ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

MJF-22
THE AMERICAS

Martha Farmelo is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues and contemporary politics in Argentina.

Exploring Solutions to Argentina's Political Crisis III:

Rays of Hope for This Country of Discredited Politicians, Passive Middle-Class and Frayed Social Fabric

By Martha Farmelo

JULY 1, 2003

Que el mundo fue y será una porquería	That the world was and will be filth
Ya lo sé	I already know
En el quinientos seis	In the year five hundred and six
Y en el dos mil también.	And in two thousand, too.
Hoy resulta que es lo mismo	Today it's all the same
Ser derecho que traidor,	To be honest or a traitor,
Ignorante, sabio, chorro,	Ignorant, wise, a thief,
Generoso, estafador.	Generous, a con artist.
Todo es igual,	Everything is the same,
Nada es mejor…	Nothing is better than anything else…
El que no llora no mama	He who doesn't cry gets no breast-milk
Y el que no afana es un gil.	And he who doesn't steal is a moron.
Dale no más, dale que va.	Go ahead, keep it up.
Que allá en el horno nos vamo'a encontrar.	We'll all meet together in hell.

From Cambalache (1935) by Enrique Santos Discépolo, a classic Argentine tango

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina – Many times I have tried to imagine what Washington, DC would be like if no more than a handful of politicians could show their faces in public without being screamed at, even spat upon and literally chased away—because until quite recently, such was the case in Argentina.

The intellectual authors of such public shamings belong to a group called HIJOS, *(Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio),* children of some of the 30,000 persons "disappeared" during the dictatorship of 1976-1983. Several years ago, they began organizing events to expose and humiliate those who participated in the murderous repression.

They alert the offender's neighbors with detailed informational flyers, throw eggs, paint graffiti on the sidewalk, and yell "assassin" at the repressor's home as if to say, "This person has committed aberrant crimes and does not deserve to live among us as a common citizen." Just three days ago, HIJOS held such an event at the Buenos Aires home of Enrique Braulio Olea, who was head of a clandestine torture center called the *Escuelita de Neuquén* (the Little School of Neuquén) during the dictatorship.

HIJOS dubbed these encounters *escraches,* adopting a slang term from the 1940s and '50s used in jails, riverside slums and other immigrant neighborhoods

where the tango was born. HIJOS created *escraches* to address the impunity of state terrorism, to exercise a social penalty in the absence of judicial penalties.

Que se vayan todos y todas. Photo by Annresty - Indymedia Argentina

Readers may recall that massive, pot-banging protests called *cacerolazos* in December 2001 precipitated the resignations of President Fernando de la Rúa and after him, seven-day President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá. In the wake of these protests, members of society generally—not only those directly affected by the dictatorship or other crimes—appropriated *escraches* and aimed them at members of the political class as a whole. Indeed, when a couple of politicians appeared on the beach without repercussion during the summer vacation of January and February, 2003, this anomaly made national news.

Argentina's new president, Néstor Kirchner, has added a surprising twist to this story. Since his inauguration on May 25, 2003, President Kirchner has enjoyed sky-high approval ratings. On June 29, 2003, the progressive daily *Página/12* reported that 83 percent of Argentines rate his administration as "good" or "very good." The general fury toward politicians has relented somewhat as a result of his can-do attitude, his selection of well-respected cabinet members and the success of his initial measures.

During his first couple of weeks in office, Kirchner replaced the top leadership of the armed forces and the federal police. He then met with human rights organizations and declared his support for the nullification of the so-called "impunity laws" that protect those who ordered or carried out the torture and disappearance of Argentines during the last dictatorship. He quickly resolved labor disputes with teachers in two provinces that resulted in the opening of schools for the first time in months.

He told the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that Argentina will only pay its foreign debt when the beleaguered economy is once again healthy. He refused to implement two controversial measures the IMF had demanded in return for an agreement, and suggested that the Director of the IMF himself, Horst Kohler, travel to Argentina to negotiate directly with the Kirchner administration—which Kohler did.

