

ICWA LETTERS

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

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THE AMERICAS

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

Mobile Mountain Ranges and Bellowing Cows:

When Argentina Makes News, Read With Care

By Martha Farmelo

NOVEMBER 20, 2002

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina—I am often stunned and saddened by the misperceptions about Argentina held by people in the US and other places. For example, television and newspaper images of last December's looting of supermarkets, burning cars, clouds of tear gas and mounted police seem to have given many the impression that the entire country was literally going up in smoke.

Frequently over the last year I have had to convince family and friends that despite political unrest and crime, I am safe in Argentina. I explain that even when sometimes-lethal political violence erupts, the danger is localized and eminently avoidable. Similarly, evading crime is largely a question of common sense and street smarts.

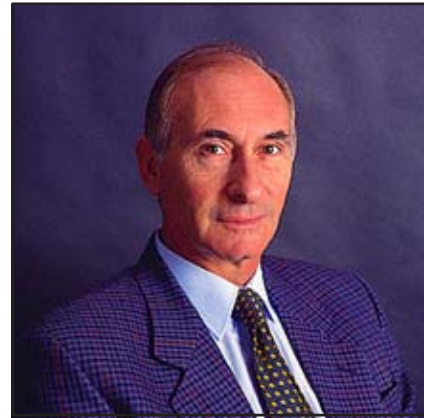
Before her trip to Buenos Aires, one woman from Washington was told that "all Americans are loathed and that [she and her husband] may be targets of rage, looking as American as we do." Indisputably, many Argentines harbor anti-US feelings. I met several men and women in a particularly impoverished area of the province of Buenos Aires while writing MJF-12 on the organized unemployed. With a gesture like a self-inflicted Heimlich maneuver, one woman confessed to me that her stomach clutched when she learned I was from the US.

"When we think of the US we think that they want to dominate us and take everything from us they can," said another. Still, except for an innocuous protest or two outside the US embassy, no North American I know has been a target of anger.

I imagine the media are responsible for most of these misperceptions. While I don't regularly read the US or European press, I do look at the articles on Argentina that friends and colleagues send with some frequency. While most seem accurate enough, some contain factual errors or debatable misrepresentations of current events.

I have never forgotten the time when we still lived in the US capital and the *Washington Post* repeatedly referred to the province of Córdoba as located in "the foothills of the Andes." Córdoba is hundreds of kilometers from the Andes and the mountain ranges there are unrelated to the Andes! More recently, the American Enterprise Institute published an article dated July, 2002, that called Adolfo Rodríguez Saá a "former governor (and for twenty-four hours, president)." In reality, he was President for seven days. Moreover, rather than a simple custodian of power, Rodríguez Saá was selected to be President for three months—a significant distinction.

Please bear with me as I run through the sequence of events. When President



Cartoons in papers ranging from the Buffalo News (my hometown paper) to the Denver Post spoofed the rapid succession of these five Argentine presidents between December 20, 2001 and January 2, 2002. Entertaining political humor notwithstanding, the real story was adherence to the Argentine constitution during a time of intense political tumult. (Left) Eduardo Duhalde, (Top, center) Eduardo Oscar Camaño, (Top, right) Fernando de la Rúa, (Bottom, center) Ramón Puerta, (Bottom, right) Rodríguez Saá

Fernando de la Rúa resigned on December 20, 2001, Senate President Ramón Puerta took over the presidency for 48 hours while the legislature selected Rodríguez Saá to hold office until elections in March 2002. When Rodríguez Saá resigned on December 30, House of Representatives President Eduardo Oscar Camaño took over while the legislature selected current president Eduardo Duhalde, who assumed office on January 2, 2002.

An article that appeared in the *Washington Post* on August 25, authored by an Argentine who lives in Buenos Aires, referred to “five Presidents in a week,” a significant mis-statement of the time frame. Right now you may be thinking, “One day, seven days; a week, two weeks—what’s the difference?” However, doesn’t one of the basic tenets of journalism require a powerful news organization (or *any* organization that publishes information) to get the facts straight?

More often than objecting to factual errors, I find myself critical of press that sensationalizes or trivializes the Argentine crisis or simply misses the point. I confess that such was my sour-puss reaction when friends in the US sent me a series of political cartoons that satirized the rapid succession of five presidents described above. One said “Another President is Chosen in Argentina” and showed a military officer and two civilians struggling to

drag a man to a large desk marked “El Presidente.” A friend who is a foundation officer specializing in Latin America even sent me an e-mail making reference to my partner: “I hear there’s an opening for president. Alan should apply!”

