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## *Gender and Participatory Democracy*

# Men and Women Cry Out Together: “Never Again ‘Don’t Get Involved!’”

By Martha Farmelo

MAY 15, 2002

**BUENOS AIRES** –The night an Argentine sit-com showed a presumably heterosexual man passionately kiss his male, transvestite maid I was so flabbergasted by the open-mindedness of it all that I covered my mouth with my hand. Two seconds later, a commercial showed a darkly tanned, body-sculpted woman in a minuscule bikini, slathered in baby oil and assuming all manner of sexual poses. The contrast took my breath away.

Likewise, during the week I spent being greeted by young secretaries in tight skirts who shepherded me into meetings with high-level government officials, bank presidents, union heads and other civil-society leaders, I was reminded that men indisputably run the show in Argentina at all kinds of levels. Nonetheless, when pot-banging citizens in Buenos Aires put down their saucepans to discuss the financial, political and social crisis and organize themselves, the gender dynamics—who attends, speaks, sets the agenda and controls the meetings—have been aston-



*Participants in a new neighborhood assembly that meets in front of the Alto Palermo mall vote to name their group “Altos de Palermo,” the original name for the neighborhood, to distinguish themselves from the shopping center.*

## A Glossary of Social Change

*Argentine Spanish is constantly evolving, and the crisis has given new life to old words and produced new ones. The following is a sample of these terms.*

**Asamblea Interbarrial:** the inter-neighborhood forum that takes place on Sunday afternoons at Parque Centenario in Buenos Aires. More recently, the term has also been applied to smaller inter-neighborhood forums, such as the new group of assemblies in the Palermo section of Buenos Aires. This term came into use in January 2002.

**Asamblea Popular:** popular assembly, a common alternative term to neighborhood assembly (see below).

**Asamblea Vecinal:** neighborhood assembly. This term came into recent use in Argentina in early January 2002.

**Asamblear:** to hold a neighborhood assembly.

**Asambleísta:** participant in a neighborhood assembly.

**Autoconvocar:** to self-convene. This is not a new word, but came into more frequent use beginning in December 2001 to describe the *cacerolazos* (see below), neighborhood assemblies and other gatherings and protests.

**Cacerolazo:** from *cacerola*, or cooking pot. A noisy protest in which people bang on pots and pans. This is an older word, since *cacerolazos* were used in the early 1970s by Chilean women opposed to President Allende to protest lack of food in the stores; have been used in Venezuela where lazy protestors can buy a pot-banging CD; and were used in Argentina against President Menem during the 1990s.

**Caceroleros:** people who participate in *cacerolazos*.

**Cacerolear:** to bang one's pots and pans.

**El corralito:** (literally, little corral or playpen). Banking restrictions first imposed on December 3, 2001 that have essentially frozen Argentines' peso and dollar accounts. This term came into use around the first week of December, 2001.

ishingly egalitarian. Not only that, no one seems to notice. These dynamics are a non-event.

This place makes my head spin.

### When Banging Pots Is Not Enough

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

I formulated this query while sitting at my computer late on December 30, 2001, as interim President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá was reading his resignation speech after seven short days in office. In fact, I included it in the post-script that concluded MJF-4 (*A Seizure or a Birth? Pots Clang, a President Falls and 30 Die as Argentines say "Enough!"*).



Just ten days earlier, in the context of widespread looting and generalized outrage against the government's freezing of bank accounts (*el corralito*, the little corral or playpen), then-President Fernando de la Rúa announced a state of siege. Before his speech was even over, massive, spontaneous groups of furious pot-banging protestors began parading through the streets. They didn't stop until Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo resigned and, less than 24 hours later, de la Rúa did the same. During the turmoil, seven protestors died in and around Plaza de Mayo.

*After the furious cacerolazos of December, neighbors continued to meet but this time put down their saucepans to discuss the crisis and decide what they want to do about it.*

Then the night of December 28, 2001, fearless *caceroleros* again clanged in fury until the wee hours when Carlos Grosso, President Rodríguez Saá's reputedly corrupt chief adviser, announced his resignation. Rodríguez Saá resigned less than two days later.

In the first days of January, groups of neighbors of all ages continued to take to the streets with saucepans in hand, but now began to congregate to discuss the crisis and what they wanted to do about it. They invariably met in purely public spaces: a street corner (often spilling out into the middle of the street, which they blocked off as a form of protest), the corner of a plaza, or the base of a monument.

These groups are defined largely by the fact that they are *autoconvocados* or "self-convened," spontaneous gatherings. Pretty soon there were groups of neighbors coming together regularly all over the city. They confected large, simple banners proclaiming their meeting spot and the day and time.