Kirchner also went on national television to declare that he would not succumb to blackmail by Julio Nazareno, the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Nazareno reportedly threatened to destabilize Kirchner's government by issuing rulings on bank deposits that would create economic chaos if Kirchner refused to order Congress to halt impeachment proceedings against the nine top justices. Just three weeks later, after 13 years on the Supreme Court, Nazareno resigned. Cautiously optimistic, Argentines are repeatedly using the phrase "*un aire nuevo*"—a breath of fresh air—to describe the recent, somewhat tentative, but decidedly more positive feeling toward politics.

Still, until just four or five weeks ago, ubiquitous *escraches* were only one manifestation of the severity of Argentina's political crisis. Argentines have been profoundly fed up not just with their politicians and their government, but with politics in general—though rather than struggle for change, many Argentines manifest a striking passivity and individualism that have ominous implications for Argentine society. Still, many new forms of solidarity and collective action have convinced some analysts that Argentina has begun the slow, laborious process of reweaving its frayed social fabric, which bodes well for reverting the crisis of politics and representative government.

One of the most salient expressions of the political crisis is the preponderance of the catchphrase that emerged from the December 2001 protests: *¡Que se vayan todos!*, roughly "Out with all of them!," meaning all politicians—quite literally. Like any other household phrase, it now rolls off the tongues of everyone from candidates for public office to ordinary citizens chatting about the country's future.

In addition to appearing on banners at every political demonstration from International Women's Day to marches against the Iraq war, what emerged as a slogan

has installed itself as a central question of debate concerning Argentine politics. What exactly does this phrase mean? Who will govern once current politicians are no longer in office? Is this measure necessary, desirable or just silly? It may seem absurd to some, but in mid-August 2002, the daily *Clarín* published a poll showing 85 percent support for the literal implementation of this slogan.

Senate aide Patricia Arnalda told me that after revealing her place of work to taxi drivers, she has been so barraged with vicious criticism that she now asks to be dropped off a few blocks from the Congress. Is it just corruption that has people so furious? "Corruption and privilege," said Patricia. "And given the crisis," she added, "to have a decent job that includes vacation and benefits is considered a privilege."

Furthermore, elected representatives have given the public ample reason to believe they are servants of their political chiefs and *not* of those who voted for them. Speaking on television before the recent Presidential election, Peronist Congressman Daniel Basile said matter-of-factly, "My boss defrauded me." When the program's host asked if he was using "my boss" to refer to then-President Eduardo Duhalde, he said, "Yes, Duhalde."

In November 2002, when the Congress approved the electoral schedule, the conservative daily *La Nación* reported that one of the votes in favor was cast by Liliana Negre de Alonso, "representative of [then-presidential candidate] Adolfo Rodríguez Saá."

In May 2002, Congress just barely passed a highly unpopular measure required by the IMF that makes it more difficult to prosecute "economic subversion," a type of white-collar crime by bankers and businesspersons. According to the regional daily *La Mañana del Sur,* "The Peronists had key help from [Radical] governor Pablo Verani, who achieved the departure from the Senate floor of Amanda Isidori, Radical Senator from Río Negro, inclining the scales definitively in favor of the derogation of the law of economic subversion." Isidori announced that she left the floor in the moment of the vote to be faithful to Verani.

Senate aide Patricia Arnalda

Granted, the October, 2001 Congressional election was the first time Argentines voted for their Senators, who until then were chosen by a simple majority vote by the provincial legislatures—often at the behest of the provincial governor. But even when directly elected, many act like entirely faithful cronies, infuriating those who voted for them. It's no wonder that Argentines believe that the political class has "ruptured it's link with society," a phrase commonly used to describe this aspect of the political crisis.

Victor Abramovich is director of the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales* (CELS), one of Argentina's leading human rights organizations, and a keen analyst of Argentina's political crisis. In a recent interview, he told me that a central issue for resolving the political crisis is to "reconstruct the value of the state and of politics. Politics are degraded. There's a vision that everything that is political is horrible, that everything that comes from the state is poisoned and corrupt. This is the big risk we run right now."

