosen structure of no leaderships, horizontalism and the assembly form as their decision making process were all elements that will be key part of the new notion of politics that will come to existence in December 2001. Tired of having been deceived by union leaders, the *Piqueteros* rejected the traditional and bureaucratic union organization and purposefully chose new organizational principles. However, until this moment the *Piqueteros* limit themselves to apply these new concepts to their own organization. They did not challenge representative democracy or suggest that the proposed organizational principles should be applied to the political system as a whole. In time, this would be the task of the Assemblies.
CHAPTER 4

ERUPTION OF NEW POLITICS

Based on MTT relational approach, there are two main processes that can explain the events of December 19 and 20th, 2001. These are the concepts of elite defection and mobilization. They will be discussed separately in the sections below, followed by an analysis of how the interrelation of both processes led to the fall of the government. The last section of this chapter will address the emergence of new politics in the uprising.

4.1. Elite Defection

MTT identify the process of elite defection as a key element to the success of revolutions (2001:113). They define this concept as “a sustained process by which significant elements of a previously stable ruling coalition align with the action programs of revolutionary or other opposition groups” (2001:196) Although the events of December 2001 cannot be categorized as a revolution,43 MTT’s approach is useful when applied to other expressions of contentious politics as the chosen case.

The theory talks about a part of the elite that separates from the ruling coalition and joins efforts with the opposition in their goal to turn the government down. Even though this was not the exact case in Argentina, elite defection played a key role in how events developed. Two facts need to be clarified. First, although not all of the groups

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43 See MTT’s definition of revolution and why these requirement do not apply to Dec 2001. MTT 2001.
defected from the ruling coalition in order to topple the president, their defection, produced a situation where the President ended up completely isolated which in time facilitated the success of the popular uprising. Second, in the December uprising, there was not an organized popular movement working towards the fall of De la Rúa’s government. The popular uprising of December 19 and 20 was spontaneous and had neither leaders nor previous organized structures. Hence, the defected elite that began to conspire could not establish an alliance with opposition popular movements, limiting itself to use the popular uprising towards their own interest.

The De la Rúa administration that took power in December 1999 was based on a coalition of parties called the Alliance. The coalition was formed by the traditional Radical Party –to which the president belonged- and the new progressive party FREPASO –that got to name the Vice President. As regards the process of elite defection, the break up of the ruling coalition can be traced down to the resignation of Vice President Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez in October of 2000 when the Senate scandal took place.\textsuperscript{44} The resignation of Álvarez left the government with no support from this party and the progressive urban middle class that identified with it. This administration chosen specifically to put an end to the Menemist era of corruption and enrichment of many politicians lost with this incident its legitimacy among a large part of the population (Peruzzotti 2003:15).

However, the key elite defection for the fall of the government was not this one, but one protagonized by the main economic groups\textsuperscript{45} and later by the members of De la

\textsuperscript{44} See previous sections for details of the Senate Scandal.

\textsuperscript{45} Iñigo Carrera y Cotarelo agree that the internal fights inside the financial oligarchy generated the conditions for the December crisis. See Iñigo Carrera et al. 2003: 214.
Rúa’s own political party. As regards the first one, even when the current administration maintained the alliance with key business sectors established by Menem, the economic situation was going out of hand and the economic elite was not happy. In the midst of an increasing difficult economic situation, in April 2001 De la Rúa decided to appoint Domingo Cavallo as Economic Minister.\footnote{Domingo F. Cavallo was Minister of Economic from 1991 to 1996 under President Menem, and from April to December, 2001 under President De la Rúa.} However, if Cavallo was able to please these groups during the 1990s thanks to the wealth produced by the privatization of public services and industries, this was not the case in 2001 (Bonasso 2002:75). In the early 1990s the participation in the privatization process allowed the foreign lenders, foreign firms and the national economic groups to articulate their interests and agree on the main economic policies the administration was applying. However, when by the end of the decade the national groups began to sell their shares in the privatized firms to foreign groups, new contradicting interests emerge (Basualdo 2000:33). The national economic groups started to demand the end of the fixed exchange rate that was established in 1991 supporting the devaluation of the national currency.\footnote{In April 1991 what came to be called as the “Convertibility Plan” was launched. Its three pillars were: fix exchange rate (1 peso=1 US dollar), dollar and gold reserves in the National Central Bank equal to money in circulation, no price indexation nor issuing of new money.} Hiding their demands behind the argument of the need to revitalize the national industry, their main goal through this strategy was to increase their financial assets in dollars from the sale of their parts in the privatized firms that were placed outside the country. These groups counted with an important ally in the media through the support of the Grupo Clarín that owned TV Channel 13, Radio Mitre and the newspaper Clarín. On the other hand were those who pushed towards a dollarized economy. Within this group there were the foreign firms and
banks supported by two of the main TV channels, Azul and Telefe, and by the CEMA think tank (Bonasso 2002:76). These foreign groups were interested in maintaining the value of their physical assets in the country, thus opposed devaluation.

The two groups had important links with Peronist leaders. Carlos Menem was associated with the pro-dollarization plan while Eduardo Duhalde was with those who supported devaluation. It was then Duhalde who, clearly perceiving the lack of support to the government from part of the economic elite, decided to grasp this opportunity. In his book about the December insurrection Miguel Bonasso tells a story saying that in August, 2001 Duhalde proclaimed in Washington D.C. while having a meeting with the Argentinean Ambassador that he will be the next president of Argentina. This would have remained a silly anecdote if he was not explicit about the time: “not in the 2003 elections but after the institutional collapse of the country” (Bonasso 2002:93).

On December 1, 2001 Cavallo decided to freeze all bank accounts to avoid the collapse of the financial system, installing what came to be called as the “corralito.” One of the immediate consequences of this measure was the fall of the informal economy, key to the survival of the lower classes. The lack of cash increased the use of credit and debit cards among the middle and high classes leaving informal workers aside. Food riots erupted all over the country. During the 1990s, most working class people preferred to cope with the economic crisis on an individual basis. Getting one or more jobs in the informal economy was one of the most common available options for them (Powers

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48 The Decree Nº 1570 authorized extractions of only U$S 250 in cash per week, and prohibited to take out of the country more than U$S 1,000. All other purchases were forced to be done inside the banking system through credit and debit cards, checks and money transfers.

49 The informal economy represents between 40 and 45% of the GDP. See Bonasso, 131.
When in December 2001 the informal economy collapsed, this coping mechanism was not available any more and people were left with no alternative but to take part in collective actions like the food riots to face the economic crisis.

Though it is hard to tell how each food riot began, it has been generally assumed that some of them had a spontaneous origin, while some others were instigated by certain political leaders (Bonasso 2002). The seriousness of the economic crisis for the poor class was perceived by the Peronist leaders like Eduardo Duhalde, Carlos Ruckauf and Felipe Solá as an opportunity to increase chaos and produce the fall of the Radical government. In this they were not alone. Members of the ruling Radical Party like Raul Alfonsín, Leopolodo Moreau and Federico Storani gave their consent: The poor people’s desperation and hunger could be easily used to create unrest, and food riots were organized. However, Peronist leaders had to overcome a main obstacle to their plan: the existence of the Piqueteros.

The Peronist party has always remained central to Argentine politics thanks in great part to their clientelistic apparatus that is especially strong in the Province of Buenos Aires. For years they have been able to mobilize poor people to pursue their political interests. However, around 1999 or even before, a new social movement started to challenge the Peronist hegemony in this area. The Piqueteros, a highly independent

50 Given the uneven distribution of population around the country, the Province of Buenos Aires is key to determine presidential elections results (it contains 40% of the national electorate), raising the relevance of this district in the electoral competition. This does not imply that the Peronist clientelistic apparatus limits itself to this province. The northwestern provinces are also strongly subjected to clientelistic relationships.

51 One of the districts that, given its large population –more than 1 million people- determine the electoral results in the Province of Buenos Aires is La Matanza. This area has seen the development of a strong clientelistic apparatus and the emergence of three different groups of Piqueteros: Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC), Federación de Tierra y Vivienda (FTV), and Movimiento de Trabajadores
group from political parties, started since then to organize the poor neighborhoods that surround the city of Buenos Aires and were perceived by the Peronist neighborhood organizers (punteros peronistas) as an important menace to their activities. Unable to directly use the masses controlled by the Piqueteros, the Peronist leadership laid out a plan to deceive them and make them participate in the chaos.\textsuperscript{52} In an interview with a member of the MTD of La Matanza (Movement of Unemployed Workers),\textsuperscript{53} one of the Piqueteros organizations, he recalls how on December 19\textsuperscript{th} the people from their neighborhood were saying that in the Peronists Party local organizations (Unidades Básicas) they were spreading the word that some supermarkets were giving food away. This was the plan: once a crowd concentrated in front of these supermarkets and no food was given –since these announcements happened to be incorrect- their anger and frustration was easily turned into violence and looting, especially considering the “coincidental” lack of police presence in the area.\textsuperscript{54}

The active conspiracy against the government coming from Peronist politicians with the consent of Radical leaders combined with the silent defection of other sectors of society. One of them was the Catholic Church. On December 19\textsuperscript{th} a meeting was held in the headquarters of the catholic charity institution Cáritas with the goal of achieving national unity. A wide variety of sectors was present, Peronist governors, union leaders, Desocupados de La Matanza (MTD). The competition between the Piqueteros and the Peronist Party is highly visible in this area.

\textsuperscript{52} See Bonasso 2002:141, the trap set by the Peronist government of the Province of Buenos Aires told by the Piquetero D’Elía. A similar story was found by the author of this thesis in an interview with Toty Flores from the MTD de la Matanza.

\textsuperscript{53} Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de la Matanza (Movement of Unemployed Workers from La Matanza), is part of the Piqueteros.

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Toribio, Buenos Aires, December 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2003.
Radical leaders, and some Catholic authorities. However, the meeting started without the
President and before he came into the room the union leader Rodolfo Daer was stating the
need to achieve a national accord with or without De la Rúa (Bonasso 2002:153).