The group closest to us first met on January 2, and soon used black spray paint on an old sheet to identify itself as the "*Asamblea Vecinal de Scalabrini Ortiz y Santa Fe—Miercoles y Viernes 21:00*" (Neighborhood Assembly of [the intersection of] Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe—Wednesdays and Fridays 9:00 p.m.). By January 28, one web site listed 49 assemblies, 46 in the capital and three in the outskirts.

In most neighborhoods, at least a couple of hundred people came to



*The assemblies immediately began to identify themselves with signs indicating the street corner they meet at and the day and time of their gatherings. This group meets at the intersection of Mario Bravo and Córdoba on Tuesdays at 10:00 p.m.*

each of those chaotic first several meetings. Reflecting the widespread revulsion toward political authority, not a single leadership position was created, though in most, smaller working groups called commissions were created to address topics such as economics and public relations. As people took turns speaking to the group, whether rabble-rousing or soul-searching, they all seemed to address the same, profound question: "What kind of a country do we want?"

### **Hundreds Vote: To Hold Assembly or March to the Plaza de Mayo?**

The assemblies convoked the first national *cacerolazo* for 8:00 p.m. Friday, January 25. It was the first protest actually convened by the assemblies, rather than a spontaneous mobilization. I imagined it would be small and lame, and boy, was I wrong. Neighbors banged their pots at assembly sites and other street corners all over Buenos Aires and in at least 100 cities in the interior.

At 8:00 on the dot we heard clanging saucepans on nearby balconies. Soon after, *caceroleros* had blocked off the corner of Coronel Díaz and Santa Fe, two avenues a couple of blocks from our home. Despite pouring rain, about 10,000 residents marched to the Plaza de Mayo that night. As the group broke up around midnight, the po-

## **The Birth of the *Asamblea Vecinal de Scalabrini Ortiz y Santa Fe***

*On January 15, shortly after giving our e-mail addresses to one of the participants in our neighborhood assembly, we received the following message, in Spanish:*

Welcome!

On Wednesday, January 2, 2002, a group of neighbors in Palermo self-convened at the corner of Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe to express our discontent with the country's current situation. There we realized that it isn't enough to bang our pots and pans, it is urgent to add content to the protest.

We had discovered the necessity to organize ourselves, debate ideas, listen to each other and find points of agreement. In this way we began to circulate a notebook among the protestors in which we listed our names, e-mail, phone numbers and proposals behind which we could all join together.

We also know that there are already numerous groups of neighbors that have taken the same path. We would like for the next *cacerolazo* to allow us to get to know our neighbors and to listen to each other. The way to do this is very simple; it's enough to have a notebook, a pencil and the desire to organize ourselves.

Little by little we learned to listen to each other and we were able to form neighborhood assemblies through which we realized that we were all in agreement on at least the following points:

- To remove the Supreme Court and arbitrate the means to assure the honorability, transparency and independence of the judicial branch.
- Call for general elections, without the law of lists [See MJF-3].
- To investigate the debt and capital flight that our country has suffered, as well as the degree of responsibility that the political class, banks, privatized enterprises and large economic groups have in this plunder of which we have been the victims.
- Express clearly that our claims are NOT limited to the annulment of "*el corralito*" but rather that we demand profound changes in the political system of this country.

We are also sending you some of the messages that we have been exchanging so that you can see our latest activities.

If you want to speak with us you can find us every day at Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe starting at 10:00 p.m. to talk and perhaps improvise a *cacerolazo*. Wednesdays and Fridays we meet on that same corner and from there we go to Santa Fe and Malabia where we hold our assemblies.

Greetings to all and please circulate this e-mail.



*Weekly cacerolazos on the steps of the Supreme Court demand the resignation of its nine members.*

lice repressed peaceful marchers with rubber bullets and tear gas. Even people heading home or hanging out near the Plaza were attacked by police.

Exactly one week later on Friday, February 1, in direct contradiction to its previous decision on *el corralito*, the Supreme Court — widely considered to be corrupt to the core — ruled that the withdrawal restrictions were unconstitutional. This ruling came one day after the fifth furious, weekly *cacerolazo* on the steps of the Court demanding the resignation of its nine members, convened

by the association of labor lawyers and supported across the board by the neighborhood assemblies. Given that timing, the Court's ruling seemed a pathetic attempt to appease an angry, mobilized populace. President Eduardo Duhalde also claims the justices tried to blackmail him by promising to hold off the ruling if he agreed to halt the impending Congressional impeachment process against the nine justices.

Around 9:30 that evening, President Duhalde held a press conference in which he declared, "*Yo no soy un presidente débil*" (I am not a weak president), which many interpreted as a direct threat to the *caceroleros* and other dissidents. Meanwhile, I understood that the court ruling entitled Argentines to demand their money from the banks that coming Monday and that the teetering banking system would finally collapse as a result.