He went on, "In this moment there are two strong anti-politics positions. One is rightwing, anti-politics and anti-state. It says the state is bureaucratic, corrupt and irredeemable; it must be reduced in size; everything in civil society is marvelous; and social aid should be administered by non-governmental organizations," he said.

"On the other hand, there is the less anti-political, more anti-state position of the 'new social actors,'" he added. This phrase refers to the *piqueteros* that use roadblocks to protest for food, the neighborhood assemblies that emerged from the *cacerolazos* of December 2001 calling for direct democracy, and the growing number of shuttered factories that have been seized and run by workers, despite violent police repression.

Abramovich said, "This position is more explainable because the state represses them, but they believe that the state is genocidal and equivalent to the dictatorship. They say, 'We're going to do everything behind the state's back in order to have autonomy. *My* community garden, *my* educational center.'"

He added, "This is the big topic of discussion: how to again think of the state as an actor that is absolutely necessary, that has to be strong, capable of regulating the market [and other key functions]." He said that the state's role in areas such as regulating recent mega-hikes in utility rates is helpful in this regard.

Unfortunately, President Kirchner's predecessor, Eduardo Duhalde, and other members of the Peronist party have at times given the public ample reason to believe that everything that comes from the state is indeed poisoned and corrupt. In early March 2003, the courts refused to allow Peronist Senator Luis Barrionuevo to participate in the election for governor of the province of Catamarca because he had not resided for the last four consecutive years in the province, as required by law. In response, he swore that he would prevent the election from taking place. Droves of his followers then burned ballot boxes, causing the governor to suspend the vote.

Barrionuevo is an old-guard union leader famous for

Senator Luis Barrionuevo. *Photo from "The Luis Barrio Website", http://www.geocities.com/barrionuevoar/luis/principal.htm.*

declaring that "In this country, no one makes money by working," and arguing that Argentina could solve its economic crisis if politicians and others "stopped stealing for two years." He also invited a group of 300 Argentines with frozen savings accounts to "bust up the banks and grab the bankers that stole the money."

Although the three competing factions of the Peronist party are bitter rivals, they magically joined together to prevent Barrionuevo's ouster from the Senate following the destruction of ballots in Catamarca.

In contrast to constitutional experts who believe that these events threatened Argentina's fragile democracy, then-President Duhalde maintained a strict silence concerning this electoral violence. Unfortunately, excepting press reports, society as a whole was strangely silent, too, in both public and private discussions.

This silence is part of a general throwing up of hands about the political crisis—what appears to be a longstanding and pervasive passivity around these issues. Three classic Argentine sayings that capture that feeling of paralysis are "*No te metás"* (Don't get involved), *Yo Argentino* (roughly, I saw nothing and wasn't even there!) and "*Roban pero hacen"* (They steal but at least they do things).

As one member of our local neighborhood assembly asked, why is everyone debating *¡Que se vayan todos!* rather than *¡Echémoslos a todos*!—Let's throw them all out!? The former implies that the politicians will choose to leave on their own, the latter that people must be active agents of change.

Countless Argentines appear to be stuck in what Carla Bavio, an outspoken swimming instructor at my pool, calls the *queja histérica,* or hysterical complaint—when one whines and carries on but does nothing constructive to alter the situation. Carla insists that the *queja histérica* is an Argentine specialty at all levels of life.

Standing in her fuchsia bathing suit in the humid pool-side air, she said, "It's like the annoying neighbor who can't stand the way her apartment building is run and breaks everybody's balls complaining to all her neighbors. But does she ever once write a letter to the manager? Does she ever once do something that might solve the problem? No."

In the latter months of 2002, I heard many Argentines express the belief that their country was finally "hitting bottom." Personally, I don't think that Argentines know where the bottom is, nor do I think they are anywhere close. I am perpetually haunted by images of the last time I was in Nicaragua: multitudes of idle men and women; no functioning transportation system for moving around Managua; shoeless, destitute kids everywhere.