Overall, in this process of elite defection President De la Rúa was completely
isolated and left alone even by his own advisors and ministries. When in the midst of
December 20th, the President was taping his national address to the people asking the
Peronists to join him in a government of national unity in order to save the country only
two members of his cabinet were present.\textsuperscript{55} The Minister of Interior, Ramón Mestre,
supposedly a key figure in such circumstances of social uprising was not only absent, but
was at the time declaring to the press that the President had already resigned (Bonasso
2002:16). It seems that it came a time when the national unity did not need to include De
la Rúa anymore. Even though he was still the president, he represented no one.

4.2. Popular Mobilization

While the elite defection was taking place, another process, this time one starting
from the bottom, was getting ready to emerge: the popular mobilization. The uprising of
December 19 and 20, 2001 was the process directly related to the resignation of
Economic Minister Cavallo and President De la Rúa. The interrelation between these two
processes, key to the end of De la Rúa’s administration, will be analyzed in the next
section.

In order to understand this popular uprising it is necessary to refer to the two
crises that were on their way since the mid 1990s: the crisis of the political and that of the
neoliberal economic model. These two crises did nothing but deepen during the year

\textsuperscript{55} Christian Colombo, cabinet secretary, and Rodríguez Giavarini, Minister of Foreign Affairs.
2001. Landmarks of the crisis of the political were already mentioned in the sections above. An illustrative fact of the breakdown of the neoliberal model was the leak of financial capital that while it started by the end of 2000, it was not until February, 2001 that it went out of control. From February 28th till December 10th US$ 19 billions left the country (Bonasso 2002:113). Only in one day -November 30th- US$ 1.3 billion dollars left (Dinerstein 2003:191). Both processes led to an increased isolation of the government and to an unbearable level of uncertainty among the people. Part of the Peronist leadership, as it has been explained before, perceived this opportunity and acted upon to take power. However, no articulated or organized group from the bottom perceived the opportunity to mobilize. Given the seriousness of the general crisis this is a fact that deserves explanation.

The Piqueteros, active since 1997 but engaged in a spiral of mobilization that grew through the following years could have been a movement that perceived the opportunity and launch a big mobilization process. However, the repressive policies installed by the conspiring Peronist leadership in the Province of Buenos Aires prevented this from happening. As it was explained above, early on in December, many Piqueteros were used by Peronist politicians to start food riots in order to create chaos and fear among the population. But when given the seriousness of the economic crisis the Piqueteros attempted to mobilize their constituencies independently from the Peronist leaders, they faced repression. The night of December 19th while the middle class was taking to the streets in the city of Buenos Aires and in the rest of the main cities all around the country, in the poor neighborhoods like La Matanza the Peronist organizers and the police were spreading fear telling the looters that nearby neighbors will come
armed and take away from them what they got, preventing them to take to the streets and join the spontaneous mobilizations. The rumors were even talking about possible “wars between neighborhoods.” In consequence, the Piqueteros did not participate in the uprising of December 19. When some organizations like the CCC\textsuperscript{56} started mobilizing, they were brutally repressed by the provincial police and sent back to their neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{57} And if after watching that night’s events on television, and witnessing the resignation of Cavallo, some of them went to Plaza de Mayo on December 20, they did so as individuals but not as an organized movement.\textsuperscript{58} \textsuperscript{59}

Thus, no organized movement interpreted the crisis as an opportunity for mobilization. However, December 19\textsuperscript{th} showed an unprecedented popular uprising focused mainly in the city of Buenos Aires, but active also in main cities all over the country. What makes this case unusual then is that the mechanisms of attribution of opportunity- meaning the perception and interpretation of major social changes as an opportunity to act (MTT 2001:43-95)- worked not in existent collective entities but on an individual level. The popular mobilization of December 19 and 20 was a spontaneous uprising where mostly middle class Argentinians took to the streets simultaneously after

\textsuperscript{56} CCC is a Piquetero organization called Corriente Clasista y Combativa (Class Fighting Organization) based also in La Matanza.

\textsuperscript{57} Interview with Toribio, Buenos Aires, December 13th, 2003.

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Toribio, Buenos Aires, December 13th, 2003. Also, Svampa and Pereyra (2003.b) describe the perception of Piqueteros of the December uprising (more). Schuster (2003) agrees that the Piqueteros were a minor actor in these events.

\textsuperscript{59} It is worth mentioning that the plan of Peronist leaders in the Gran Buenos Aires was able to work not only because of their extended clientelistic apparatus but also because of the fact that since the Province of Buenos Aires was governed by them, they had the control of the provincial Police force.
listening to President De la Rúa’s speech to the country. After a decade of paralysis the middle class decided that it was time to gain the public space and make itself heard. Many of the mechanisms described by MTT in their model for analyzing contentious politics were set in motion during this process (2001).

As it was said before, the attribution of opportunity was working at an individual level. The signs of the crisis were so clear that it needed no organized collective framing for individuals to acknowledge and become conscious of them. The perception of an opportunity to act was fostered in great part by the level of uncertainty that reigned during those days. MTT highlight the key role of uncertainty in any episode of contention (MTT 2001:112). The Argentine case supports this statement.

The reasons that generated high levels of uncertainty were many, but one can be considered central since it represents a direct attack to values the middle class holds sacred: the “corralito.” The middle class watched the food riots on TV seeing how the value of private property was being stepped over. When in a different context this could have generated an immediate call for order regardless of the means used, this time things were different. They knew private property was not sacred any more. It had been violated in its roots this time not by the lower classes but by the government itself with the “corralito.” The confiscation of bank savings made the respect for private property become a thing of the past. The suspension of one of the basic rules of capitalist society

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60 Although there is no study that proves that the uprising was done by the middle class, there has been consensus among the media, the people and academics to view this event as such. One fact that can be raised to prove the high participation of the middle classes is that the corners of the city of Buenos Aires that saw their neighbors take to the streets. Footage of those days shows mostly middle class neighborhoods banging pots and pans in the streets. A look at the composition of the Neighborhood Assemblies, a direct consequence of the December uprising, shows that most members belong to middle class sectors. Additionally, the PNUD report Aportes para el Desarrollo Humano de la Argentina, 2002, sustains that the protests that started in December 2001 involve high and middle sectors of the population. 32% of those with a high socio economic level said they participated in the protests, 28% of the middle socio economic level and only 15% of the low levels (PNUD 2002).
created a situation where anything seemed possible. The rules of the game did not apply any more. In this context of uncertainty, it was much easier for the middle Argentinean to run the risk of mobilizing.

It was frequent during those days to find media articles and political commentators that understood the uprising as the middle class reaction to get their savings back. In opposition to this claim, Peruzzotti argues that even when there were some groups that organized themselves based around this specific issue—the movement of the ahorristas (savers) involved people that wanted their money back—61 it was not Cavallo’s announcement to freeze deposits on December 1st, 2001 that drove people out on the streets, but De la Rúa’s speech deciding to suspend the constitutional guarantees through the declaration of the state of siege. This was essentially a reaction to a political act. At the same time, Peruzzotti reminds us that the large proportion of the slogans of the uprising was clearly of a political nature (Peruzzotti 2002, a:20). Another piece of evidence that opposes the statement spread by the media is a public opinion survey conducted in a cacerolazo by Carlos Fara & Asoc. This study found that to the question “if the corralito was lifted tomorrow would you continue participating in cacerolazos?” 93% replied affirmatively (Fara and Cabrera 2002).62 Among those interviewed only 32% had money frozen at the bank by the government’s measures. A final confirmation of the main reason of the uprising lies in the answers given by all members of the Assemblies to the question “why did you take to the streets on December 19th?” in the field research

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61 For a look at the Ahorristas movement, see Smulovitz 2003.

62 This survey was conducted in a cacerolazo held in February 1, 2002. This data is used given the lack of any public opinion surveys during the December uprising, and assuming that these people also took part in the main uprising in December 2001 given the fact that 82% of those interviewed declared to have participated in previous cacerolazos.
conducted in November and December 2003. Among many other reasons, the first one is always the declaration of the state of siege and the *corralito* is never mentioned.\(^{63}\)

Thus, contrary to the hypothesis diffused by the media the main contribution of the *corralito* to the uprising was the fact that when a violation to existing agreements and rules that are basic for the functioning of society occurs, the level of uncertainty is so high that everything, even the unthinkable –a “revolutionary” middle class- becomes possible. The *corralito* created an identity crisis in the middle class. There was a deep feeling of frustration and deception among them. Bonasso synthesized the perception of the middle class during those days: “If the banks themselves were stealing their money from them, they could trust no one” (Bonasso 2002:136).

A second contribution of the *corralito* to the general uprising can be found through the mechanism of politicization of new spaces (MTT 2001). When normally lines in banks are not oriented to social interaction, this was a place that became deeply politicized during the month of December. Forced to wait endless hours in the streets outside the banks in order to inquire about possible means of getting their money back, and to make long lines to have access to an ATM to receive the $250 dollars in cash that people were allowed weekly, the Argentinean middle class began to interact with their fellowmen and women, sharing personal stories of frustration related to the tragedy that involved them all. If the 1990s have been characterized by an extreme individualism,\(^{64}\)

\(^{63}\) Interviews with members of the Assemblies, November and December, 2003.

\(^{64}\) Powers analyzes how working class people cope with the economic crisis during the 1990s finding that they mainly privileged individualistic solutions to their economic problems. (2001:139) In her field research he found that people were realizing the change in values that neoliberal economic policies were bringing (2001:143).
this trend was reaching its breaking point (Sidicaro October 2003). This was the first step towards the socialization of personal issues.

In this context of high uncertainty, the government failed to understand what was happening. It mistakenly thought that it could rely on the middle class desire for order to control the critical situation. The declaration of the state of siege on December 19th as a reaction to the food riots was expected to allow the government to get hold of the situation and incite fear in the middle class. However, as explained before, the food riots meant nothing to the middle class as a collective actor when their values had been already been destroyed by the government itself. Instead, the people turned to the street against the state of siege that in their minds was directly related to authoritarian and repressive behaviors. It was then that the mechanism of memory activation was set in motion. MTT refer to the fact that the history of contention in a particular country always provides certain lessons (MTT 2001:70). In this case, the way people reacted to the state of siege was conditioned by the recent national history. The people were decided not to go through a period of repression similar to the one installed by the military junta in 1976. The work done by the human rights movement in the last twenty years played a key role in the high level of consciousness people showed when reacting against the presidents’ measures (Di Marco et al. 2003:51). When interviewing participants of the uprising, the defiance of the declaration of the state of siege is usually the first reason they mention for explaining their behavior in those days. The declaration of the state of siege marks the decisive moment in the escalating dynamics of action, and in this sense, it can be considered to be the immediate cause of the uprising.