After Duhalde's speech, Alan and I headed to the assembly meeting at the corner of Scalabrini Ortiz and Avenida Santa Fe. About four or five hundred people banging pots and pans had cut off Santa Fe, a main thoroughfare. Like all the *cacerolazos* I have seen so far, men and women were out in equal numbers.

On the street corner itself, Sebastián, a skinny, baby-faced 26-year-old, and Carlos, a 50-ish man with longish salt-and-pepper hair, toiled to stop the pot-banging and call the group to order. Yelling into a hand-held, electric bull-horn, Carlos read the list of items the group had agreed on in votes at previous meetings, such as a call for general elections without the closed-list system (see



*This man is participating quietly in a noisy cacerolazo on the steps of the Supreme Court. His sign reads, "If the court falls, corruption falls."*

MJF-3). People edged in closer to the corner, but still blocked off Santa Fe.

Sebastián then took over and made an announcement. "The first question is, Do we march to the Plaza [de Mayo] and risk repression, *cacerolear* in the barrio, or hold assembly as planned?"

People yelled out opinions and suggestions. Sebastián suggested those in favor of going to the Plaza de Mayo speak first. Two women with long brown hair came forward, the first a twenty-something hippy in ragged jeans and a t-shirt, the second a thirty-something woman I took to be a professional in dark pants and a red shirt. Both exhorted the crowd not to be inhibited by fear of repression and argued the best protest is filling the Plaza. Those wanting to hold the meeting as planned began chanting, "*a-sam-blea, a-sam-blea.*" More than once, they were drowned out by others chanting, "*qué se vote, qué se vote*" (let's vote, let's vote).

Finally, Sebastián asked those wanting to march to the Plaza to move to his right and those preferring to hold assembly to move to his left. After some shuffling, about half the crowd left off in the direction of Plaza de Mayo while about 250 people stayed behind to *asamblear*. There were slightly more women than men in this latter group.

Still yelling into the megaphone, Sebastián announced that several people had asked that someone give a quick analysis of the day's Supreme Court ruling. Immediately a handful of men and women surrounding a woman named Cristina lifted their arms and pointed their index fingers downward at her head. "She's an economist! She's good!," they yelled. Sebastián waved her forward and she indeed gave a clear, succinct and insightful analysis of the ruling.

Sebastián then listed on a scrap of paper the names of those who wanted to speak and limited them to five minutes (more or less). He proved to be well-informed, eminently committed to democratic procedures and skillful at guiding a huge and unwieldy group. He did not impose a single opinion of his own, nor did he propose or accept topics of discussion except those raised by the speakers.

The dozen or so people who spoke that night included barely more men than women. Moreover, the men seemed only a smidgen less inhibited than the women, if at all. Several women expressed strong opinions to those standing around them in the crowd without taking the initiative to address the group, but so did many men. In general, men and women opined with equal passion and confidence. In contrast to what I would expect in most



The neighborhood assembly that first sprang up closest to our home meets at the corner of Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe. The sign says Wednesdays and Fridays at 9:00 p.m., but since commissions meet on Mondays, they have cut back full meetings to Wednesdays only.

Latin American capitals, it looked like a scene from somewhere more like my former home, Washington, DC.

The comments were somewhat all over the place, ranging from helpful insights and inspiring calls for action to negative harangues and absurd proposals. When something was not clear, men and women yelled out demands for explanations. Neighbors stated more than once that they were not fooled by the Supreme Court's ruling and would continue to fight for the impeachment of the entire Court. They also said repeatedly that even if the government lifts *el corralito*, they plan to stay in the streets "*hasta que se vayan todos*" (until they all leave, meaning all politicians).

I had to strain to hear the speakers. On and off, people on the fringes of the meeting banged their pots, which makes a deafening noise. At one point the neighbors blocked the path of a city bus that normally turned from Scalabrini Ortiz onto Santa Fe. After about five minutes of tenacious shouting and pot-banging, the driver gave up and traveled the wrong way down a one-way street, his only choice.

After an hour or so, a contingent of *caceroleros* carrying the banner of the *Asamblea Vecinal de Palermo Viejo* came marching down Santa Fe. At that point, the meeting was suspended and most people began to *cacerolear* as they marched down Santa Fe.

### Where's the Machismo?

This assembly showed me that although it was *el corralito* and the declaration of the state of siege that sent the middle-class flooding into the streets, men and

women now articulate plainly that the entire economic and political system needs urgent, radical change and the entire Supreme Court has to go.

In addition, the egalitarian gender dynamics left me dumbstruck. And they are not limited to our assembly. Whenever I see pictures or film clips or hear representatives of the assemblies speaking to the press, there are almost always similar numbers of men and women participating, analyzing and opining with equal force. Even a female trade unionist in the city of Rosario in the province of Santa Fe said the gender dynamics in her neighborhood assembly are the same.