This notion of hitting bottom is consistently presented as good news, as generating relief—and why not? When you hit bottom, the only way to go is up, and if the only direction is upward, no one has to do anything to improve matters except wait. Hence, Argentines can not only throw up their hands but also *wash* their hands—precisely of responsibility for resolving the country's crisis.

When the middle class erupted in protest in December 2001 and in the weeks that followed, it looked as if such passivity had come to an abrupt end. In response to the government's freezing of bank accounts and then-President Fernando de la Rúa's announcement of a state of siege, thousands poured into the streets banging their pots and pans in a furious *cacerolazo.*

Back then, one wrong move—like President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá's appointment of corrupt cabinet members—and people poured *en masse* into the streets. However, most Argentines now believe that "people power" was only part of the equation, and that Duhalde's forces incited the looting and some of the protests that spurred the resignations of de la Rúa and Rodríguez Saá.

Diana Maffía is the Adjunct Ombudsman for the City of Buenos Aires. "Keep in mind that Rodríguez Saá announced default on the foreign debt," she told me. "Duhalde participated directly in the departure of Rodríguez Saá by manipulating power, groups of lead-

Continued on page 6

Carla Bavio on her wedding day

Parenting in Argentina: Reflections on Passivity and Anti-Authoritarianism

Though I've met dozens of families at my son Camilo's preschool, I can count on one hand the parents who set consistent, meaningful limits for their children. Most parents attempt to set limits with words, but do nothing to enforce them. I believe that this lack of positive discipline is relevant to understanding the current political and economic crisis, even though this scene is not limited to Argentina.

"Facundo, we're leaving. Come put your shoes on! Right now!," his mom called out as he ran around our living and dining rooms in his bare feet. "Facundo, I mean it!" she added about four or five times. Eventually, she brusquely grabbed his arm and yelled at him to stop misbehaving, and he began to cry. They finally got out the door about 25 minutes later with Facundo still in tears.

Argentines eat dinner late and some of Camilo's classmates go to bed close to midnight even though they must get up by 8:00 or so the next morning. Regardless of schedule, some parents simply fail to enforce bed-time. One friend told me that at 10:00 p.m. or so, she *asks* her four-year-old "with trepidation" if she *wants* to go to bed. *La Nación* reported that one-third of the children in the city of Buenos Aires sleep an average of two hours less than necessary, due in large part to a lack of limits around TV and the internet.

After hearing numerous parents reflect on how strict and arbitrary their parents had been with them, I began to sense that the widespread lack of limits is related to a conscious rejection of authoritarianism—a healthy tendency, but not without its dangers. My hunch was confirmed twice by local experts.

This cartoon appeared in La Nación on March 16, 2002. The mother says, "But please! What can my son be lacking? He's had everything he wanted." The teacher replies, "Maybe he needs some limits." The mother responds, "I don't think so, but fine. If he needs limits, I'll buy him limits."

Scenes from a mask-making street party, the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Camilo's pre-school.

First, *La Nación* reported that in nearly 80 percent of families in Buenos Aires, parents treated their children as equals and the kids failed to perceive the difference in status between themselves and their parents. "This symmetrical model is a response to an authoritarian one," the article reported, "but it is not useful, because it doesn't permit children to grow and mature."

Second, I attended a talk at Camilo's school on setting limits. As I settled into my folding chair and stirred sugar into steaming, bitter espresso, the conversation focused not on limits *per se* but on encouraging moms and dads to accept their authority as parental figures.

The speaker said, "Parents are having difficulty distinguishing between the concepts of authoritarianism and authority, and seeing authority as positive." Even household routines and order are seen as arbitrary and physical limits such as making a child sit down in a car are seen as physical aggression, she told us.

Indeed, the parents spoke of emotional struggles with setting limits and times they had "made their children cry." I left with a better sense of the emotional dynamics at play when friends yell things like "Facundo, come put on your shoes!" and leave half an hour later with their child in tears and why such dynamics are so widespread.