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65 Even when MTT do not explicitly identify a mechanism related to this observation, this was such a key element in the Argentine uprising that it has been identified as such in this paper.
Once the mobilization process started, many mechanisms were interacting at the same time. New actors and identities were being created through the use of innovative means of action and the framing of current issues in a new way. The participation in the uprising of December 19 and 20 shaped people’s experience and political thinking often changing the way they perceived and framed the country’s reality and also their personal situation. In her analyses of the interests of the Argentinean poor urban class during the 1990s Powers makes a very interesting analysis of the way people frame their personal reality in relationship with that of their country. She states that “for personal material needs to affect political thinking, the micro [one’s personal material situation] and the macro [the national material situation] levels must be linked together –that is, the microlevel interests must be seen as affected by macro-level decisions” (Powers 2001:15). This link between both levels was made in the middle class during the summer of 2001. While until December 19, most middle class Argentineans tried to address their own problems by themselves -be it unemployment, reduction of their salary, confiscation of their savings, harder living conditions- and limited their critique of the political class, its behavior and its policies to family talk; they began to frame these issues in renovated way. The middle class that was until now ruled by the neoliberal individualistic and market oriented culture, understood that their own problems were part of a larger collective problem, and that the streets needed to be taken over by the people.⁶⁶ A participant of a cacerolazo expressed this general feeling through her personal story: “Hasta hace poco me echaba la culpa, que no me iba bien, que era yo la que no hacía bien mi trabajo (...) un sentimiento individual y culposo. Hasta que me empecé a dar

⁶⁶ This change of perceptions has been recurrently mentioned in the interviews with Assembly members.
cuenta de cómo son las cosas y resignfiqué mi lugar en el mundo” (Dillon January 2002). With the banging of pots and pans, the private was made public. With the marching through the streets enrolled in national flags, the citizen-consumer regained her condition of full citizen. The interaction between these people fostered a sense of solidarity and created bonds and new identities that would constitute the basis for the development of a new movement during January 2002: the Neighborhood Assemblies.

4.3. Forces from Above and Below

Through the deconstruction of the interacting processes and mechanisms that were in place the December uprising can be considered the result of a combination of the action of the elite and the masses. Two main processes are at the basis of this explanation: elite defection and popular mobilization. While it is true that the fall of the government would not have been possible without the elite defection, the mobilization of those days showed that the government had no popular support and this was key for the success of a non-violent removal.

The anti democratic plot started by the Peronist leadership that took place in the Gran Buenos Aires was fortunately met with the democratic uprising in the capital city. Both contradictory processes came together to oust De la Rúa’s administration. Elite defection may have needed some military coup or some kind of violent action to impose and take the democratically elected government out. Popular mobilization by itself would probably have not been enough if the government had the support of most of the ruling

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67 “Not so long ago I blamed myself, that I was not successful, that it was me that was not doing her job right (…) an individual feeling of guilt. Until I started realizing how things really are and I gave a new meaning to my place in the world”
elite and the main economic groups. So, both processes were necessary for the fall to happen.

Both actors, Duhalde, the head of the conspiracy, and the unorganized masses involuntarily were pushing for the same outcome to occur. Who took the final prize then? In a short term analysis, the triumph goes to the conspiracy leaders. After a series of new political maneuvers inside the Peronist party, Duhalde became the President of the country in January 2002.\(^\text{68}\) However, Duhalde made a big initial mistake. He thought the December uprisings were directed against De la Rúa alone. He believed the mass mobilization of those days has been instrumental to his goals and consequently took advantage of them. However, soon after he took power, the continuation of the cacerolazos\(^\text{69}\) led him to the realization that this was part of a larger questioning directed to the whole political system by itself. The analysis of his administration, his relationship with the popular movement, the need to call for advanced elections in May 2003, and the evolution of his successor’s administration will question the fact that he was the big winner of this operation.

4.4. New Politics in the Popular Uprising

Most scholars agree that December 2001 was expressing a crisis of representation. As Enrique Peruzzotti states “what we are witnessing is the cancellation by the Argentine citizenry of the representative contract arising from the loss of trust in the current political

\(^{68}\) See Bonasso 2002 for the details of this new conspiracy.

\(^{69}\) After December 19 and 20, 2001, the people continued to take to the streets every Friday night to bang pots and pans for the new government to know they were alert. These events were called “cacerolazos.”
leadership” (Peruzzotti 2002.a:2). Why did the popular uprising express the peak of this crisis? At first sight, the ousting of a president by a peaceful popular mobilization can be considered a major incident if not a divider in the political history of the country. However, it would not be completely accurate to show the success in toppling down a government as the main indicator of the crisis of representation. As was mentioned before, the resignation of the president, no matter how important the popular participation may have been, was not achieved entirely by the mass mobilization. Regardless of the concrete outcome of the revolt, there are still other indicators to support the relevance of the December events as major expression of the crisis of representation.

First, as has been endlessly analyzed by both academics and the media, the most popular slogan of those days evidenced the deep crisis of the representative system. “Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo” (We want everyone out of office, not one should be left) was chanted by anonymous multitudes during those heated days. Nobody knows the origin of this chant, but there has been a broad consensus that it perfectly embraced the people’s feelings during the uprising. If during those days the chant limited itself to express the anger, exhaustion and rejection of the people towards the political class, the slogan later acquired new and redefined meanings as the assemblies made it their basic platform. Under them “que se vayan todos” did not imply the establishment of an anarchical state, but the possibility of reinventing a new politics with no politicians (Bielsa et al. 2002:33). After looking at the candidates that ran in the April 2003 elections (Carlos Menem, Adolfo Rodriguez Saá, Leopoldo Moreau, Néstor Kirchner) most political analysts questioned the actual value of this slogan when in the end “se quedaron
todos” (everybody stayed). However -as will be analyzed in the following sections- there is more behind the results of the 2003 elections that what this interpretation allows to see.

A second sign of rejection of the representation system was the defiance to authority. When the president announced the state of siege that is supposed to reduce the rights and warranties of the citizens, including the right to meet, the masses purposefully took to the streets openly challenging the measures taken by the elective representatives. If the bond between represented and representatives was increasingly tense, with this action, it finally broke.\(^70\)

While rejecting the old politics, the new one was about to be born. Though in a completely unarticulated way, what the masses were doing by the same act of taking to the streets was reclaiming politics for themselves. Retrospectively, it is possible to spot some of the characteristics that the new politics from below will develop once it will be articulated by the Assemblies. The fact that a non-organized spontaneous crowd managed to avoid the cooptation of their own uprising by any political force -not only from major parties like the Peronists but also from small leftist parties- is enough proof that though still unarticulated, the idea of a new politics that rejected traditional political parties was potentially present. The pictures and footage from those two days reveal that the only banner or sign that was allowed to be exhibited was the Argentine flag.

\(^70\) In retrospective, looking at the political developments of the following two years and the persistence of the representative political system, the bond between represented and representatives seems to have been quickly restored. However, the specific actions of defiance of December 19 and 20 show a breakdown of this bond, notwithstanding the quick recovery of the political system. A deeper analysis of this issue can be found in further sections.
The December, 2001 uprising was the first moment of expression of the new politics. The Assemblies that began to emerge among those that participated in those events and in the following cacerolazos, will in time articulate this new notion. This chapter explores the origins and characteristics of the Assemblies and the way they embrace and define the new politics. It moves then to explain their failures and successes to finally evaluate the perspectives for their future.

5.1. What Are the Neighborhood Assemblies? Origins, Principles and Praxis

Origins

If December 19 and 20 can be summarized by the slogan “que se vayan todos” (we want everyone out of office now), the experience of the Assemblies will be well represented by another one “que venga lo que nunca ha sido” (let that, which has never existed, come to being). The first saying referred to the past, to what should be left behind, to what should be overcome. It was the first moment of the crisis of representation. However, what it was not explicit about was the system that will replace the old politics.
The Assemblies have been the first expression in the search for the new way. In this sense, they are the first positive articulation of an alternative to the eroded current political system. This is not to ignore the contribution to the new politics from below of other relevant social movements like the *Piqueteros*, from which the Assemblies took their organization form. But as it was made clear before, even while acknowledging their heterogeneous and diverse visions, the *Piqueteros’* original goal was the integration to the system. The Assemblies went beyond this and began to look for something radically different. Created in an almost spontaneous way by neighbors that have shared the experience of repudiating the politicians for the first time in Plaza de Mayo in December 19 and 20 but then continued to meet guided by this same purpose every Friday at the main crossings of their own neighborhoods, the Assemblies became initially the way they found to channel the discussions that should bring about the new system. They were created as spaces of deliberation and discussion where citizens were taking politics back in their own hands. Clear about what they did not want anymore, they launched themselves to endless meetings and discussions to create the system to come. This new saying, “*que venga lo que nunca ha sido*” expressed the novelty of the phenomenon and the challenge the Assemblies were facing: to create a newly born way of doing politics that would replace the old one.

However, from being conceived as a mere instrument in the search for the new politics, the Assemblies became the new politics. The Assemblies were originally a place of participation and political involvement. If during their first meetings the neighbors went to the Assemblies to share their worries and discuss their visions of the political situation, they quickly realized that the new system to come needed to be based in those
same principles that ruled these new entities. The horizontal participation and non
hierarchical organization form that the Assemblies were providing became in itself the
desired system. By discussing about how to overcome traditional politics, they were at the
same time creating the new one. This led quickly to proposals of direct democracy and
systems of non representation that will be established through the reproduction of these
early experiences. The following quote from a document for diffusion of one of the
Assemblies is revealing in this sense: “Nuevo poder: creer que la asamblea ya es una
forma de nuevo poder, o germen de, y aspirar a que se generalice y se imponga con lo
oscuros que son todavía los caminos para llegar a eso. La aspiración del pueblo (en
serio y no en papeles), otra organización política (no otras caras), otro Estado (no otro
modelo).”71 (Pérez et al. 2003:192).