Moreover, reminiscent of the bizarre silence surrounding the recent, historic swell in the number of women in the Argentine Senate from six to 35 percent (see MJF-3 for details), this gender dynamic seems to go unnoticed. Unlike the change in the Congress, the assemblies are discussed at length in the press. Still, I have yet to hear a single mention of the notably gender-equal participation of men and women.

When I asked a sociologist named Beatriz who participates in the assembly at Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe (SO-SF) for her opinion about these gender dynamics, she said she hadn't noticed them. She agreed that they



*This sign glued to a wall near our home invites neighbors to a roundtable debate on Argentina's external debt sponsored by the Palermo Viejo Neighborhood Assembly.*

are decidedly not machista and expressed surprise that she hadn't noticed this before. "Maybe [they're not machista] because we are committed to democracy," she said.

In 1983 Beatriz campaigned hard for Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical party, the first civilian President after the most recent dictatorship. This was her only political involvement before joining the assembly. "I'm not connected to any party. I campaigned for Alfonsín because he was our only hope, but I felt uncomfortable in the Radical party. But I feel very good in the assembly. I love the ideological diversity. I love my country and I am so pleased to

participate in a group like this, working for change."

Sebastián, the young guy from SO-SF, had a similar reaction to my question about the gender dynamics. "You caught me totally off-guard. I really hadn't noticed. What I *had* noticed was the range of ages of the people, but now that you mention it, I see that you're right. The participation of men and women is really even," he said.

On the issue of age, I told him that at one meeting, a middle-aged woman approached a teen and told him that she was heading home—and from the obvious physical resemblance I suddenly realized they are mother and son. "That's unheard of," he said. "A parent and child in the same political organization!"

Then, returning to the issue of gender, he said, "I think that in terms of speaking publicly, the men might dominate a little, but really just a bit. In the commissions, there are as many men as women," he said.

Do women tend to gravitate to the more typical women's issues, such as education or health? "No," he said, "in the commission on politics and economics there are just as many women as men, and in the commission working on public relations, there are more women than men. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that so many people who come to our assembly are professionals."

And why is this, like the increase of women in the Senate, a non-issue? "I think it may be that the issues on the table are so urgent: unemployment, hunger...but you're right, this issue is not getting the attention it deserves," he said.

"Maybe that's a good thing," I said. "If it's not generating resistance and backlash, all the better."

"No," he countered, "I don't think so. There is still incredible discrimination. Yet the assemblies have not adopted any kind of feminist discourse or agenda. They talk about economics, the justice system and the political class, but not gender discrimination."

### Here's the Machismo

Just two weeks ago, I posed the same question to Pupi (pronounced "POO-pee"), a feisty, 50-something English teacher and SO-SF participant. She told me, "It's funny, I was just thinking about this for the first time two days ago." She thinks the assembly is somewhat dominated by a male style and that men's voices tend to be heard more than women's. "There are lots of different personal styles in the assembly, and I think it's good for the men to be exposed to them," she said. "There are men that have strong opinions but a quiet, conciliatory manner, who are very respected. It's good for [other] men to be exposed to them, and to work with so many women."

Does she ever feel inhibited or repressed as a woman?

“No, but I never feel that way!,” she laughed.

As Pupi suggests, despite the predominantly egalitarian dynamics in the larger assembly meetings, sexist or “less-than-feminist” dynamics are still perpetrated, sometimes by women. In fact, like most social phenomena in Argentina, the assemblies are defined by contradictions in the gender arena.

One evening Alan was invited to a gathering at the home of Liliana, a woman from SO-SF. The group began the meeting by going around the room one-by-one to say their names and why they participate in the assembly. One lawyer in his late forties said that *cacerolazos* and *asambleas* are a way of breaking out of isolation, loneliness and frustration with the current situation, both personal and political. He said that at the assembly he can discover many people in the same situation, connect to



*For some, the assemblies are a way to break out of isolation, loneliness and frustration with the current situation.*

his neighbors and the society around him, and struggle for change.

His words echoed those of most people that night. Many talked of being active in the 1970s, then years of fear of the dictatorship when friends were disappearing, and the frustration of the 80s and 90s when, in their words, neo-liberal economic policies destroyed the country. They said they felt silently complicit, since they didn't know how to oppose or even fully understand what was going on.

The intimacy of this conversation was more typical of long-time friends than strangers and acquaintances. Moreover, although men here seem to talk about their feelings more easily than in the US, this revelation of emotions such as loneliness and vulnerability was more stereotypically feminine than masculine. Something in my gut says that this by-product of the assembly movement is just one example of the ways in which these cha-

otic entities are a channel for cultural changes—subtle or not—that are waiting to happen in Argentina.