Let me reiterate: rejection of authoritarianism and difficulty in setting limits for children is by no means unique to Argentina. But they are highly *relevant* to Argentina.

When a full-scale rejection of authoritarianism translates into the inability to distinguish and assume one's authority, one relinquishes one's own agency and responsibility. Does this tendency in parenting have implications for how individuals operate in the society at large? If so, the coming of age of an entire generation of adults who struggle with their personal agency and responsibility might help explain some of the collective factors in Argentina's crisis, especially the persistent tendency toward passivity.

For in my mind, the true opposite of authoritarianism is democracy, not chaos. Yet democracy must be constructed, nurtured and defended—especially in a country like Argentina, where democratic institutions are still frighteningly weak. However, in contrast to the "effervescent" young adults of the 1970s, my generation of middle-class Argentines often seems more apt to throw up its hands than work actively to create democratic systems, be they in the home or in society at large. Tragically, this throwing up of hands means toleration of corruption, economic exclusion and a whole host of ills that are dangerously entrenched in Argentine society.

ers and other deals. It wasn't the result of popular indignation alone. There have been plenty of other popular mobilizations that were not that efficient," she said.

That would explain why, just after Rodríguez Saá's resignation, President Duhalde enjoyed remarkable public silence when he implemented highly unpopular measures. For example, the government (and citizenry) absorbed billions of dollars of debt held by wealthy, private companies when it converted all loan obligations from dollars to pesos at the rate of one-to-one.

Shortly afterward, in an attempt to woo the IMF, Duhalde presented a budget with new spending cuts that in addition to being recessionary, exacerbated the social crisis. In contrast to Kirchner, last year it appeared that Duhalde caved in to blackmail by the Supreme Court justices when he ordered his forces in Congress to halt impeachment proceedings against the judges, despite public demands to the contrary. Did he experience a single significant *cacerolazo*? No.

In contrast to the middle class, poorer and more marginalized sectors of the population tend to be well organized and consistently visible, especially in the form of countless roadblocks. Meanwhile, the middle class has been utterly quiet even while its members slide under the poverty line with frightening speed.

Many Argentines I've talked to seem to write off such passivity as the legacy of Peronism. Certainly the paternalistic and messianic tendencies of Perón's rule have permeated Argentine culture for many decades.

The combination of rampant corruption and weak judicial systems foster political passivity, as well. According to Diana Maffía, "To a greater or lesser degree, this is a country in which the norms are not respected—not traffic norms, nor those that come from the Supreme Court."

Victor Abramovich said, "Yes, there is passivity in the culture of the Argentine middle class. The middle class is hugely responsible for having sustained the process of concentration of wealth and [President Carlos Menem's] reforms of the 1990s. It tolerated, consented to and accompanied this process," he said. President Menem served from 1989 to 1999, during which he radically restructured the economy by pegging the peso to the dollar, cutting the fiscal deficit, privatizing major state-owned industries and liberalizing trade and finance.

"Dollar-peso parity was sustained at the cost of salaries, stable employment, pensions and certain government services," said Abramovich. "The middle class didn't just discover hunger because of *La Nación's* campaign [on this issue last year]. During the election of 1999 [won by Fernando de la Rúa, who promised to uphold the one-to-one exchange rate], people already knew the social cost of dollar-peso convertability. We had already seen two years of recession and skyrocketing poverty, social exclusion and unemployment."

Furthermore, he said, "The middle class does not have a *visión de conjunto*," a vision of the whole society. "Its vision is very class-oriented, very personal. If the government tells those with frozen bank accounts that it is going to return their money in dollars, they wouldn't ask what's going to happen to social aid or welfare programs."

Lina Lara, an education specialist, agrees. "We're all accomplices, everyone who bought into the one-to-one [peg of the peso to the dollar], everyone who bought their blender on installments. We all enjoyed [the dollar peg] while unemployment was rising to almost 30 percent as a result."

Diana Maffía believes that middle-class passivity is due in part to the last, murderous dictatorship. During 1976 and 1983 approximately 30,000 Argentines were tortured and disappeared.

