ICWA LETTERS

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A Seizure or a Birth?

Pots Clang, a President Falls and 30 Die as Argentines Say "Enough!"

By Martha Farmelo

BUENOS AIRES – December 21—3:00 p.m. I shouldn't be writing this right now. My head hurts so badly that I should take two extra-strength Tylenol and lie down. My three-year-old son, Camilo, is napping, my precious opportunity to rest. But I must write to slow the non-stop, three-day adrenaline-rush through my veins.

I also write to understand the tightness in my stomach, fluttering in my chest and pressure against the backs of my eyes—I think I'm feeling impotence, grief, elation, fear—about the vertiginous chain of events of the last few days. That chain began with scattered looting and ended in at least 30 deaths, the resignation of Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo and the loud, buzzing ascent of the helicopter above the *Casa Rosada* that whisked away President Fernando de la Rúa after he resigned last evening.

I take a deep breath. What did I write yesterday? A few days ago? Last week? I can't even remember if the phone call from Eric, my worried friend in Washington, was this morning or last night. Let me look back.

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Wednesday, December 12, 2001—11:00 p.m.

Tonight at 8:30, I was giving Camilo a bath when I began to hear clanging pots and pans. Anticipating tomorrow's general strike, men and women across Buenos Aires banged cooking pots and drivers tooted their horns to express their opposition to the government's latest economic measures. The sound was so deaf-

Men and women of all ages banged pots and pans in the streets of Palermo and other neighborhoods in Buenos Aires to protest the government's economic policies, including a $250 weekly cash limit on withdrawals.

ening that we had to shout to be heard. And this is not a poor neighborhood. We live in middle-class Palermo, where the recent $250 weekly limit on cash withdrawals has infuriated people who otherwise might not have participated in the protests.

Frightened, Camilo dipped his chin toward the bath water and covered his ears with his hands. I wanted to diffuse his fear and let him experience his first *cacerolazo* (from *cacerola*, or cooking pot). I wrapped him in a towel, carried him to our tenth-floor balcony and held him on my lap. In time, what was frightening became entertaining. When he asked why people were making such noise, I told him simply that people are angry because they don't have jobs. Echoing a conversation we had a couple of weeks ago, he replied, "Like the woman on the steps of the subway who asks for money because she doesn't have a job and can't buy food?"

"Exactly," I replied, stunned.

The riotous clanging lasted twice the 15 minutes programmed. I had read about such a protest last year in a US magazine, but it's something else to watch your neighbors striking the hell out of their sauce pans and the guy who sells us our newspapers banging the lamppost with all his might. From what I'm hearing on tonight's news, just about everyone was shocked by the breadth and fierceness of this angry protest, one that transcended political parties, unions or other organizing forces.

All over the city, the lines at banks to open accounts, sign up for a debit-card or simply request information wound around the block.

Thursday, December 13, 2001—9:00 p.m.

Alan just put Camilo to bed. We must be the only people in Argentina who put their kid to bed so early. Most people haven't even had dinner yet.

Due to the strike, Camilo's pre-school was closed "for security reasons" (such as the potential danger to those who violated the day's ban on public transportation) and we were cautioned to stay close to home, just in case. As we played Candy Land on our balcony and walked the eerily hushed streets of our neighborhood, men, women and children looted grocery stores in Rosario—the same city where nationwide looting erupted 12 years ago at the height of hyperinflation and eventually led to the resignation of President Raúl Alfonsín. Protesters burned taxis and ATMs in other parts of the country.

At first, people weren't looting. Needy families in several areas across the country simply shoplifted *en masse* from grocery stores, even where the government and supermarkets tried to head off such theft by distributing thousands of bags of food.

Monday, December 17, 2001—11:30 a.m.

I just e-mailed my friend, Jay, in Washington and told him about our weekend:

"In a word, we're well. Yesterday morning the three of us went for a bike ride in the crowded, luscious, green Palermo Parks. It was glorious. The weather was sunny, low 80's, low humidity. Camilo sang in his seat on the back of my bike. We happened upon the Buenos Aires Symphony playing a concert of Argentine classics under some trees. Then we ate some *"choripan"* (a sausage sandwich) we bought from a vendor who had turned half a steel-drum into a grill, and rode around some more before heading home for nap-time.