On the other hand, later on the women moved into the kitchen to help clean up while the men continued chatting in the living room. Alan felt badly and decided to give the women a hand.

“A man in the kitchen!,” one woman exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Maybe changing this aspect of how men and women relate is part of the task of creating the new Argentina,” he offered, smiling.

The women laughed. “Go tell that to the guys in the living room,” one countered good-naturedly.

Another evening as they stood with Alan in the street at an assembly meeting, a handful of mostly professional women commented that maybe they should elect an assembly president to coordinate it, after all. They began naming possible candidates—all men.

“And what about one of you?,” Alan asked.

No one really answered. In this mini-example, as soon as there was reversion to the idea of more traditional, more vertical forms of organization, men came out on top.

At another Wednesday meeting at SO-SF in early March, a quite elderly woman named Gladys expressed her dissatisfaction about the time consumed by announcements that could be better spent on assembly business.

“Somebody spoke for 15 minutes about International Women's Day!,” she complained. “If I want feminism, I'll look up a feminist organization and go to them. I don't come to the assemblies for feminism.”

One might argue that an older woman opining forcefully in public is no novelty. Yet Gladys' speaking her mind in a neighborhood assembly so freely, articulately and forcefully—and the fact that men and women in equal numbers heard her with both respect and nonchalance—left me feeling that despite the sexism and lack of a feminist agenda, in many ways the assemblies *embody* feminism in Argentina.

Like I said, this place makes my head spin.

### **From Emergency Food Aid to Nationalizing Banks: More than a Middle-Class Movement**

On Wednesday, January 30, a SO-SF commission on political and economic issues met for the third or fourth time. That night about 30 men and women gathered on



*These Argentines are listening to reports and proposals from various neighborhood assemblies at the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly, which takes place each Sunday afternoon at Parque Centenario, a sprawling, dusty park in a largely middle-class area.*

almost four to one, causing me to wonder if other assemblies are more male-dominated than I realized. Other weeks, the numbers were far more even.

The reports reflected a wide diversity of social classes and class-related issues. A woman from La Boca said their priority issues are emergency food aid and *Planes Trabajar* (workfare positions). Similarly, the speaker from Plaza Garay said their concern is not *el corralito* but hunger. In contrast, other assemblies vowed to fight for the nationalization of banks and the (mostly profitable) public companies that were privatized in the 1990s or called for protests against the foreign banks.

The man from Constitución stated his belief that the assemblies are the protagonists of something historic and called for the modification of Article 22 of the constitution, which says

that the populace will only deliberate or be governed by its representatives.

the street corner at 8:00 p.m. in the pouring rain, then moved into a nearby café where they listened, discussed and debated until midnight.

As the air began to swirl with hazy cigarette smoke, the group addressed three issues. The first was “What kind of a government do we want?,” a question that seemed designed to make sure everyone was on the same page and expose leftist militants intent on imposing their opposition to the current system. The second concern was violent vs. non-violent protest and the need to stay non-violent in the face of repression. The third issue was a proposal to use an existing mechanism through which citizens can present bills in Congress, the idea being that by gathering enough signatures, the assemblies could present bills they themselves generate. Although an interesting vehicle for greater citizen participation in the short-run, it is logistically difficult and repugnant to those who want first to see all politicians out. It ended up on a back burner.

To get a better idea of the topics discussed in other assemblies, I took a bus to Parque Centenario, a huge, dusty park with a large artificial pond in the middle-class neighborhood of Caballito. About 2,000 people had gathered for the weekly *Asamblea Interbarrial*, the Inter-Neighborhood Assembly, a meeting of participants and delegates from the different neighborhood assemblies. I carefully climbed toward the front over people and bikes and sat down on a small patch of dry grass. For nearly three hours, I tried any number of ways to sit comfortably as dozens of delegates made three-minute reports from the various neighborhood assemblies.

The meeting was run by two women. The first man who approached the podium said, “Bear with me, I’m nervous because this is the first time that I do this.” Other men made similar requests for forgiveness. That Sunday, the number of men reporting outnumbered the women

One speaker called for the assemblies to take over the functions of the police and of the government in general. The web site of the *Asamblea Popular de Boedo-San Cristobal* (<http://asamblea.sancristobal.org.net.ar/>) has a slogan that crawls across the top of the home page and reads like a catchy soccer chant:

O-lay O-lay, O-lay O-lah  
 Now it is the people that must govern  
 O-lay O-lay, O-lay O-lah  
 Popular assemblies everywhere

### **Technology and Social Change: An Option for Some**

By early January, numerous web sites were tracking and promoting the *cacerolazos* and neighborhood assemblies. And early on, hundreds or thousands of assembly participants shared email addresses and set up listservs (email discussion groups). Naturally, those who are poorer, inexperienced or simply disinclined are excluded from this form of communication. Here is a small sampling of websites:

- <http://www.cambiocultural.com.ar/>
- <http://www.cacerolazo.com/>
- <http://www.cacerolazo.unlugar.com/>

Asamblea Vecinal de Palermo Viejo:  
<http://www.palermoviejo.netfirms.com/index.htm>

Asamblea de Vecinos de Caballito:  
<http://elesperancero.com/caballito/>



*This wall in the neighborhood of San Telmo reads “No to evictions. Participate in the Neighborhood Assembly” but someone had painted over “Saturdays 6:30 p.m. Chacabuco y México.”*

### Near Historic San Telmo, Hunger and Housing Take Priority

Banners from various assemblies in the historic, decaying, somewhat bohemian San Telmo neighborhood can always be seen at the larger *cacerolazos* and the *Asamblea Interbarrial*. San Telmo is known for an outdoor antique market on Sundays in Plaza Dorrego. Invariably Tango dancers slide together to swooning, melancholic melodies and then pass a hat among the crowd. San Telmo is also known for its *conventillos* (tenement houses) and high numbers of indigent families. Hunger, housing and jobs are priority concerns.

Anxious to see first-hand what a more working-class assembly looks like, I went with Alan’s sister Cristina to the *Asamblea Vecinal de México y Chacabuco* about five blocks from her apartment in the neighborhood of Montserrat, adjacent and very similar to San Telmo. This group meets at a *Club de Trueque* (or Barter Club, one of more than 4,000 sites in Argentina where neighbors meet weekly to exchange goods and services ranging from old books and bicycles to haircuts and Tarot card readings). The Barter Club, in turn, meets in a large bar-restaurant.

We found a block-long line of mostly women holding bags of food, old clothing and used household goods waiting for the Barter Club to open its doors. I asked a couple of women standing in line about the Assembly and they sent me to the main organizer, a young woman

named Analía with flowing, black hair and big brown eyes. She was wearing old jeans, a white sleeveless top and stylish flip-flops. Along with Barter Club papers in hand, her gorgeous smile and confident body language exuded warmth and competence.

Analía told us that the assembly had dissolved after people “from the outside” had come to create problems. She ventured her opinion that the assemblies in general will soon die away since they don’t work when outsiders try to get involved, especially those who have no track record actually helping people in the neighborhoods. She encouraged us to speak to her husband, Rubén, who was inside tending bar, for a second opinion and more information.

A stocky guy in a white shirt with one stray eye, Rubén was serving up cold beers to two men sitting on bar stools. “Are you from the neighborhood?,” he asked.

“I am, and this is my sister-in-law,” said Cristina. As a North American *not* from the neighborhood, except to ask a couple of questions, I mostly kept my mouth shut.

He reiterated his wife’s assertions, explaining that at the last assembly meeting “things happened that shouldn’t have,” which we suspect referred to a fistfight, which we assume involved only men. He spit anger as he, too, talked about outsiders that try to push their own political agenda, including members of one of the orga-

nizations of sons and daughters of people “disappeared” during the last dictatorship.

“We’re just a group of neighbors who see the needs and try to do what we can,” he said. “We organize the Barter Club, and serve up spaghetti and other food whenever we can. Here we’re from all different political stripes. That’s not the issue. I myself am a socialist, but we have everything here. These guys that came never responded before when we asked for help, and now they try to run our assembly.”

Later, he said, “We’re going to try again next Saturday. We might hold the meeting here, or we might hold it somewhere else. Here comes Vanesa. Why don’t you give her your phone number and she’ll let you know what’s happening.”

Vanesa had a round face, curly, shoulder-length hair and looked to be in her late twenties. “Are you from the neighborhood?,” she, too, asked.

Cristina explained, “I am, and this is my sister-in-law.”

“What do you do?,” she asked Cristina.

“I am an English teacher, and I give private classes,” Cristina replied. “The truth is that I don’t have to worry about housing or food. But I’d like to help in some way if I can.”

Vanesa explained that her situation is similar. “I teach school, so even though I don’t have a lot, I always have food on the table. I live in a decent place. I can afford to maintain an internet account and pay for a cell phone. We see the needs and try to do what we can. Here’s my number. Why don’t you give me yours, and I’ll let you know what happens on Saturday.”

That meeting went more smoothly, and Cristina has been participating in the assembly’s health commission since then. She says the assembly is not male-dominated, but that rather men and women weigh in quite equally.

“The assembly is dominated by a small group of men and women, especially Rubén, the owner of the bar,” she said. “I don’t like that much, although when Rubén goes on too long, there are two women that reign him in. The bottom line is they are doing good things for the people, and I’d like to stay involved.”