A first look at the Assemblies can be taken by addressing the extension of this
phenomenon. Table 3 shows the number of Assemblies that were active in March 2002,
what can be considered the peak of the movement. As can be seen through this data, the
experience of the Assemblies is concentrated mainly in the city and Province of Buenos
Aires, and when it extended to other regions, it reached mainly the most prosperous,
populated and urban developed provinces. The city of Buenos Aires holds approximately
10% of the population of the whole country and hosts 41% of the Assemblies. Adding the
Gran Buenos Aires -that together with the city holds a little less than one third of the
country population- these two areas are home to 73% of the Assemblies (Bielsa et al.
2002:26).

71 “New power: to believe that the assembly is already a form or new power, or the beginning of,
and to aspire that it will expand and be imposed, regardless of the lack of a clear path to reach to this stage.
The people’s aspiration -for real, not in paper-, another political organization -not just other faces-, another
State -not another model-.”
### TABLE 3

**NUMBER OF ASSEMBLIES IN ARGENTINA**

**March, 2002**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Number of Assemblies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Buenos Aires</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province of Buenos Aires</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province of Santa Fe</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province of Córdoba and others</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>272</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bielsa et al. 2002

It is difficult to know the precise number of people that participated in these Assemblies. No in-depth study has been yet conducted addressing the scope of this phenomenon. It has been estimated than in its origins each of them went from around 100 to 500 participants. Public opinion surveys stated that one in three inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires has participated in a *cacerolazo* or an Assembly (Pagina12 10.03.02). According to the UNPD report 20% of Argentineans has participated in an Assembly (PNUD 2002).

Trying to define what the Assemblies are is a hard task. As was mentioned in the introduction, given their recent development there are only a few studies about them. They are also a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon that is hard to embrace in a
single definition. Some have even questioned if they can be considered as one movement arguing that these generalizations go against their territorial specificity and “situational” form (Dinerstein 2003:195). Notwithstanding their heterogeneity, based on interviews with members of Assemblies, on their own diffusion material, and on the existing literature it is possible to find commonalities among them. The Assemblies are overall a political movement. Politics is their area of action. They are the vehicle through which the people had gained politics back for themselves reinventing politics as the search for the common good (Bielsa et al. 2002:25).

The Assemblies reject political parties in the way that they are seen as the embodiment of old politics. Some scholars and politicians have questioned this rejection and some have even seen these positions as a possible threat to institutions and democracy (Álvarez 2003; Peruzzotti 2003; Grondona, March 2002). Most of them argue that the assemblies should evolve into some form of political institution or establish links with the existing political system. Portantiero is highly critical of their main slogan “que se vayan todos” calling it a “nihilist idea” based on a rhetoric notion of the “people” taking the place of politicians. He favors an articulation of these mobilizations with some kind of political organization (Di Marco et al. 2003:73). Politicians like Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez agree with Portantiero. He regrets that so much energy has been wasted during that turbulent summer since the uprising did not create new political figures or subjects (Álvarez 2003). In a similar line Peruzzotti claims that “the unilateral termination of the representative contract cannot provide a plausible solution to the present crisis” considering it necessary that these mobilizations should evolve into a positive program of institutional reform (Peruzzotti 2003).
However critical the Assemblies may be of representative democratic institutions, they have never seen themselves in opposition to democracy. On the contrary, they consider they are “democratizing” democracy (Bielsa et al. 2002:15). This notion is in line with Philip Oxhorn’s ideas. In his criticism to the literature about consolidation he suggests a switch of focus towards the quality of democracy, asking for more accountability and citizen participation (1998:228). This is exactly what the Assemblies had to offer. Regardless of their failure or successes, they emerged as a new space for debate where to exercise citizenship and channel political participation. Their significance as a new political space was that for the first time in many years it was possible to associate politics to something pristine and non corrupt. Their initial attraction was based on the fact that people realized there were other ways of doing politics. The Assemblies came to rescue the wounded and broken notion of politics after a decade of deligitimization and distrust. They were able to do this by offering a refreshed space for political participation with no pre-established dogmas, no sacred orthodoxies and no appointed leaders. They are in this way a political laboratory, and that is what people found appealing about them: the possibility of invention.

A key issue highlighted by most scholars as regards their political role, is how the Assemblies regained the public space after it has been continuously privatized for over a decade (Ferraro and Coronel 2003; Dinerstein 2003:195; García 2003). Dinerstein calls this process the re-appropriation of public space, meaning that the Assemblies that met in corners, squares and parks were taking these public spaces as a forum for political discussion and participation. Later on, the tendency of regaining spaces evolved into the “occupation” of abandoned buildings and their transformation into cultural centers,
micro-businesses and recreational spaces for the neighborhood. As for now, there are around twelve occupied buildings that had to face recurrent eviction threats (Di Marco et al 2003:87).\textsuperscript{72} These experiences were important not only from the point of view of acquiring a key resource such as a permanent place to meet, but also from the fact that the struggle for their own place consolidated bonds between the members and strengthened their sense of belonging to the broader “popular movement” that also makes use of these tactics.

Though centered in the political arena, the Assemblies went beyond this and brought along also an economic, social and cultural project (Di Marco et al. 2003:153). Rejecting old politics meant rejecting neoliberalism too. Their questioning of the political class was as strong as their questioning of the economic groups that have been allied to them. Thus, they started working towards the building of a new economic order in line with the new notion of politics. Through these efforts they mixed already existing alternative economic practices like the barter markets,\textsuperscript{73} with more recently developed notions like those of “solidarity or social economy.”\textsuperscript{74} This alternative view of economics placed social justice at the heart of their policies. Hence, one of the main contributions of the Assemblies is how they began to restore the social tissue that was broken after years of individualism, social fragmentation and marginalization (Bielsa and others 2002:109-110; Di Marco and others 2003:75; Dinerstein:199). From a cultural perspective the

\textsuperscript{72} For example, the Assemblies of Villa Urquiza, Juan B. Justo y Corrientes, Belgrano-Nuñez, y Palermo Viejo have occupied abandoned buildings.

\textsuperscript{73} In 2000 the barter markets involved 2.5 million people and 6,000 clubs. See La Serna 2003.

\textsuperscript{74} Social Economy emerged from civil society and is formed by non profit organizations with the original goal of integrating physically disabled or unemployed people in projects ruled by non capitalist criteria of efficiency. It later went beyond these small scale projects and evolved into what some call “labor economy” that is a more developed model of an alternative economic system applicable to developing societies. See Hintze and Sabaté 2003.
Assemblies brought about a major change too. They are critics of a consumption-driven life style and propose a solidarity and socially oriented one instead.

Their economic, social and cultural work has been done in close alliance with other movements that received a strong impulse through the December 2001 uprising. The Assemblies have been cooperating strongly with Piqueteros and the movement of Workers-run factories in these areas. Dinerstein highlights this aspect by saying that the Assemblies are a site of conjunction. They are “a time space site within which the articulation of ideas, debates, feelings and solidarity action with workers, the movement of the unemployed, students, pensioners, takes place.”(Dinerstein:196; Svampa 2003.a:152). Members of the Assemblies refer to this conjunction of social movements as the “popular movement.”

Principles

Having described their areas of action, it is necessary to focus on the new politics the Assemblies are proposing. The following are the principles that guide their existence. They are the basic organizational guidelines they have given to themselves. However, as it was mentioned before, these principles that in the beginning were articulated to organize their own meetings became the basis from where to build the new notion of politics. Five characteristics emerge from observing their practice.

The first one is horizontalism, implying the absence of any hierarchy or leadership and the equal participation of all individuals. This principle was born directly from the crisis of representation since it indicates the distrust towards any sort of delegation of power. Horizontality refers to the creation of an organization with no hierarchies meaning no fixed differences between members (Adamovsky 2003). In their
own organization this principle entails daily practices like coordination of meetings on a rotational basis and the election of speakers (*voceros*), not delegates (Bielsa et al. 2002:2; Di Marco et al. 2003:80). The difference between these terms is that the speaker is the one that communicates the decisions the Assembly -as a sovereign entity- has already taken to the outside, but unlike the delegate is not entitled to any kind of representation and cannot decide on behalf of the Assembly. As regards the building of a new notion of politics, this horizontalism should be translated into a system of direct democracy.

A second principle is that of autonomy. This notion is also closely linked to their questioning of the traditional political system. The Assemblies declare themselves autonomous from the government, political parties, unions and interest groups, trying to remain independent from the old politics. As it will be seen before, each Assembly will hold this principle to different extents, some being more radical than others in this respect. Their autonomy is declared also in relation to any pre-established dogma or ideology. The Assemblies are an open space for discussion and political invention. They had been defined by their own members as a “thinking body” (Bielsa et al. 2002:52). They are open to any contribution to build among all its members a new politics but reject any pre-established “recipe” for social change. Adamovsky defines this autonomy from dogma as the principle of multiplicity, meaning the seeking of unity in diversity. In this sense, the Assemblies not only accept differences but also stimulate them since they believe that diversity brings strength to the movement (Adamovsky 2003). This is the reason why they reject any kind of monopolizing ideology, “revealed truth” or pre-established way of doing things. This can be clearly seen in the way they adopted these principles of organization. They were not decided a priori and imposed on the Assemblies...
but emerged from the daily practice. When they encounter someone that tries to present himself or herself as having “the” way to go, they reject this immediately and accused him or her of “bajar línea”\textsuperscript{75} and trying to co-opt the Assembly.\textsuperscript{76} As another example of their respect of diversity, decisions are taken in most of them by consensus, not by vote. The new politics thus, is one that needs to cut down with the past and remain autonomous from the influence of institutions and structures connected with it; one flexible enough to stand aside from fixed paradigms and reinvent a new way. The notion of autonomy has been taken as the main organizing principle by those among the Assemblies and other popular movements that believe in a new political strategy, not based in taking power but in building power from below. Their commitment to this principle is such that they call themselves “autonomists.”