"Even in 1976 there was considerable political effervescence," she said. "During the military dictatorship that was completely extinguished, which produced a deterioration in the social fabric that is almost impossible to recuperate."

She also distinguished between two types of individualism in Argentina. During the dictatorship, individualism was defensive. "The message from the state was 'If you're innocent, don't worry. We'll protect you. But watch out for your neighbor who might be dangerous.' And it was true, because they repressed not just those that were actively engaged [in revolution or social change], but whomever had indirect participation or were ideologues, even sympathizers." She reminded me that those caught with their address books often unwittingly implicated dozens of friends and family in so-called "subversive" activity.

She said that in contrast, "'*Menemismo*' created the most savage individualism, based on personal advantage. There may be someone who cries for help because he is hungry, but I can go to Miami and buy a television, something I had never been able to do, or I can go on vacation where rich people always went and I had never been able to go."

I was reminded of friends of mine here in Buenos Aires, members of the middle class who generally live hand-to-mouth. Rather than exercising fiscal caution, this family of four lives carelessly beyond their means. This year they couldn't swing a summer vacation, though they thought about it. My girlfriend told me, "Maybe we'll just go, with whatever we have. Who cares if we owe money? When we get back we'll worry about all those dummies." Some of those dummies include her kid's preschool director whom she and I both adore, and who is struggling to keep the beloved place afloat.

Marta Ocampo de Vásquez is a founder of the cou-

rageous, world-renowned Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. "The middle class has always been passive," she says. "It pains me to say this, but many say that the people came out to the streets in December 2001 only because *le tocaron el bolsillo*" —that is, the government reached into their pockets, a reference to their frozen bank accounts—a view held by Victor Abramovich.

"But you have to look at something," she continues. "From then on there have been many new things that didn't exist before. There is much solidarity in the middle class that emerged after the 19th and 20th [of December 2001]. There are now numerous soup kitchens, innumerable projects to help others, the neighborhood assemblies… I'm sorry that for lack of time I can't participate in one. And then you have the occupation of factories by the workers. They've made them function again—those are the things that fill me with emotion. Because little by little, the people are becoming aware of their capacity, what they can do, in peaceful ways and through work."

Marta Ocampo de Vasquez, a founding member of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo

Marta Vásquez is describing the reconstruction of the social fabric that Diana Maffía accurately considers so hard to recuperate. Diana made similar comments. She spoke first about the *piqueteros,* unemployed workers who use roadblocks to demand emergency food aid, workfare and jobs.

"This most marginalized group, the *piqueteros,* has constructed a very solid form of organization. They have a formidable circulation of power, women as significant protagonists, and a series of activities that exceed the demand for work. They hold cultural activities, they do workshops, they clamor for training. You're right that these groups reorganized themselves far better than the middle class," she said.

"But there is something I would point out as a possibility of recuperation," she said. "The *cacerolazo* is just a noise, it doesn't even have words. It was a ton of people together expressing that they were on the other side from their government and supposed representatives. There wasn't a demand or a slogan so we could know if we were a unit now, if we were going to be able to construct something together in this new territory that was opening up. But over the past year that noise, that spontaneous reaction, was transformed into slogans and those slogans into an efficient effort to make change."

She added, "Look at the evolution of the neighborhood assemblies. Many have started very important constructive work, including significant demands of government authorities. They began to discover that as citizens they had a power that they didn't have individually, that together they could make it work. This is a very important maturation for our democracy. It is an enormous possible solution."

I've seen the reconstruction of the social fabric happen before my eyes every other Friday night when I work at the soup kitchen organized by our local neighborhood assembly. Volunteers spend the afternoon gathering donated food from green-grocers and others whom they've gotten to know over the last several months. Someone lugs two massive pots, a tank of gas and other supplies donated by the city government to the park on the corner of Malabia and Avenida Santa Fe, right next to the Botanical Garden.