In more middle-class assemblies, national issues such

as nationalizing banks or easing *el corralito* also seem to be ceding space to neighborhood-based concerns. A group of assemblies in the southern suburbs are fighting to get the same trains we ride out to my in-laws to reinstate a rail car for passengers with bicycles. The Palermo Viejo assembly made big news (and everyone happy) when, working with the city and about a hundred restaurants in the neighborhood, it secured an additional garbage pickup from those eating establishments.

As far as I can tell, there is no gender breakdown around the issues. With a few exceptions such as women-dominated work on school-based meals for kids, men and women appear to be equally involved in discussions and direct action whether the issue is support for striking workers, communal food purchases, opposing the federal budget, or requiring labor leaders to declare their personal wealth.

Some cases are out-and-out gender benders. For example, as in other assemblies, several men (and only men) from SO-SF have taken the lead in the time-consuming



“¡Piquete y Cacerola, la Lucha es Una Sola!” means, literally, “Roadblock and Saucepan, the Struggle is the Same.”

process of organizing collective food purchases from the Central Market. As food prices in the supermarkets continue to rise, and though the process is still a bit chaotic, twice now we’ve saved half of what we used to spend on things like eggs, pears, bananas, eggplants, potatoes, onions and cheese.

Lest you think this is a nifty, non-sexist bunch of guys: When the food buyers proposed to simplify things by purchasing a standard basic basket of goods, a pleasant, politically progressive guy named Nestor said, “We’ll have to find a woman who can make us a list, how much to buy of what.” Alan’s claim to be able

to provide that information was ignored.

### **How to Terrorize an Administration: Unite Roadblocks and Cooking Pans**

Numerous assemblies express support for the *piqueteros* (see MJF-8), large groups of working-class, now-unemployed Argentines who use roadblocks to demand food and jobs.

In late January, government officials seemed alarmed at the first test of a potential *piquetero*-assembly alliance when thousands of *piqueteros* from the province of Buenos Aires marched for 17 hours to the Plaza de Mayo. For the first time, middle-class neighbors along the march route saluted the unemployed protestors by clanging their saucepans and shopkeepers kept their doors open. In the morning, one assembly served the marchers massive baskets of fresh bread and gallons and gallons of *mate cocido*, a typical Argentine tea.

In the city, neighbors from more than a dozen assemblies joined the march, mixing their banners among those of the *piqueteros*. In moments, the chant heard most loudly was “*¡Piquete y Cacerola, la Lucha es Una Sola!*” (literally, “Roadblock and Saucepan, the Struggle is the Same!).

Granted, votes of support and joint marches are a far cry from a substantive alliance. Moreover, in the assemblies support for *piqueteros* is often framed as a symbolic act of solidarity rather than a joining of forces. Yet one night a man took the microphone at SO-SF to say that *piqueteros* and *caceroleros* are victims of the same economic model, and those who freeze middle-class savings also cause factory closings or otherwise kill working-class jobs.

I suspect it's not just their rapprochement with the *piqueteros* that causes the government and extra-governmental right-wing forces to fear the assemblies. The conservative daily *La Nación* ran an editorial characterizing them as dangerous,

“since by nature they approximate the somber decision-making model of the ‘soviets,’ where the idealistic lyricism of many was almost always manipulated by a minority of ideological activists...the possibility that these popular entities aspire to do justice with their own hands and substitute judges, legislators, and governmental administrators creates a high risk of ending up in the undesired extreme of a popular meeting of dubious rationality, where decisions are frequently made by acclamation, which ends up becoming a factor of institutional perturbation.”

This editorial only adds to a climate of impunity for unconstitutional actions against the assemblies. Neighbors in Merlo, in the province of Buenos Aires, were

beaten by gangs of thugs after a *cacerolazo* in front of the municipality. A neighbor of mine reported that folks in the Palermo Viejo assembly received e-mail messages containing threats or false reports of controversial proposals never presented at the assembly.

The assemblies are widely believed to be infiltrated by intelligence agents and the police. One night Alan saw three guys watching the SO-SF assembly as they leaned against cars parked half a block away. “They looked just like guys from *los servicios*, [police and other intelligence units]” he said. “They looked me up and down as I walked past, as if to say ‘we know where you’re coming from.’ It was scary.”

Meanwhile, I pondered another query I formulated for my newsletter postscript of December 30: “*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?*” Ironically, I think the answer is no.

Just a few short months ago, one wrong move—like seven-day President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá’s appointment of allegedly corrupt cabinet members—brought people out *en masse* into the streets and contributed directly to the resignations of two presidents. More recently, President Duhalde enjoyed remarkable public silence when the government (and the 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. Also, in an attempt to woo the International Monetary Fund, President Duhalde presented a budget with new spending cuts that as well as being recessionary, exacerbated the social crisis. And the list goes on.