These two principles are closely related to the third one. Given the high level of horizontalism and autonomy, the Assemblies cannot function but in a desentralized way. They lack a centralized unique structure that coordinates all of them since they reject any bureaucratic form of organization like those of political parties or labor unions. Even when there have been some attempts of creating coordination structures that were initially very successful -like the Inter-Assembly of \textit{Parque Centenario}\textsuperscript{77} these efforts later failed. The resistance of the Assemblies to appoint delegates that will vote for proposals in these coordinated meetings representing them ended up in the dissolution of these

\textsuperscript{75} This expression can be heard in all the Assemblies. \textit{Bajar línea} implies assuming you have a clear idea of what is going on, and what should be do and therefore try to impose these positions and strategies to the rest of the group. That is why the Assemblies reject this behavior.

\textsuperscript{76} Interviews and observation of meetings.

\textsuperscript{77} The meetings of the Inter-Assembly at \textit{Parque Centenario} started with approximately 300 people on January 2002, and they were around 3000 on April. (Bonasso 2002:316).
kinds of instances as more and more Assemblies stopped participating. As regards the new politics, this will imply the avoidance of bureaucratic centralized structures that may, as in the past, become self-serving and slow down any reform initiative.

A fourth principle that is rooted in the previous ones is their grassroots’ origin. The Assemblies are “self-convoked” organizations –many of them reminding this fact in their own name. They were born by initiative of the neighbors that met in the *cacerolazos* every Friday after December 19 and 20, 2001. In this way, the new politics is a politics from below (Ferraro and Coronel 2003), one with increased popular participation and striving towards a more equal access to political power and economic resources.

A fifth and final principle is that of self-management. This is related to the notion of autonomy. Self-management for the Assemblies is not only a way of not depending on the old political and economic structures, but also a way towards empowering people. The Assemblies have developed local micro-enterprises that range from producing environmental friendly dish soap, art crafts, or hand made paper, to the opening of a shop that sells the products of the factories run by workers. Maristella Svampa states that “the fact that the self-management is the more visible feature of the latest social mobilizations (...) clearly shows the place that it has at the center of the new politics.” (Svampa 2003.a:153).

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78 Many assemblies took the name of “self-convoked assembly” of this or that neighborhood. (in Spanish *Asamblea autoconvocada*).  

79 Read more about *La Asamblearia*, the project of some Assemblies to sell the products of their “social economy” initiatives, at [http://www.asamblearia.com.ar](http://www.asamblearia.com.ar)
None of the principles described above are easy to apply even in the most homogeneous groups of people. The heterogeneous membership of the Assemblies created an extra challenge for the movement. This section will look at the way these principles work in the everyday praxis through the analysis of a case study: the debate about what to do to commemorate the two years anniversary of the 2001 uprising that took place among a group of Assemblies from the South of the City of Buenos Aires in the meetings of the Enlace Sur, a coordination mechanism to agree on goals and actions.

During November and early December 2003 the two-year anniversary of the uprising was the main issue that generated heated debates within the Assemblies. The main positions that were identified were on one hand, those who wanted to have a unified event with all the popular organizations and movements in Plaza de Mayo, and on the other hand, those who preferred to have a local event in their own neighborhoods and rejected to march together with other groups to the main square. The arguments behind holding one main event were supported by those highlighting the meaning of December 2001: “El 19 y 20 es un día de lucha. A dos años no le podemos entregar esa fecha al gobierno.”

Within this spirit, they proposed the dialogue with other popular groups like the Piqueteros so as to show that the opposition to the government policies is still strong. The second group of people rejected any possibility of dialogue with the Piqueteros, mainly with those of them that are controlled by political parties or labor unions. They insisted on having local events since the main target of the Assemblies should be to re-

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80 “The 19 and 20 are days of struggle. Two years later we can’t hand in these dates to the government.” Ana, member of one of the Assemblies, Buenos Aires, November 29th, 2003.
mobilize the “neighbor” that took to the streets in the summer of 2001-2002 but now is back again inside his house.

La discusión es como incidir en el que se volvió a su casa, no en el bloque piquetero. La Plaza no es lo más importante, sino que el pueblo salga de vuelta cualquier otro día con organizaciones más superadoras que estas. La discusión con esas organizaciones [los Piqueteros] está cerrada. La llave la tienen los que salieron en 2001 y se volvieron a sus casas.81

During the meeting, the practice of horizontalism was evident from the beginning. Based on the Assembly organizational form, there were no assigned authorities. When the meeting started, someone volunteered to facilitate the session and led the discussion holding a list of speakers. Everyone was allowed to speak as many times as they wanted to and for as much time as they required to making their position clear. The usual meetings of the Enlace Sur are held among one speaker –not delegate- from each Assembly. However, since this was such a significant topic, they called a plenary session where all the members were invited to voice their opinion and decide together by consensus what should be done.

However, consensus proved hard to arrive. The debate took several meetings, each of them of around 4 to 6 hours. At times when the discussion seemed to get to a dead end, some members questioned the consensus methodology and suggested a voting process. This proposal sparked a whole new discussion about what decision making process has been agreed in the beginning of the Enlace, if any at all. After several meetings a single proposal was achieved that though arrived at by consensus, clearly

81 “The discussion is based on how to influence those that went back to their homes, and not the Piqueteros. The Plaza [main square] is not the most important thing, but that the people will take to the streets any other day with organizations that go beyond the ones we have now. The discussion with these organizations [the Piqueteros] is closed. The key is now in the hands of those that took to the streets in 2001 and then went back home),” Clara, member of one of the Assemblies, Buenos Aires, November 29th, 2003.
evidenced the fracture of different positions among the Assemblies. The agreed plan was
the following: on December the 19th each Assembly will hold a local event; and on
December 20th those Assemblies that want to participate will join the Piqueteros’ march
followed by an act at Plaza de Mayo, but they will march as individual Assemblies, not
representing the Enlace Sur. In order to maintain the unity of this coordination
mechanism, they all decided to hold one activity all together: to flood the southern
neighborhoods with posters remembering those who died on December 2001 naming
those politicians that were responsible for the repression.

The following discussion that later took place among those who decided to attend
the Piqueteros protest was which one to go to. The divisions among the latter had also
prevented them from holding a unitary act, and therefore there were four different acts
planned for December 20th at Plaza de Mayo. These endless debates evidenced the
weaknesses of the chosen organizational form and how it may propel the creation of more
and more divisions among the groups, preventing them from creating a strong popular
movement in opposition to the current government.

The fact that even after the failure of some centralized mechanisms like the Inter
Assembly of Parque Centenario, the Assemblies still look for spaces to coordinate
actions among themselves may seem to contradict, in a way, their tendency towards
decentralization. However, in the daily praxis the Assemblies seem to have realized that
notwithstanding how strongly they wanted to remain autonomous there is a need for
coordination. This is a topic of continuous debate among those members that emphasize
autonomy over all and those who while agreeing on this principle balance it with the need
of unifying the popular movement. This last group highlights the need of coordinated
actions to strengthen the opposition to the government. However, for them coordination does not have to be done in a centralized way. Their rejection to previous coordination mechanisms like Parque Centenario had to do with the fact that they were not respecting the principles of the new politics. In this sense, they seem to have learnt from past mistakes. These new instances like the Enlace Sur are smaller and in this way better prepared for a consensus and direct democracy style of decision making process.

5.2. Obstacles

During the first half of 2002 the Assemblies grew in number of members and projects. As the effervescent spirit of revolt that dominated the summer was slowly appeased, the number of cacerolazos diminished\textsuperscript{82} but the participation in the Assemblies was persistent showing an evolution in the means of action chosen (Bielsa et al. 2002:25). In June the winter weather diminished their visibility. They had to leave the parks and corners and decided to change them for “occupied” buildings, rented spaces or local coffee shops. This was also possible given the gradual reduction of members that they were witnessing. On June 26\textsuperscript{th} the repression of a Piqueteros’ protest that ended in the killing of two members generated a new wave of protests, participation and direct action methods among the Assemblies that decided to march in solidarity with the unemployed workers. The second half of the year began to show a new decrease in participation. Many Assemblies faced internal disputes that ended dividing them or loosing large numbers of members. The anniversary of the uprising by the end of 2002 brought some people back only on a temporary basis. Each Assembly had begun to consolidate their

\textsuperscript{82} The average number of cacerolazos per day in December 2001 reached 66, in January 22, in February 11 and in March 4 (Bielsa et al. 2002:25)
functioning and organization on a much smaller number of people ranging from 15 to 60 members. This, in time, enhanced the possibility to solidify an Assembly organizational form, but debilitated the movement in tremendous ways.

At their flourishing stage, the Assemblies developed and articulated a new concept of politics and aspired to become the vehicle towards the establishment of direct democracy in Argentina. This ambitious goal is evidence of the level of innovation that the movement was bringing to the country. The assemblies did not want to limit themselves to channel demands from society to the government but to become the government themselves, at least starting at the local level (Ferraro and Coronel 2003). However, their original objective failed to come through.

In the first place, the very essence of some of the principles they advocated for like autonomy, decentralization and horizontality conspired against their goal of becoming the new politics. This is not to say that these principles are inapplicable per se, but that in this case this was not possible. In the case of the Assemblies these principles translated into a lack of coordination and organization that created endless discussions and internal divisions that proved the project to be unfeasible, at least in the terms that was initially conceived. The adoption of consensus as the main decision making process implied extremely long meetings that became burdensome for the regular citizen already busy trying to cope with the economic crisis at a personal level (Peruzzotti 2003:21-22). It also created the perception among participants that they were never arriving to a single decision and therefore of being a waste of their time.\(^{83}\) The rejection of any centralizing

\(^{83}\) Interviews conducted with former members of Assemblies confirmed this perception.
structure that will imply delegation of authority and the creation of the hated bureaucracy ended up preventing the Assemblies of acquiring a broader goal in national politics.  