I'm sure you know that things here are getting dicey economically (and socially, politically), and it's hard (though fascinating) to watch it unfold. Yet this weekend my stress level has been lower than in a long time, so I'm trying to just enjoy it as much as possible."

Tuesday, December 18, 2001—11:00 p.m.

Summer vacation has begun. Friday was the last day of the school year, something I will forever associate with June, not mid-December. I spent this morning toasting the upcoming New Year with 7-Up and *pan dulce* (Argentine fruitcake) with middle-school social workers and

school psychologists I had met while observing a sexuality-education course for local teens. As I rode the number 60 bus home, I thought, "Hooray! I'm on vacation! No newsletters for at least two weeks."

So much for my lower stress level, though. Earlier tonight I settled in front of the news with a cup of lemon tea. There's been looting in Rosario again. It seems everyone is recalling 1989, and the news shows are even replaying footage of looting from then.

But some key factors have changed for the worse. Alan just told me that the number of indigent people in Argentina has practically doubled on President de la Rúa's watch. Between 1989 and 1999, then-President Carlos Saúl Menem channeled a fair amount of cash to the poor. This sustained cronyism, but held the number of indigent Argentines stable at 2.9 million—even as the economy deteriorated in the latter half of those ten years and income inequality increased throughout. De la Rúa did no such thing, and in just two years the number of indigent Argentines soared to 5.7 million. That's a lot more hungry people.

The financial context is also different. On December 1, 2001, Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo announced a new package of emergency measures. In the midst of the worst run on deposits in recent history, the key policy is a $250 weekly limit on cash bank withdrawals. Most Argentines receive their salaries and pay their rent, utilities, food and domestic help (if they have it)—even buy cars and homes—with cash. The result is rampant confusion and turmoil. Cavallo claims this change will force much of the work that is paid under the table to be "officialized" so that employees can be paid with checks or bank transfers (and receive benefits).

I'm hearing and reading accounts that employees are actually more likely to be fired, since few businesses will want to increase fixed costs during a prolonged recession. At Camilo's pre-school, few parents can pay this month's fee. As a result, the teachers and cleaning staff aren't getting paid, so many of them, in turn, can't pay their debts, buy holiday presents or always put ample food on the table. It's like being in the back seat of a car when the driver slams on the brakes: not only does movement come to a sudden halt, but as you double over, your head hits the front seat and the seatbelt cuts into your belly.

Meanwhile, Argentines voted overwhelmingly "Yes" in a popular vote organized by the non-partisan *Frente*

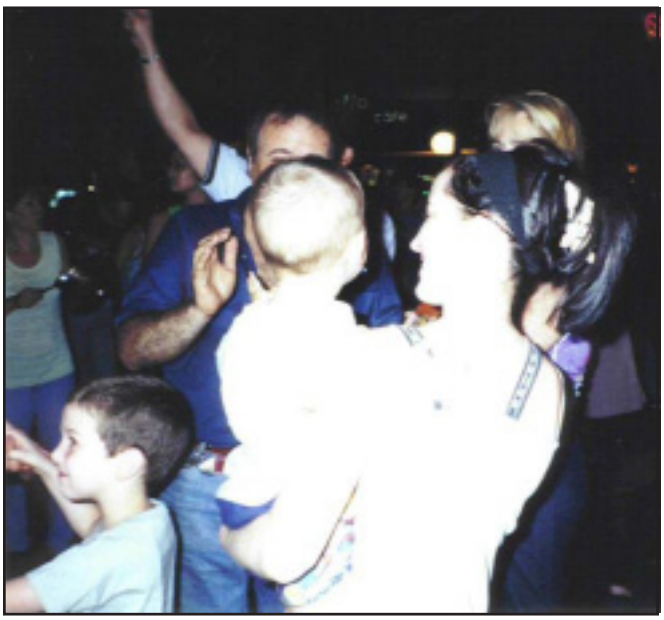
Nacional Contra la Pobreza or National Front Against Poverty (FRENAPO). In just four days, FRENAPO mobilized three million Argentines in neighborhoods and villages across the country to vote on a proposal to create monthly unemployment insurance of $380 per head of household, $80 for every child of unemployed parents and $150 for senior citizens with no pension. About 9,000 voters opted against the proposal. More people registered their "Yes" than voted for all the Peronist candidates combined in the October, 2001 mid-term elections.