I admit: The process was nuts. It made everyone’s head spin, and it seemed in moments as if literally no one wanted to become Head of State during such a profound political, economic and social crisis. *Página/12*, a well-read leftist daily, is prone to running highly satirical photomontages on its front page. On December 31, 2001, just after Adolfo Rodríguez Saá resigned, the headline read “*Presidente Se Busca*” (President Wanted) and appeared over a picture of an empty, fancy, red-and-gold presidential chair.

However, all the joking obfuscated the real story. First, in a country that has been chronically plagued by military coups and dictatorships, and despite tremendous weaknesses in its democratic institutions, Argentines adhered to their constitution throughout that tumultuous period. Second, rather than a military overthrow, the people—well accustomed to the saying “Don’t get involved”—took to the streets and ousted their president. Many Argentines have argued that the events of December mark a positive, historic

moment, one to be celebrated rather than mocked.

Perhaps the one article I've seen that most sensationalized the economic crisis appeared in the *Washington Post* on August 6, 2002. This piece described a crowd of Argentines who cut meat from still-live cows after a cattle-hauling truck overturned in the province of Santa Fe last March.

"Within minutes, 600 hungry residents arrived on the scene, wielding machetes and carving knives," said the flagship paper of the US capital. It went on to report, "'Kill the cows!' someone yelled...And the slaughter began...Cows bellowed as they were sloppily diced by groups of men, women and children. Fights broke out for pieces of flesh in bloody tugs of war."

I would argue that while the basic purpose of the media is to provide information, they should also humanize the news so that readers or viewers can relate to and remember the events in question. This *Post* article was probably factually correct, and one could argue that such vivid, memorable images such as those of the slaughter of live cows help North Americans focus on the Argentine crisis. However, I suspect they provoke in most readers feelings of horror and disgust rather than empathy or understanding.

Not surprisingly, ideology often appears to be a principal driving force in how issues are reported. Such was my impression when I read an August 22 article in



This picture and caption ran in the *Washington Post* on August 6, 2002. Photo by Enrique Rodríguez.

Britain's *The Economist*, a conservative publication that even leftists sometimes read because the reporting is generally excellent.

The story entitled "Argentina's Collapse" described how grim life in Argentina has become. I do not dis-



A neighborhood assembly in the middle-class neighborhood of Flores converted this abandoned bar into a community center. Assembly members have received death threats as a result. (Bottom, right) Former ICWA fellow Wendy Call with Julio, a former revolutionary Peronist.



agree with the assertion that, “No genuinely mass movement has emerged to articulate grievance,” at least one that does so effectively across class lines. However, the quote that caught my attention said, “Neighbourhood assemblies that sprang up during December’s protests have degenerated into talking shops for bearded leftists nostalgic for the 1960s.”

I should start by disclosing that my partner Alan is a bearded leftist who is active in one of the neighborhood assemblies described in MJF-9 on gender and participatory democracy. In my opinion, even if all they did was talk, they would be making a significant contribution to rebuilding the fabric of a frayed society characterized by intense individualism and scant solidarity. One lawyer in his late forties who participates in Alan’s assembly said that assemblies are a way of breaking out of isolation, loneliness and frustration with the current situation, both personal and political. At the assembly he has discovered many people in the same situation and has connected to his neighbors and the society around him.

Indeed, the members of Alan’s neighborhood assembly talk a great deal—but they also take action. Most recently, they have begun serving almost 200 hot meals each Friday night to hungry garbage pickers (*cartoneros*) and unemployed residents of our middle-class neighborhood. Countless other assemblies do even more.

In the neighborhood of San Telmo, one assembly has created a community garden and held a vaccination campaign for the *cartoneros*. In Belgrano, Flores, Villa Urquiza and numerous other neighborhoods, the local assemblies have taken over vacant properties such as an abandoned bank branch, house or corner bar to set up a soup kitchen and, in some instances, a community center. At the Bar Alameda in Flores the local neighborhood assembly runs a



Assembly members were shocked to find a fully-outfitted operating room (Top, right) and rooms full of medical equipment such as this mammogram machine (Above, left).

Journalism students (Right) from a cooperative high school in the province of Buenos Aires visited the intensive care unit during their tour of the facility.



Flabbergasted By An Abandoned Clinic Full of Health Equipment

According to Juan Carlos Cherbavaz, the morning of August 31, 2002 he and about 120 members of two neighborhood assemblies in Flores busted the locks and entered an abandoned health clinic on Gavilán Street with the idea of creating a community center. For months they had sustained dead-end conversations with the City of Buenos Aires about the possibility of using municipal space. Rather than wait any longer, they scoped out abandoned properties in the neighborhood.