Among the problems that emerged from horizontality and the equal participation of all members, there was the presence among them of political parties’ activists. When asked about the reason for the gradual demobilization of the movement, most members of the assemblies point to this as the main cause. The rejection of political parties was not limited to the main traditional ones that dominated the political system during the whole century (PJ and UCR), but was directed to the notion of political party as a bureaucratic, vertical, non democratic, dogmatic structure. Thus, small left political parties were subjects of the Assemblies’ criticism as much as the rest of them. They were also part of the old politics, especially in reference to their dogmatic strategies towards revolution and their notion of being the “vanguard.” In a movement that was built from below and based on principles of horizontality and no leaderships, nothing could be more opposed to them that these conceptions that came from the old left. In an interview with Juan Carlos, member of an Assembly he confirmed this extended view “En las Asambleas se puso en evidencia la función conservadora de la izquierda, que quería preservar la política que las asambleas estaban poniendo entre paréntesis.” The dilemma was that as the Assemblies were open to everybody, leftist activists, amazed at the new phenomenon that

84 Interview with Juan Carlos, Buenos Aires, December 13, 2003.
85 Interview with Wilfredo, Buenos Aires, November 11, 2003; Interview with Juan Carlos, Buenos Aires, December 13, 2003. This statement has been also heard repeatedly at the meeting of the Enlace Sur –meeting of different assemblies from the South of the city of Buenos Aires- when discussing how to honor the two years anniversary of the December uprising in Buenos Aires, November 29th, 2003; and also at the meeting of Asambleas Autónomas –groups of Assemblies that meet once a month to coordinate efforts and that are extremely jealous of their autonomy- in Buenos Aires, November 15th, 2003.
86 “In the Assemblies the left showed their conservative function that wanted to preserve the kind of politics that the Assemblies were questioning,” interview with Juan Carlos, Buenos Aires, December 13, 2003.
they have missed to be part of, tried to intervene and co-opt the movement. The immediate consequence was an ineludible internal conflict in most of the Assemblies. The result of this varied among them. The leftist parties take over was successful in only few of them, most of the Assemblies resolved the conflict splitting in two, while in other cases the parties’ activists ended up being expelled always after long discussions and meetings to achieve a consensual decision by all its members.

A second obstacle lies in the fact that if they wanted to avoid complete anarchy, the current political system had to keep on working until they would be able to find and implement a feasible alternative. This meant that the system was given the chance to reconstruct and reinvent itself being able, according to some, to sort the challenge the December uprising had posed to it. When De la Rúa was deposed, Congress met to chose a transitional president to be in charge of the country until new elections will be called. Since the Peronist Party had the majority in both chambers, all they had to do is decide among themselves who would be the next president and later propose it to Congress. In the meeting between the Peronist leaders, Adolfo Rodriguez Saá, governor at the time of the Province of San Luis, was appointed president. After a secret negotiation between Duhalde and the leader of the Radical Party, Raul Alfonsín, Congress approved Rodriguez Saá’s designation on December 23, 2001. The fact that the old politics was not completely defeated but, on the contrary, still alive was clear in the way these negotiations took place. The choice of Rodriguez Saá was functional to the interests of those Peronists who consider themselves potential candidates for the next presidential elections. The new president was elected under the condition that elections will be held in three months. However, as soon as he swore in, Rodríguez Saá’s public declarations gave
the perception that his plan was to stay for much longer instantly loosing the original support of the Peronist leaders. On December 28th, during a cacerolazo where people were complaining about the appointment of political figures related to corruption cases during the 1990s, a group managed to get inside the National Congress and burnt down some furniture while the police begun to leave the place. While this was happening most of the people remained protesting in the square in front of the Congress building watching the incident with suspicion. The following day, on December 29th the president was supposed to meet with all the Peronists governors to agree on a new cabinet. Only one of the main leaders –Carlos Ruckauf- and five governors of small provinces were there. Realizing the lack of support for his administration on December 30th Rodriguez Saá resigned. If De la Rúa was ousted by a combination of elite defection and popular mobilization, Rodriguez Saá was victim of a Peronist complot against him. Even when mobilization was still thriving, the continuous cacerolazos after De la Rúa’s renouncement were not aimed at turning down any president that was in power. In fact, many of Rodriguez Saá’s announced measures like stopping the payment of the external debt or the reduction of politician’s salaries were well received by the people. In public opinion surveys conducted during that week, 2 every 3 persons approved the speech the new president gave when he took power. Additionally, these days were only the beginning of the mobilization. There was no possibility of taking power or building a new

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87 For more details about the appointment of Rodríguez Saá, see Bonasso 2002:245-249.

88 People rejected the appointment of Carlos Grosso, Jose María Vernet, José Luis Manzano and Matilde Menéndez. As a consequence of this cacerolazo Grosso resigned and Menéndez was not appointed.

89 For the whole story see Bonasso 2002: 292.

90 Mora y Araujo public opinion poll quoted in Pagina 12, 26 December 2001.
power yet. The Assemblies only started to organize in early January.\textsuperscript{91} A participant in the uprising recalls how when on the 20\textsuperscript{th} De la Rúa resigned while they were still in Plaza de Mayo they asked themselves, “¿Qué hacemos ahora? Si queremos podemos llegar a la Casa Rosada. Pero ¿después qué? Mejor vámonos a casa.”\textsuperscript{92} The power vacuum and the implicit consensus on the idea that someone had to be in charge of the country in the meantime, allowed the old politics to rebuild and continue its secret and self-referenced practices that will lead to the designation of Eduardo Duhalde as the transitional president on January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2002.

The presidential elections of April, 2003 have been often cited as the counterpoint of the December 2001 uprising. If in the legislative elections of October 2001 the absenteeism reached 24.58\% and the protest vote (blank and null) was 23.99\%, in the 2003 elections the situation was at first sight completely different. The level of absenteeism was somewhat similar 21.96\%, but the protest vote reached only 2.82\%, percentages that were closer to the averages since 1983. If in 2001 the people claimed “que se vayan todos,” in 2003 they voted for “everyone to stay.” The most commonly cited explanation is that these elections showed that the political system was able to rebuild itself in only a year and a half. However, the reality is not clear cut. While this statement is partly true, it is worth digging a little deeper into these electoral results and call attention to other trends that confirmed the persistence of the crisis of representation and thus, the relevance of the new politics. The elections illustrated the collapse of the

\textsuperscript{91} The first mention in the media about meetings of neighbors is on January 6, 2002, and on January 20 the first time they are referred as Assemblies.

\textsuperscript{92} “What do we do now? If we want we can get to the Government Palace? But then what? Let’s just go home instead,” interview with Toribio, Buenos Aires December 14th, 2003.
two political parties members of the former Alliance: the UCR got only 4.09% and FREPASO disappeared. The only survivor has been the PJ.

In addition, while the presidential vote showed an important reduction of the protest vote so as to make it somehow insignificant, the contrary was true as regards the legislative elections, especially those for national representatives. The average level of abstention in these elections was of 31%, and the average protest vote reached 11%. Adding them up, around 40% of the people abstained or cast a protest vote in the 2003 legislative elections, a number not that far away from the 42.6% of October 2001. Actually, the level of abstention rose compared to October 2001 when 24.58% abstained. In the province of Santa Fe, the blank vote reached 20.57%, and in the province of Buenos Aires it was 14.54% for the legislative elections and in those for governor the blank vote won the second place with 12.03%. According to Maristella Svampa, these results demonstrate the continuation of the political crisis (Svampa 2003.d). Even the PJ that seemed to have remained immune to the crisis that is cutting through all political parties has suffered the erosion of their electoral support. The party received an important set back in a traditional Peronist region like the Province of Buenos Aires. Even when they won the elections, this was their worse election in this district. In an interview to the newspaper Página 12 in December 2003 Sidicaro contextualizes the supposedly “success” of the Peronist Party in avoiding the crisis “el poder es una relación. En la medida en que se hicieron migajas las otras fuerzas, en un sistema en el que se desestructuraron los
The different behavior between the presidential and legislative elections point to the fact that the high participation in the first case is not strictly related to the reconstruction of old politics, but may be attributed to alternative reasons. First, people who previously opted for casting a protest vote this time might have felt they should participate since what was at stake was much higher than in October 2001: the presidency of the country in a context of political and economic crisis (Pousadella 2003.b). Second, when in the weeks before the elections public opinion polls showed former President Menem had a chance of winning, these same people preferred to change their strategy and cast a vote against his return. The advance of Menem and the other right wind candidate López Murphy scared the members of the Assemblies. Even when after long discussions they had agreed over the strategy of abstention on election day the majority of them cast a positive vote (Di Marco et al. 2003:112).

Thus, April 2003 showed mix results: the political system was rebuilding itself but the criticisms to old politics were still present and the need for a change was expressed. The election of President Kirchner shows in a way, the presence of these two trends (Fara 2003). Kirchner came from a traditional political party associated with all the abuses of the old politics, but has not personally been at the center of any scandal and has generally maintained, from his governor office of the Province of Santa Cruz, a low profile. In a sense he was the only candidate that offered a warranty of governance –due

93 “Power is a relationship. Since the other political forces have been deeply eroded, in a system where all the other forces have desintegrated, the Peronism of the Province of Buenos Aires emerged as the most important.”
to his belonging to a political party that proved to be the only one that can navigate politics in times of crisis-, combined with the promise of change and renewal.

If the evolution of domestic politics posed a constant challenge to the future of the Assemblies, a bigger one lied in their own origins. The main issue that was impossible to solve was how to achieve non representation when the assemblies were not attended by the whole population, or at least a large majority of it. Even at their flourishing stage when they were able to reunite hundreds of participants each, the Assemblies were not “the neighborhood” but -as stated by a member of this movement- “at most they are a representation of the spirit of December 19 and 20th in each neighborhood.”94 This became even a major problem when their members began to constantly reduce. If the assemblies could not be considered to “be” the Argentine people at the beginning of their formation when they involved the participation of hundreds of people in each of them, the possibility of making such a statement became even more difficult when after one year they became meetings of 25 people. This reality was grasped by most of them. In her analysis of two case studies, García explains how the own members changed the denomination they used to refer to themselves when the numbers of participants started to decay. If they were first referring at each other as “neighbor,” when the attendance began to drop, the “neighbor” started to be the other, the one that has to be mobilized and reached and convinced to become a part of the assembly. They were no more neighbors but “asambleistas” (assemblee) (García 2003). “Tendríamos que garantizar una mesa

94 Interview with Juan Carlos, Buenos Aires December 13th, 2003.
afuera para conversar con el vecino y que nos vean que seguimos laburando. El contacto con el vecino es nuestra razón de ser.”