Wednesday, December 19, 2001—noon.

Darn! Alan's mother was going to make the hour trip in to take Camilo to the suburb of Burzaco for his first big sleepover at Granny and Granddad's, and Alan and I were going to have more than 24 hours of down-time. Apparently there's looting at supermarkets in Banfield and Lanús, two suburbs between here and Burzaco, and Alan's mother is worried that Camilo could become stranded for several days. I suppose she's right. Given what's going on, it seems petty, but I'm disappointed.

Wednesday, December 19, 2001—6:00 p.m.

Today saw widespread looting throughout the country, including sections of downtown Buenos Aires and its suburbs. It was horrific to watch Argentines pitted against Argentines, all of whom blame the government—not each other—for the current crisis. Traumatized shop owners were filmed in tears. Looters were filmed screaming, "We're hungry!" and "We want to work!" Municipal workers on strike in the city of Córdoba stoned and burned the municipal headquarters. Sixteen people have died, some killed by shopkeepers. I've been worried about Camilo's teacher Marina, whom I love dearly. She is supposed to be married by a judge tomorrow, and her church wedding is Saturday night. I hope everything will be OK.



Many parents with small children participated in the late-night cacerolazos *and marches.*

This afternoon I went for a walk through our section of Palermo and found that many stores had closed their doors, including the Disco grocery store and two pharmacies across the street. The white-coated pharmacists were filling prescriptions through a waist-high, one-foot-by-one-foot hole in their lowered, protective, metal mesh.

On the other hand, most of the shops along busy Avenida Santa Fe were wide open and full of bustling shoppers, as was the Alto Palermo shopping mall. Though, again, it seems petty, my concern is not so much safety, but rather—as a true Farmelo—getting food. If the looting doesn't stop soon, markets are likely to be closed indefinitely. We won't go hungry, but as we're short on fresh goods, we may have to get by on one hell of a lot of pasta and dry corn flakes.

Thursday, December 20, 2001-1:30 a.m.

A few hours ago, President de la Rúa declared a 30-day state of siege, suspending all constitutional guarantees. At 10:45 p.m. yesterday he gave a short speech that mostly condemned opportunistic looters and downplayed people's hunger and frustration. About two minutes into it, I heard one individual bang a pot on their balcony, then two, then several, then a multitude—another furious, spontaneous *cacerolazo*.

At about 11:30 p.m., Alan and I were sitting on our balcony analyzing events when suddenly we realized that a massive column of people was moving down our four-lane, one-way avenue, diverting the oncoming traffic. Thousands of people filling five city-blocks whacked their pots, pans and drums and chanted anti-Cavallo slogans. I think they were on their way to the Economy Minister's home about a mile from here.

"Cavallo hijo de puta! La puta que te parió!" Cavallo son-of-a-bitch! The whore that birthed you! (a vintage Argentine curse).

It was breathtaking to see so many men and women of all ages—entire families, even—marching calmly, if noisily. They seemed to have mobilized spontaneously with no apparent leaders. The front of the march was just some middle-class folks in polo shirts, Bermuda shorts and sandals, walking along. There was not a sign of a political party, union or other organizational presence. It appears that just about everyone is totally pissed off and declaring that they won't tolerate the current economic policies any more, period. About half an hour later, another group about two blocks long passed by our apartment. Similar marches took place in other parts of the country.

In Buenos Aires, men, women and kids packed the

Imagine five full blocks of our four-lane street, Avenida Coronel Díaz, packed with protesters whacking pots, pans and drums.

historic Plaza de Mayo in front of the *Casa Rosada*, the same spot where an overwhelmingly working-class throng congregated in 1955 to demand Perón's release from prison. Amazingly, this time there was not a single political banner or sign among the thousands of mobilized Argentines, nothing but the light-blue and white of the national flag. Some men had their young children up on their shoulders, clapping their chubby little hands. Older men and women were supported by younger folk.