Assembly members who work for the justice system used the courts’ data base to check into the legal status of various sites. In the words of Cherbavaz, when they learned that the owners of the Portuguese Clinic were fugitives under investigation for fraud and embezzlement, they thought, “This is the ideal place!”

Astonished, they found five floors of intact health equipment—OB-GYN examination tables, x-ray machines, dental equipment, incubators, even a fully equipped operating room and intensive-care unit. Immediately, they began to visualize creating a community health center and an HMO for uninsured workers. They now hope the latter will serve 60 employee-run factories in and around the city of Buenos Aires.

About two months ago, they convoked a meeting of doctors from area hospitals who might be interested in collaborating. “We set up about 60 chairs and were all organized,” said Juan Carlos. That night, almost 140 health professionals showed up. Currently, 37 former employees of the clinic and about 60 doctors are helping them work toward their ambitious goals.

Meanwhile, they have also set up a program of snacks and other meals for children and adults who live in nearby, city-run tenement houses. “This place is like the Hyatt to those kids,” said Juan Carlos. “They play here and they don’t want to leave.”

soup kitchen, sells used books at bargain prices and offers classes in everything from painting and pottery to yoga and improving self-esteem. Two additional neighborhood assemblies in Flores recently took over an abandoned health clinic that, to their shock, was full of sophisticated, apparently useful medical equipment.

Such initiatives are a far cry from “talking shops” for activists “nostalgic for the 60s.” And looking at Argentine history, I’d argue that whatever nostalgia may be present is bound to be for the 1970s—a period of fervent revolutionary activity in Argentina—not the 60s. An assembly member named Julio at the Bar Alameda told me that he used to be a revolutionary Peronist. He was probably a member of the *Montoneros*, an armed group active in the 1970s and subsequently decimated by a brutal campaign of torture, disappearances and assassinations by the Argentine armed forces.

“That was then. This is now,” Julio told me. Despite criticism from leftists who believe that the popular ousting of President Fernando de la Rúa on December 20, 2001 constituted a revolution, he favors local organizing to meet immediate needs for things like food and shelter rather than political organizing for “the revolution.”

Naturally, without dramatic events like those of last December or a decision to default on its international

debt, Argentina doesn’t even make news all that often. When it does, it is no easy task to transmit the complexity of current trends and events. Joe Goldman, an 18-year resident of Buenos Aires and correspondent for ABC News, told me he has a particularly hard time selling stories from here for television. “The issues here are far too complicated for the less-than-three minutes I usually get,” he said.

Just recently, Argentina made quite extensive news—at least in the business and financial sections—with its decision to pay only interest and no principal on its debt to the World Bank. While technically Argentina simply failed to make a payment and is not in default for another 180 days, the *Washington Post* reported that, “The Argentine government defaulted on all but a fraction of an \$805 million payment due yesterday to the World Bank, deepening the country’s rift with the international financial establishment and stirring concern about a new deterioration in relations between the United States and Latin America.”

Perhaps the real story is *why* the government of Argentina failed to pay the Bank — including factors ranging from concern about depleting already dangerously low Central Bank reserves and perhaps a desire to play hard ball with its international creditors. Locally, the press both analyzed this question and gave equal or greater weight to the news that at least nine children died of mal-



nutrition in the last two weeks, mostly in the province of Tucumán.

I don't pretend to argue for an "objective" press, or that my writing about Argentina is anything near objective. I agree with ICWA Director Peter Martin that there is no such thing as totally objective reporting, only subjective reporting with (hopefully) good judgment.

Meanwhile, despite inexpensive plane fares, rock-bottom prices once you get here, a fabulous capital city and breathtaking natural sites in the interior, very few North American tourists chose to come to Argentina. It's a pity! Absent less ideological and sensational coverage of Argentina in the international press, I wish more people from the US and other countries could see Argentina with their own eyes. Tourist dollars

could also help boost the fragile Argentine economy.

Unfortunately, it appears that the press itself discourages tourism. Two days after the publication of the article that described the live cows, I received the following message from a well-traveled friend who lives in Maryland:

"There was just a big front page article in the Post about Argentina's woes. Sounds so dismal and the people interviewed spoke so hopelessly. I had been considering spending some time down there, but now I'm having second thoughts as the situation there doesn't appear to be improving anytime soon... So my possible scenarios: a) don't go to Argentina at all, b) go to Argentina just for the nine-day spring break in April, c) go to Argentina for month or so in the summer. What do you think?"

I told her to come, by all means. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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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

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