At about 6:30 p.m., assembly members and other volunteers who have simply appeared out of the woodwork begin washing, sorting and cutting the pounds and pounds of vegetables that will go into that night's stew. Many of the helpers are neighbors who were passing by and came over to see what was up. José María is an unemployed chef and the chief cook. After four hours on his feet preparing the stew, he works the streets until dawn rummaging through the local trash for cardboard, paper and other recyclable goods to sell.

Lucía, a gorgeous 20-year-old in sweats and a t-shirt, is flanked by two crouched-over, well-dressed ladies of means. Eighty-two-year-old Marina hooks her cane on the table where she slices innumerable carrots, onions and butternut squash. Eighty-eight-year-old Catalina's diminutive hands have been mangled by arthritis but they cut, peel and dice just the same. Marina and Catalina are treated like queens by El Gringo, another garbage-picker and assistant cook with wild hair that recalls his days of addiction to drugs and alcohol.

One woman in the neighborhood donates 16 pounds of beef each week. Strangers come by on their way out to dinner to drop off bags of rice, spaghetti or fruit that they think might be helpful. Each week, one man brings gallons of rice pudding so the garbage pickers, unemployed neighbors who look just like me, and well-dressed retirees will have something sweet for dessert. Each week, new people we've never seen before come by to help. One time it was a young guy in an expensive suit carrying a fancy leather briefcase. "Next time wear jeans and flip-flops," we told him, smiling, as juice from the raw beef dribbled onto his shoes.

"There are also other ways to come together," said Diana Maffía. Echoing Marta Vásquez, she said, "The phenomenon of the worker-occupied factories is spectacular. There's some behind-the-scenes agreement. The owners take off with the money and abandon 200 or 300 families. Those families say 'We're going to keep working and organize among us to sustain this factory.' This

reflects their collective capacity to believe they can do without an omnipotent authority and rather produce results for themselves." According to the National Movement of Recuperated Factories, there are currently 140 worker-occupied businesses that provide 15,000 jobs.

Victor Abramovich points out that no political grouping has been able to capture the demand for institutional change expressed by these new social actors. Indeed, Peronist Néstor Kirchner won the Presidency even though throughout his campaign he appeared to represent a clear continuation of *Duhaldismo*, and even kept Duhalde's economy minister, Roberto Lavagna. He has since shown considerable independence from both Duhalde and many of the former president's policies.

"If there is a demand for *¡Que se vayan todos!*, that needs to be transformed into a demand for institutional change," says Abramovich. "Demands against the judicial system have to be transformed into reform of the judicial system. It's not really happening yet.

"Those actions will only translate into something important if there are political actors who can channel those demands. The new groups such as *piqueteros* and neighborhood assemblies do not yet have a political corollary that can dispute power, manage the government, transform the state. But it's been only one year, which is not much time," he says.

Diana Maffía adds, "If I had to sum up what has happened between citizens and the state, I would say that there has been a 'de-naturalization' of catastrophes that happen to our citizens. They are not natural disasters. Politics are not like that. Rather that is the way politicians act, that is the way they are. There are other ways, and things could be different, more just, and it depends in part on how each of us acts."

Echoing Diana's summing up, Victor Abramovich says, "A central issue is how to reconstruct the value of the state and of politics—that it matters if there is electoral fraud, or if the Supreme Court stays or goes. But the crisis of representation has been gradual. It's like poverty: We're not going to eliminate it in the short run. Argentina is going to live with this representational crisis and with weak institutions for at least the next ten years."

He laughed quietly as he said, "We're not demanding much—a normal government that doesn't steal, that is rational, that has minimal technical capacity, that respects democratic rules. It doesn't take a genius or a magician. A normal government that functions for more than four years would help reconstruct our institutions. It would be strange, but it's not impossible."

To most Argentines' surprise, President Kirchner's administration may turn out to provide just that. The honeymoon is not over yet. Time will tell. ❑

This appeared in La Nación, *March 8, 2003. "Another that doesn't know whom to vote for"*

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-4303)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

Author: Farmelo, Martha J.
Title: ICWA Letters - The Americas
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.