People seemed both elated and furious, chanting "*Que se vayan! Que se vayan!*" (They've got to go! They've got to go!) and "*Si este no es el pueblo, el pueblo dónde está?!*" (If this is not the people, then where are the people?!). Alan noticed that the more politicized word "*pueblo*" (implying social agency) is being used again, even by the media, in place of the more innocuous "*gente*."

By 12:30 a.m. Cavallo resigned and requested extra security for himself and his family. Around that time, mounted police charged the loud but non-violent crowd in the Plaza de Mayo, and people dispersed temporarily. Things have finally quieted down along our street and Camilo is going to get up by 7:30 a.m., protest or no protest. I'm going to try to sleep.

Thursday, December 20, 2001—3:00 p.m.

Yup, our *gordo* got up at 7:30.

Peaceful protesters and police remained in the Plaza all night. This morning things seemed fairly quiet, and I went for a swim downtown. My buddies at the pool mostly just looked at me, biting their lower lips, raising their eyebrows and shaking their heads. They talked of feeling uncertainty, anguish, indignation and relief. One woman spoke angrily of how frightened she was when heading home the night before to Ciudad Evita (Evita City), which is located near the Ezeiza airport. "The looting, these politicians…this is a disaster," she said.

The looting has mostly quieted down, in part because the government has promised to distribute millions in emergency food aid. I received an e-mail this morning from a researcher I had contacted, letting me know that I can call her anytime to get together. I can tell that down the street the magistrate is still conducting weddings. Every so often we hear the cheers of families and friends as the newlyweds emerge on the street.

However, as I write this, the police appear to have been ordered to empty the Plaza de Mayo, and the battle seems powerfully symbolic as well as violent. Cops are shooting water, rubber bullets and tear gas at peaceful protesters, and mounted police are charging unarmed individuals, including a small group in the square sitting huddled under an Argentine flag. Coincidentally, this is exactly the day and time that the white-kerchiefed Madres de Plaza de Mayo walk their weekly circles around the monument in the Plaza demanding the return of their loved ones "disappeared" during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. The police have already arrested a number of Madres, but they seem to be letting a small group circle the monument, though surrounded and practically crushed by police.

Meanwhile, the Congress is meeting to debate the state of siege and possibly revoke the executive's superpowers and the $250 weekly cash limit. We still don't know who will replace Cavallo; if, when or with what the dollar-peso parity will be replaced; if de la Rúa will remain President; and what will happen over the Christmas holiday.

Alan and I had a discussion about which of us would go observe the events, a question that would never have arisen if we didn't have a child at home. The issue of gender came up in a strange but not unusual way: although we can not explain why, it seemed safer for Alan

While Alan was observing the protests, Camilo tried his first mate, *a bitter Argentine tea.*

as a man. The situation is clearly dangerous. Most peaceful protesters are abandoning the Plaza de Mayo, and except for a few female journalists scooting here and there with microphones, I see fewer and fewer women among the images on TV. We also weighed the fact that Alan's having grown up here and experienced a dictatorship gives him a set of street-smarts I just don't have. In the end, my fear of deportation caused me to vote for his going. I am still here on a tourist visa, and given the state of siege and the outbreak of violence, I don't want to risk being evicted from Argentina.

While Alan's been gone, calls for him from U.S. reporters have started coming in. As an articulate, English-speaking, progressive, Argentine economist, Alan has suddenly been in demand for interviews on progressive U.S. radio like the Pacifica network. It's going to be exhausting. He's going to need to prepare, and I'm going to have to get Camilo out of the house when they're ready to tape or go on the air.