5.3. Different Worldviews

After this first moment where the Assemblies thought they could become the new politics, different positions emerged inside of them and continue until now. Even when it is hard to embrace the variety and heterogeneous character of the Assemblies, this classification will try to define the general trends that could be observed in the movement that are based on the different worldviews of the groups. A big division can be made between those who seek to reform and rebuild the current system and those other who still present themselves as an anti-systemic movement that looks to replace the current political and economic system. Svampa identifies these positions with Simmel’s images of the bridge and the door (Svampa 2003.a:149). While the bridge implies the idea of a link, the door brings in the notion of closure. Thus, the image of the bridge represents the position of those that while disenchanted, propose the need of a rebuilding of the political system through a more participatory democracy. Here we include two groups: a) those who directly support the current government or work in collaboration with it (especially at the local level through the CGP96); and b) those who prefer to focus on local issues remaining independent from the government, only interacting with it to put pressure,

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95 “We should have a permanent table out in the street to talk to the neighbor and for them to see as working. The contact with the neighbor is our reason to be.” A participant of an Assembly in the South of the City of Buenos Aires, November 25th, 2003. The issue of how to reach to the “neighbor,” listen to him and make it part of the Assembly has been a recurrent item of discussion in most of the observed meetings of this and other Assemblies.

96 CGP is the Spanish acronym for Centro de Gestión y Participación (Center for Management and Participation). They are a channel of participation of citizenships in the local administration of their neighborhoods in the City of Buenos Aires. The city is divided in 16 CGPs.
express their demands and having no long term goals of replacing the current political system. The image of the door proposes a separation from the current political system and its replacement for a new one. In this second category we find two other groups: a) those who seek to build power from below, are part of the autonomist movement and identify themselves with current transnational movements inspired by the theories of Michael Hardt (2000), Antonio Negri (2000) and John Holloway (2002); and b) those affiliated with left political parties that usually take control of these assemblies and work towards a more classical revolution. These divisions can be seen between assemblies where one of them prevails, but also as positions embodied by individual members inside each assembly.97

This classification intends to describe the enounced positions the assemblies and their members hold and make explicit through their discourse. However, when looking at the actual activities and policies they implement, the divisions start to blur. Even those groups that declare their opposition to the system and hold anti-systemic discourses end up in a way working within the system. The autonomists even state this possibility in their discourse: "Debemos caminar permanentemente en esa tortuosa contradicción de luchar contra el Estado para eliminarlo como instancia de desigualdad y opresión, a la vez luchamos para ganar territorios en el Estado, que sirvan para avanzar en nuestras conquistas"98 (Thwaites Rey 2003).99

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97 A very similar categorization can be also applied to other groups that are part of the popular movement like the Piqueteros.

98 “We must permanently walk in this tortuous contradiction of fighting against the state towards its elimination as an instance of inequality and oppression, while fighting to win territory within the state that will be useful to advance our conquests.”

99 Similar statements can be found in documents from the Colectivo Nuevo Proyecto Histórico (Colectivo New Historical Project)
5.4. Successes

In the short run the Assemblies may seem to have lost their original battle: the construction of a new political system. However, they managed to become important agents of democratization in the Argentine society along their two years of existence. When talking about democratization this thesis refers not only to the opening and increased participation and equal opportunities at the level of the political system but also at the level of economic and social relationships. There is a mistaken impression that popular uprisings are incompatible with democracy. However, as MTT states “democracy results from (...) popular contention” (2001:269). According to Auyero the positive influence of popular struggles in democracy derives not from an optimistic view of social movements but is a fact confirmed by historical processes (Auyero 2001:82).

Even when the Assemblies have not been able to eradicate the old politics and establish the new politics they embrace, they have influenced the political system in a variety of ways and moved it towards their goal, though at a slower pace than first expected. With more or less visibility in the media, with variant flux of attendants depending on the times, they have become an acknowledged and important part of the popular movement that represents the main opposition to the government these days. Their actions have contributed to foster democratization through the demand of accountability and responsiveness. And many successes can be claimed in these regards.

The impact of the Assemblies does not limit itself to the political system but also reached the civil society from which they are part of. Cohen and Arato highlight this second area of influence of social movements as one that is usually underestimated. Thus,
in order to measure the impact the Assemblies had in both the political system and in civil society, this thesis will rely on what these authors define as politics of influence, politics of reform and politics of identity (1992). Politics of influence refers to the alteration of the political discourse produced by the actions of social movements. Its goal is to establish the government’s agenda (Peruzzotti 2001.b:269). Politics of reform points to the demand of material resources and to the implementation of specific policies (Peruzzotti 2001.b:269). It is also defined as the democratization of political and economic institutions. In this case democratization will be measured by an increase of accountability and responsiveness, basic issues that were lacking due to the crisis of representation in Argentina. Finally, politics of identity implies the redefinition of cultural norms, individual and collective identities, and social roles in civil society (Cohen et al.1992:526).

The success of the Assemblies in the realm of the politics of influence has been outstanding. Given the seriousness of the crisis of representation the political system knew that in order to survive, it had to incorporate in its discourse at least some of the demands that were expressed in the streets in the December uprising and later on in the Assemblies. Many of these demands were captured by the candidates of the April 2003 presidential election, but mainly by elected president Nestor Kirchner as soon as he took power. The new political discourse where social issues, human rights and the fight against corruption at every level have taken a central place, evidence that President Kirchner understood that people were asking for a change. With a 64% of positive image in December 2003, even after 7 months of being in office, he proved he had learnt the lesson from the popular uprising (Fara 2003.b). The demands for change in the political and
economic arena were previous to what now came to be called “kirchnerismo” (Sidicaro October 2003). The current President did not create anything from scratch but knew how to channel the pressing claims already existing within the society. As a member of an Assembly put it “los politicos entendieron que el estilo Menemista ya no se aguanta más.” However, many of them consider that these changes are mainly limited to the political discourse and that the President’s strategy is to co-opt the social movements with minor gestures that favor their demands. They complain that root changes in the economic arena such as abandoning neoliberal policies have not taken place yet. “El gobierno sigue articulando un modelo neoliberal que camina solo con represión, y lo combina con fuegos artificiales de derechos humanos y reforma de la policía.”

The cooptation strategy of the government-if existing- has been quite successful since both the Piqueteros and the Assemblies have been divided in those who favor the current administration and those who remain in the opposition. In the case of the Piqueteros this division that started already during Duhalde’s transitional presidency, consolidated under Kirchner and now is deeply rooted. In the case of the Assemblies only a few of them openly support President Kirchner. The worse effect of the President’s

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100 “Politicians understood that the Menemist style will not be tolerated any more.” Comment from a member of an Assembly in the meeting of Plenario Enlace Sur, Buenos Aires, November 29th, 2003.

101 They consider minor gestures for example to abstain during the vote against Cuba in the UN, the meetings held with Brazilian President Lula and Venezuelan President Chavez, and the offer of the ESMA (Navy School) to the human rights movement to transform it into a museum.

102 “The government continues to articulate a neoliberal model that only works together with repression, and combines this with fireworks talk about human rights and police reform,” Interview with Chacho, Buenos Aires, November 29th, 2003.

103 FTV headed by D’Elia and CCC headed by Alderete gave the government a truce under President Duhalde. When Kirchner took power D’Elia transformed his movement in a support group of President Kirchner. On November 6th, 2003 he declared he will defend Kirchner if necessary through force.
policies on them has been the loss of members as people begun to deposit their trust and hopes for social change back in traditional channels and institutions.

The fact that Kirchner has managed to channel the demands of the December uprising and later of the Assemblies granted him a strong positive image. However, according to some focus groups studies, this has not meant that politicians are seen in a more compassionate way. The image of the “political class” as a whole has not changed much since the heated days of 2001. The prevailing perception seems to be synthesized in the following statement of a participant of this survey: “Dejándolo a Kirchner que es algo nuevo, todo lo demás es lo mismo de siempre” (Cibeira October 2003).104

As regards the politics of reform, specific criticisms raised by the Assemblies related to political and police corruption, the demand of impeachment of the Supreme Court, the control over the privatized firms and the renegotiation of their contracts, the opposition to a price increase of the public services provided by these firms, the devolution of the 13% reduction of public salaries in 2001, have been all addressed by the new government’s policies (Di Marco et al. 2003:251). Carlos Menem105 and officials from the Menem and De la Rúa administrations are currently facing trials for corruption;106 police officers and chiefs have been subject of investigation for corruption, one Supreme Court judge has been already impeached,107 two chose to resign under the

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104 “Leaving Kirchner aside, since he represents something new, the rest is the same as always.”

105 Carlos Menem has currently two orders of international capture since he has been called to declare in a trial for illicit enrichment and another one for corruption in the construction of two prisons, but has avoided justice remaining in Chile.

106 Maria Julia Alsogaray, the Senators that received money to approve the labor flexibilization law.

107 Eduardo Moline O’Connor.
threat of impeachment,\textsuperscript{108} and another one has currently an impeachment process opened against him in Congress;\textsuperscript{109} the concession of Correo Argentino (National Post Office) has been nullified and the entities that regulate privatized firms are starting to perform their duties; and finally public employees got the 13\% reduction of their salary back. Even when it is hard to prove a direct link between the claims of the Assemblies and the government’s policies, the fact that these were all issues that were proclaimed in the Inter-Assembly of Parque Centenario shows the relevance of the Assemblies in articulating these demands. This is not to say that nobody before has expressed for example their rejection to corrupt practices. Some NGOs focused on the promotion of democratic culture -like \textit{Poder Ciudadano}- have been working on the issue for many years. However, the threat that a popular uprising followed by a bottom-up organization in the form of Assemblies can have on those in power, cannot be compared with the impact even the most successful NGO may attain.