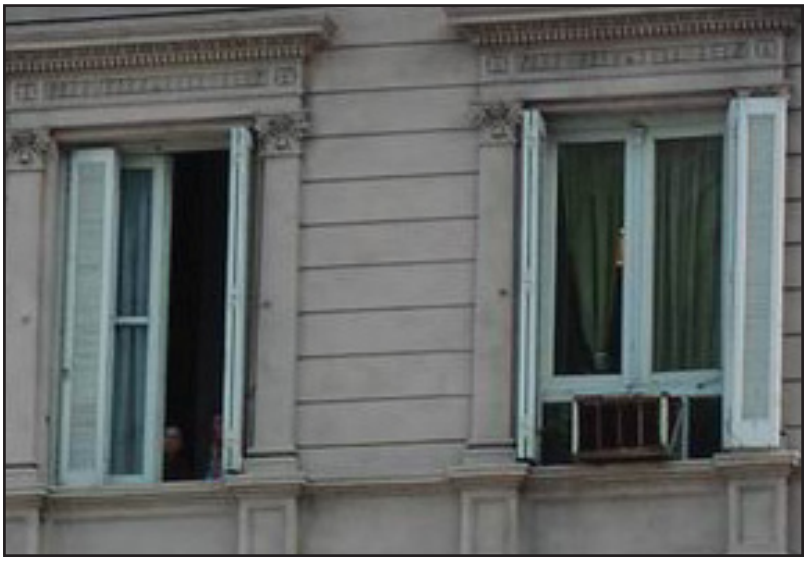
Alan has agreed to be home by 6:00 p.m. or call. He promised to keep a prudent distance from the violence, and I trust him. Camilo and I made Christmas ornaments out of home-made play-dough and he's painting them out on the balcony. Earlier, Camilo tried—and liked—his first *mate*, a bitter Argentine tea sipped through a silver straw from a gourd or wooden vessel. I took a picture to show to Alan.

Thursday, December 20, 2001—7:00 p.m.

On Alan's way downtown, the subway shut down. A young, female police officer with a thick braid down her back wondered what to do. Alan knew things boded poorly when she said, "They told all of us to go to Plaza de Mayo. I guess I'll take the bus."

Alan found people in dresses and ties participating in the events, despite the chaos. The glass fronts of banks and stores had been riddled with bullets. Burning tires and other debris were sending up dense columns of gray smoke. He brought back pictures of riot police, mounted

Protesters and police in the back of the Casa Rosada *where the President goes in and out. The female officer with the braid down her back (fourth from the left) was with Alan on the subway before it closed down and they both caught a bus.*



(Above) Police and protesters faced off on one side of the Casa Rosada, *adjacent to the historic Plaza de Mayo. (Right) Frightened employees inside the* Casa Rosada *peer out the windows down on to the Plaza de Mayo.*

police and burning cars. One of the most telling moments, he reports, was hearing what was obviously a Peronist meeting a friend on the street and commenting, "We'll be back. I'm going to be director of such-and-such again."

While Alan was out, Camilo watched with me while President de la Rúa made a speech calling on the opposition to join him in a coalition government. He also said that he was not going to cling to his position and was ready to commit a significant act of *grandeza* (literally, greatness). It sounded to me like he was declaring, "I'm ready to quit."

As he spoke, Camilo said, "De la Rúa is bad."

"Who says that?," I asked.

"He just is," he replied. I suspect he's heard this at pre-school.

As de la Rúa spoke, the station began to show in the

corner of the screen live shots of mounted police galloping near fires and smoke. I changed the channel, but not quickly enough. A few minutes later Camilo said casually, "I want to live in Christmas Town," (from the story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer).

"Why, Sweetie?," I asked.

"Because it's a nice place," he replied.

Sometimes one has to listen very closely to children.

Thursday, December 20, 2001—10:30 p.m.

Four people were killed at or near the Plaza de Mayo today. One teenager was shot through the neck with a lead bullet. Sporadic food riots are still going on, as well.

De la Rúa has resigned. He's been prohibited from leaving the country because he's being charged with ordering the deadly repression. Cavallo is also prohibited from leaving the country as he's implicated in a major arms-trafficking case.

I guess Alan can kiss goodbye last week's interesting job prospect at the government's international trade office.

I just switched on CNN and was horrified to find zero news on Argentina. "I can't believe this! Don't you know that people are dying here?," I said out loud to the CNN people in Atlanta.

What will happen next is not clear, especially as the opposition Peronists are splintered internally. Amazingly, Menem is out of the picture. For weeks people have been talking about the possibility of *acefalía*" (literally headlessness), or what would be the chain of succession if the President resigned. This debate was especially germane since the Vice-President, Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez of the progressive FREPASO coalition, was never replaced after he resigned 14 months ago. I assume that Peronist Senate President Ramón Puerta, who was recently designated as second-in-command when the President is away, is in charge. Actually, I'm not sure, but I'm my brain is saturated with the day's events. I'm going to bed.

Friday, December 21, 2001—4:30 p.m.

Instead of lying down, I took two Tylenol and stayed at my computer. It's been another long day. More wounded protesters have died, bringing the death toll in and around the Plaza de Mayo to seven. The papers are reporting more than 2,700 arrests in the city of Buenos Aires alone.

This morning Camilo and I walked to the Norte grocery store about four blocks away. The feeling inside was utterly strange. One short, sixty-something woman in the fruit section tousled Camilo's hair and said, "Oh, what a beautiful boy. It's unbelievable what's happening. Children are the most beautiful thing we have. People are using them. They're dying. It's so terrible."

I wanted to put my palm over her mouth. Did she not realize that such words are frightening to a three-year-old, or did she not care?

Then at the deli-counter I waited with a slim woman who looked about 45 behind a gray-haired, slow-moving woman. As a heavy-set man in a white apron and butcher's cap served up her sliced ham, the gray-haired woman raged on about how awful things are and what a terrible time it is to be an Argentine. Behind her back the slim woman smiled at me forlornly, and after the other woman was gone, I said, "I'd really just like to shop in peace."

"Me, too," she said. "But don't you hear a silence?," she asked.

She was right. Now that no one was ranting, there was a disconcerting hush in the huge store, just when the place should have been bustling with pre-holiday shoppers.

Smoke and tear gas filled the streets around the Plaza de Mayo during days of looting and protest by hungry and furious Argentines.

"It's sad," she said. She looked heartbroken.

As I lined up my heaping cartful of food on the checkout belt, I learned that Norte's free-delivery service had been suspended to protect the delivery guys. When I mentioned that I live just four blocks away, the cashier called over a young, male worker who pushed our load all the way home in a shopping cart. Camilo smiled ear-to-ear as he rode down the street in the cart's fold-down seat.

Groups of mounted police galloped around the Plaza de Mayo and charged peaceful protesters. Images of them on TV prompted three-year-old Camilo to declare, "I want to live in Christmas Town."

At lunchtime, Gustavo, an old friend of Alan's, stopped by. Sure enough, they began that chicken-and-egg debate about who provoked the violence, the police or the protesters. I was saved from their conversation by a phone call from my friend, Lina, who was at her office at the Ministry of Education. After we established that we were all OK and confirmed that we would meet just before Marina's wedding tomorrow night, we had a conversation that consisted solely of questions.

Hesitating, I asked her, "Well, what do you think?"

"Well…it was all predictable, don't you think?," she said.

"But did you think it would happen so fast and be so violent?," I countered.

And she reflected, "How do you sort out what you think from what you feel? How do you distinguish now between what you expected, and what you didn't expect, and what has actually happened?"

"And, I mean, what happens next?," I added.

There was silence. "Things are so unclear—what do I know?," she said.

Later that afternoon, Alan took Camilo to the zoo nearby. Alan reported that as they crossed the botanical garden and headed home, Camilo sustained perhaps his first political discussion for more than five slowly-walked city blocks.

"Where is de la Rúa?," he wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," Alan said.

"Did he die?," he asked.

"No, he's fine."

"Did he do a bad job?" (I think he got that one from me, while we were watching TV).

"Yes, many people think so."

"Why did he do a bad job?," Camilo persisted.

"Because he caused so many people to lose their jobs." Good one. We know he gets the jobless thing.

"How do people lose their jobs? Is de la Rúa without a job?," and so on. I was astounded to learn of it.

I am trying to maintain perspective. I realize that conflicts far more sustained and bloody are taking place in many places of the world. And for good or bad, Argentina still has a long way to go before it hits bottom. 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.