As for the demand to stop the payment of the external debt and the negotiations with the IMF that have been so popular among the Assemblies, the new government has become a more strategic negotiator in its relationship with the multilateral organizations standing in a stronger position than previous administrations. Public opinion surveys show that the support for the government’s policy towards the IMF is not only majoritarian but has even increased since 2003. In February 2004 75.1\% declared their agreement to the way the government is negotiating with this institution, compared to a 58.4\% in September, 2003 (Kollmann, February 2004). However, the view of the

\textsuperscript{108} Julio Nazareno and Guillermo López.

\textsuperscript{109} Adolfo Vazquez.
Assemblies on this issue differs. Most members consider what the government is doing to be insufficient. The strong reaction and anger most members of the Assemblies had when a participant in a meeting of Asambleas Autónomas –where twenty two different Assemblies were present- started asking for support towards the Kirchner administration showed that this is the prevailing view among them. In this respect, the Assemblies were part of the organization of an unofficial national referendum that took place in November 2003 to vote for or against the payment of the external debt, the FTAA, and the presence of US troops in the country, to try to influence the government's policies in this area.

Politics of identity refers mainly to the influence and changes that the movement produced not on the political system but on civil society. Cohen and Arato believe that “the success of social movements on the level of civil society should be conceived not in terms of the achievement of certain substantive goals or the perpetuation of the movement, but rather in terms of the democratization of values, norms and institutions that are rooted ultimately in a political culture” (1992:562). This is a terrain where the Assemblies have brought an important contribution. Its impact in this arena has been widely acknowledged by most scholars and by most of the participants (Di Marco and others 2003:125-126; Svampa 2003.a; Dinerstein 2003).

The Assemblies are seen as propelling the democratization of social relationships (Di Marco et al 2003:12). Their main success has been to begin the reconstruction of the broken social tissue after a decade of social fragmentation and exclusion (Svampa 2003.a:152), which is considered a key prerequisite for the functioning and stability of any political system (Dinerstein 2003:199).

Peruzzotti sustains that social movements are key places for collective learning processes to develop. He states that through the questioning of political traditions and institutions, social movements are decisive in the road to cultural change (2001.b:296). The contribution of the Assemblies in this area has been immense. Whatever their fate may be, their members highlight that this movement has already left a legacy of democracy, pluralism, participation and respect (Ferraro and Coronel 2003). The personal and collective experience of enrichment is constantly mentioned by all participants. December 2001 is usually referred to as the big rupture with a culture of individualism to begin the foundation of a culture of solidarity (Sidicaro October 2003). The Assemblies, being the direct consequence of the uprising had a special role in this new development. The increase of solidarity has been notable in a country where volunteer work is not a strong tradition. According to a public opinion poll in 2002 32% of those over 17 participated in some kind of volunteer work, comparing with 26% in 2000 and only 20% in 1997 (Iglesias August 2002). Through the creation of micro-businesses ruled by non profit principles to help the unemployed and cartoneros¹ of their neighborhood, the development of cultural and educational projects, the organization of soup kitchens and ollas populares,² the Assemblies have been an important instance to channel these new solidarity trends.

¹ *Cartoneros* is the word in Spanish used to call the people that look through the garbage bags to collect card-board, paper, glass and cans to sell for recycling. After December 2001 the amount of them grew in such a way that they started to organize and divide the zones of Buenos Aires to do their work.

² *Olla popular* ("popular pot" is the literally translation) is the Spanish name for the organization of a big meal in the street, originally used by labor unions in the site of their protests, now used by the Assemblies to feed those in need.
5.5. Looking to the Future

The Assemblies were the actors that embraced the search for the new politics and in consequence articulated and defined its characteristics. This is not to deny the contribution of other members of the popular movements like the *Piqueteros* or the Occupied factories. As was mentioned above, the *Piqueteros* were the first ones to mobilize against the current political and economic system. However, they did not reach the level of questioning brought up by the Assemblies. As Svampa and Pereyra comment in their book “*Entre la ruta y el barrio,*” the *Piqueteros,* even after the December uprising, did not feel as strong as the Assemblies about the questioning of representative democracy. This is evidenced in how they were cautious about bringing in the Assembly’s main slogan “*que se vayan todos*” The key issue for them has always been economic integration, not political representation (Svampa and Pereyra 2003.b:178). As for the occupied factories, they represent an important element of the popular movement by offering workers at the same time a means of living and an empowering experience from which to learn from. They are also conceived as the seed of what may be a new economic system. However, these struggles have not questioned the political system either or proposed a new kind of politics. Rather, they adopted until now a local focus and limited to gain control of specific factories and to develop the legal and economic means to keep running them. However, both *Piqueteros* and the Occupied Factories movement offer a contribution towards the construction of the new politics. By adopting an assembly form of organization, this system of horizontalism and no fixed leaderships is being tried, developed and improved in these small settings. Workers and Unemployed are getting used to it and are accepting it as a more democratic way of organization.
Given the gradual decline of the Assemblies it is necessary to ask if they will be up to the challenge of fighting for the establishment of the new politics. In terms of power (be it measured in numbers, level of organization or resources), the Piqueteros have overwhelmingly surpassed the Assemblies. Their power is shown by the constant negotiation and confrontation they go through with the government, and the high visibility they acquired in the media. However, the fact that Piqueteros is not an inclusive social movement and relies on the specific demands of the unemployed, it is hard to see how they can develop and establish the new politics that should be for society as a whole. Additionally, Piqueteros is not an exception to the endless divisions the popular movement has to face in its ranks, thus, limiting their potential power to impose the new politics. Even when much more powerless, their main goals and inclusive character make the Assemblies a better place for the new politics to develop its full potential.

The decline of the Assemblies is an issue of worry among their members, and this fact was reflected in the numerous debates that took place among them in December 2003 when organizing the events for the two years anniversary of the uprising. Many of them made a balance of the activities done along the year, evaluated their goals and strategies. As mentioned in previous sections, the successes have been many. However, their initial goal of becoming the new politics seems to be even further than before. When discussing the success of the popular referendum about the FTAA and the external debt, a member commented with skepticism: “Aquellos días creíamos que estábamos para más de una consulta popular, y hoy vemos la consulta del ALCA como algo super positivo.”  

113 “During those days we thought we were ready for something bigger than a popular referendum, and today we see the referendum for the FTAA as a huge success,” a participant of an Assembly in the South of the City of Buenos Aires, November 25, 2003.
CONCLUSION

The aspiration in this thesis was primarily to contribute to the few academic studies that had been conducted on the recent events of contentious politics in Argentina. In this sense, the main goal has been to call attention to the emergence of a new notion of politics that took place in the midst of the summer of 2001-2002. Two moments have been signaled as key expressions of this new politics: the December uprising and the creation of the Neighborhood Assemblies. However, social change does not happen over night. As has been argued throughout the thesis, there were precursors like those movements that demanded truth and justice and the Piqueteros that have laid the grounds for the new political to come to life. In the same way that the birth of the new politics took years and different movements and events to host it and finally emerge, the concept is still in its infancy and will inevitably change over time and across different experiments before it acquires its final shape. This thesis attempted to show the relevance of this new notion of the political and its potentiality to bring about a new political system. Its final impact is still impossible to foresee. However, even in the worse case scenario -as it has been shown in the previous sections- this new notion will continue to be influential in reshaping the current political system.

Secondly, the research done about the crisis of the political and that of representation attempted to clarify the meaning of those concepts, repeatedly mentioned but usually not defined in previous studies. The role that neoliberalism had in this political crisis could be seen through its impact in the increased power of technocrats, the
disarticulation of social actors like the labor unions, and the socio economic marginalization that it produced during the 1990s. The scope of this project did not allow for a deeper analysis of this topic but the inclusion of this section was meant to inspire further research in that area.

Lastly, this thesis can be seen as a new study highlighting the relevance that contentious politics and specifically social movements have in the current times. It aspired to emphasize the influence of social movements in the processes of democratization, considered mainly as the improvement of the quality of democracy. The case study of the Neighborhood Assemblies showed the contribution of this movement to democracy in Argentina. Additionally, by applying MTT’s new relational approach to the Argentinean case this thesis attempted to move forward in the development of social movement theory. The fact that this study shows a case of an uprising where there is no perception of political opportunities by an already organized group, shows the relevance of MTT’s mechanisms and processes where the social movement is being born through the social relationships and bonds that are created during the mobilization itself.

As I am writing these words, the Assemblies keep meeting, discussing and redefining the new politics. Not everyone in Argentina is aware of their constant work. As they have been lacking media coverage, and their project of direct democracy has not been implemented, many Argentineans believe the assemblies do not exist anymore. However, as with most issues in the social world, the significance of the movement goes beyond its immediate setbacks or failures and will only come to light in the long run. In the meantime it is possible to state that their mere existence has implied a revolution of mindsets that brought a profound contribution to Argentine democracy. The passage from
a decade of political apathy and disinterest into an era of political involvement and participation cannot but be beneficial for any type of democracy that might be unrolling. At the same time, even when the level of mobilization has been receding since the heated days of the summer of 2001-2002, the uprising left behind organized entities in the form of the Assemblies. This implies the existence of active cells that are the core of broader networks of people that could be easily mobilized if the events require them to do so. This should be an alert signal for anyone that might try to bring back the old politics of the 1990s in its pure form.

In a time of economic crisis and extensive social conflict, the emergence of social movements is a way to channel this high level of conflictivity. This was the role of the Neighborhood Assemblies among other social movements like the *Piqueteros*. As the journalist Martín Granovsky puts it “*las asambleas y los cacerolazos no servían para tomar el palacio de invierno pero si fueron útiles para evitar un alto nivel de violencia política y social*” (Granovsky November 2003). The Assemblies channeled the energy irradiating from the uprising and transform it into a forum for political participation, deliberation and reinvention. They created the necessary space for the notion of new politics to be born.

The research cannot end here, since the new politics is still unraveling. This is only the beginning and further studies should be pursued in order to evaluate the impact that this new notion will leave in Argentinean society.

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