More than one U.S. analyst had said a while back that what has happened was like a car crash in slow motion. To me it feels more like Argentina has just experienced a 48-hour, collective seizure, and in its aftermath, everyone is trying to figure out exactly what happened to the country and themselves. Alan counters that my metaphor implies that Argentines have been unconscious during these events, and just the opposite is true. Others like Congresswoman Elisa Carrió have likened the events to a birth.

Indisputably, the middle class has, *en masse*, said "Enough!" The poor have said, "We can't take it anymore." What made the events so different and historic is the absolute lack of a convoking organization. And rather

than a military overthrow, the people—*el pueblo*—have ousted their president. It does feel as if Argentina is entering a new era, though it's hard to predict what exactly will change.

What organic, organizational mechanisms might emerge—or not—for channeling the sustained, constructive, massive influence of the middle and lower classes on the political process?

If organizing mechanisms do emerge, will they negate the very non-partisan, non-sectarian "purity" of the spontaneous nature of the uprising?

In the absence of some organizing mechanism, will the threat of repeated, spontaneous mobilizations—peaceful or otherwise—serve to hold politicians (and security forces) accountable?

Will the newly-again-in-power Peronists understand that Argentines throwing out de la Rúa is not the same as their affirmatively choosing the opposition, and act accordingly?

While it seems clear that we've seen the end of the current, IMF-driven, neoclassical economic model, will there be enough vision, consensus and political will to implement a viable, stabilizing alternative that leads to reactivation, growth, jobs and an equitable distribution of wealth?

As I formulate these questions, I'm hearing on the TV behind me a description of the dead: a 25-year-old guy who three days earlier had found a job; a young, male seminarian; a 14-year-old boy who adored soccer and just graduated from eighth grade; a 35-year-old widow, mother of seven.

Maybe I won't cry after all. Alan hasn't and won't. At points over the past three days, I've felt giddy with hope about Argentina's future. At this moment, I mostly feel sick.

Sunday, December 30, 2001—11:40 p.m.

Post script

Events continue to unfold at a dizzying pace. On Friday, December 21, Senate President Ramón Puerta agreed to take over from de la Rúa, but only for 48 hours while the Legislative Assembly picked a new president.

Two days later, I took Camilo to Parque Las Heras, a large, rolling, green space two blocks away that is normally filled with soccer players, sunbathers and kids. I asked the only other mother at the playground why it was empty, and learned that hosts of Argentines were glued to their TV sets watching the seemingly endless congressional debate on the selection of Peronist governor Adolfo Rodríguez Saá to take over the presidency. He finally did take office on December 23. As I write this, he is reading his resignation speech, and I have no idea who will assume the Presidency next.

The first days of the Rodríguez Saá administration were described as "kinesthetic" and "vertiginous." He announced official default on Argentina's public debt, denied rumors of devaluation, pledged to create one million jobs by the end of January and eliminated ministries such as public works and education (where my friend Lina works).

Marina's wedding was lovely, and after the ceremony she was photographed surrounded by "her kids," Camilo included. The Christmas holiday was relatively quiet, except for the firecrackers and fireworks that went on through the wee hours. At midnight we sat on our bal-

This prophetic cartoon appeared in Pagina/12 *on December 5, 2001. In the first frame, the bearded character says, "They touch our asses, they freeze our savings, they pay us when they want, they limit our trips, they lower our salaries, they fire us… I mean, are we ass-holes, the middle class?" In the second frame, "Let's take to the streets, let's throw out the [Economy] Minister, let's fill the Plaza [de Mayo], let's overturn unpopular measures, let's defend the constitution. Forget 90 days [of the $250 weekly limit on withdrawals]. Freedom Now!" Then, "WHEN WILL WE THE MIDDLE CLASS RISE UP?" And in the last frame, "Before we no longer are one."*

cony, drank champagne, ate *pan dulce* and wondered out loud what will happen next.

Meanwhile, government workers cleared away the piles of ashes and burned-out carcasses of automobiles. Bank staff and shop owners started sweeping up the debris and ordering replacement glass for their shot-up and busted-in storefronts, and those who could began to submit insurance claims.

Then at 10:00 p.m. on December 28, we heard some people clanging pots and pans here and there on their balconies. By 11:30 or so, noisy but peaceful crowds converged at Avenida Santa Fe two blocks from our apartment and in other middle class neighborhoods such as Belgrano and Caballito. Once again, mostly middle-class Argentines waving nothing but national flags spontaneously took to the streets and coalesced around three principal issues, which could be discerned from the chanting.

Those festering concerns were dubbed the three "c's": *el corralito* (the little corral), or limits on bank withdrawals; *la Corte,* the Supreme Court, named mostly by Carlos Menem and considered enormously corrupt; and *corrupción* (corruption) in the new President's cabinet—principally his chief adviser, Carlos Grosso, the former mayor of Buenos Aires who is facing charges of fraud and corruption. By 1:30 a.m., Grosso had resigned. Protesters—we don't know who they were—also broke into and vandalized the Congress and attacked the police at the *Casa Rosada.*

Yesterday, Rodriguez Saá asked for the resignation of his entire cabinet in response to the *cacerolazo* and to gain the support of the full block of Peronist governors. Today, he called a meeting at the presidential summer residence with those 14 governors to decide on next steps. When only five showed up, he announced then and there that he would resign. During the meeting, Argentines surrounded the residence banging pots and pans so loudly those inside could barely carry on their business.

Meanwhile, tension has also been heightened by continued, if sporadic, violence. Yesterday, train workers who have not been paid for months attacked railroad offices at the Once station and burned the train cars they normally work on. Also yesterday, three young men watching TV in a market in the neighborhood of Floresta commented something to the effect of "he deserved it" when images of young protesters attacking a cop appeared on the screen. A retired police officer present shot all three dead, point-blank. When thousands of neighbors burned two vehicles in front of the police station, officers responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

On December 28, people mobilized in another spontaneous cacerolazo *which led to the resignation of the new President's chief adviser, who is charged with corruption.*

Events like these are an eerie echo of the most recent dictatorship. Many claim that the ferocity of the police

Protesting Argentines achieved the resignations of Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo (top left), President Fernando de la Rúa (top right, and the new President's chief adviser, Carlos Grosso (bottom left). President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá (bottom right) resigned after seven days in office in response to an institutional crisis within the Peronist party.

attacks in and around the Plaza de Mayo exceeded the repression of public protest during the dictatorship. The daily *Clarín* reported today that HIJOS, an organization of sons and daughters of people "disappeared" between 1976 and 1983, denounced the distribution of fraudulent flyers with the organization's name on them calling for the looting and burning of the Congress and *Casa Rosada.* To many, this smells like the work of the security forces, or frightening, far-right groups.

As I have watched the post-de-la-Rúa political harangues, I have thought to myself, "So much for so many women in politics" (*see* MJF-1, MJF-3). Despite 30-percent female representation in the Congress, the decision-makers on the news have been almost exclusively male. What a contrast to the looters and protesters, who except for the bitter end on December 20th, appeared to be equal numbers of men and women.

That has even been true when the form of protest was banging pots and pans. After the apron, what stronger symbol of women's domestic roles than a cooking pot? What is the origin of such an intriguing form of protest? I was surprised to learn that the intellectual author of the *cacerolazo* is actually Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez, de la Rúa's former Vice President, who organized anti-Menem mobilizations during the 1990s.

Just this morning our friends were feeling everything from excitement to dismay to disgust. Virtually everyone was—and still is—wondering, "How far will this go?" and "What's next?" I couldn't help but focus on the possibility of judicial reform. If Argentines succeed in bringing real accountability to the justice system, they will have achieved one of the most far-reaching and profound changes imaginable. I asked myself, "Can 'people power' make that happen?" Now I'm extra-aware of the more basic issue of Argentina's governability.

Like a cat with nine lives, just 12 hours ago and despite the violence, Argentina seemed to once again have a chance to recoup, to grow and to establish economic and political systems that work. Right now it's not clear if this cat has landed on its feet. My friends and family outside Argentina want to know if we feel horrified or unsafe. Mostly, I consider it a privilege—though it will be a struggle—to watch things unfold. ❑

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