The assemblies discuss these concerns and have marched behind their spray-painted banners in front of the congress against the federal budget and other issues. But has the government changed its behavior? No.

### **Partisan or Not? Leftist Parties Get in the Way**

“*If organizing mechanisms do emerge, will they negate the very non-partisan, non-sectarian “purity” of the spontaneous nature of the uprising?*” This is another query I formulated on December 30. My answer is a mix of “no” and “maybe.”

Why do I believe the assemblies will remain non-partisan and non-sectarian? I assert this because they reflect the larger culture of absolute-and-total repudiation of the political class, expressed in the slogan *Que se vayan todos!* (“That they all go!” or “Out with all of them!”). Although many Argentines privately still respect and support at least one politician, most I talk to take this slogan literally. Last November, a poll showed only 10 percent of Argentines trusted political parties and 11 percent supported Congress. Indeed, the rupture between the politi-

cal class and the society at large is one of the most salient aspects of the current crisis.

So, who will run the government once current politicians are out of business? Almost no one I have talked to can articulate a reply. In fact, in that week of meetings with bank presidents, union heads and other civil-society leaders, not one offered a solution as to where to find well-prepared, non-corrupt, new leaders.

Among people “on the street,” the most common answer is something like, “Who knows? That’s exactly the problem. Why vote? Who can we vote for?” Many critics of the assemblies refer to “*Que se vayan todos*” to argue that these gatherings of mobilized citizens are irrational and counterproductive. I think the groups are mostly inexperienced. Not surprisingly, they are more skilled at protest than making proposals, but even in their short life-span so far, that seems to be changing.

I would love to see data on how many assembly folks are or were political activists. Based on how people behave at meetings and how often they say out loud that this is their first experience of this nature, my impression is that most are becoming activists for the first time. Furthermore, they



*So, who will run the government once current politicians are out of business? Although many Argentines privately respect and support at least one politician, no one I have talked to can articulate a reply.*

proudly distinguish the difference between the politicians they abhor and *haciendo política* (“doing politics”), which they embrace.

So why do I say maybe the assemblies will not remain non-partisan? Because leftist party hacks are working doggedly to make inroads in to them. They push a single ideological agenda, to exacerbate the system’s contradictions so the masses gain class-consciousness and initiate the path to revolution. They seem uninterested in the notion of democratic functioning.

Leftist parties now show up with huge signs at the *cacerolazos* in Plaza de Mayo, though they would never dream of bringing their signs to the smaller neighborhood marches and protests. Still, they dominate some assemblies and, until recently, the *Asamblea Interbarrial*, where all participants who chose to, voted by raising their hands in the air.

Not surprisingly, the *Interbarrial* voted against working toward a participatory budget process in the city of Buenos Aires, which has been legislated but never implemented. According to Alan, “This is exactly the type of mechanism that could involve citizens in controlling public resources *and* bring accountability to the political system. It would also be a way for assemblies to gain experience and learn about participatory government. But since it involves working with the current system, it was rejected.”

In mid-April, I read that activists from two leftist par-

## A Quick Reflection from Washington, DC

*On March 1, 2002, I received this thought-provoking e-mail from a dear friend in the US capital.*

I must confess that I’ve become a little skeptical of the *asamblea* idea based on my experience in Mexico City. It’s not that I think it’s a bad idea, but rather it’s disturbing how quickly and easily they became infiltrated and manipulated and destroyed by political machines, even the PRD [Partido Revolucionario Democrático] — which in Mexico City, at least, is a legitimate party of the left. I’ve become convinced that the notion of grassroots democracy is so radical and threatening that even national political parties of the left have difficulty resisting the desire to co-opt and control. The Sandinistas [in Nicaragua] are a good example. PRD is another. Maybe even the FMLN [guerrilla movement turned political party in El Salvador]. Even in Venezuela, where you had a very spontaneous grassroots democracy emerge in reaction to a corrupt and rotten party system, those ideals and neighborhood committees have become more instruments of control than of free political expression and grassroots democracy. I hope the people of Argentina can keep some of the ideals of independent thinking and freedom at the base from being subsumed by a national political agenda with very hierarchical controls.

## Politicians, Bankers and Others Beware: No Place Is Safe

One of my favorite Argentine slang words is *escruchar* (presumably from the English “to scratch”). To *escruchar* is to publicly identify and humiliate or shame someone for being corrupt or otherwise criminal. The first “scratches” were aimed at those who directed or carried out the unspeakably brutal repression of 1976-1983.

Today, scratches are primarily directed at bankers, union leaders and, most of all, current and former politicians at all levels of local and national government. I can think of literally only a handful of members of Congress who are unlikely to be scratched if they appear in public. One participant in the assembly at SO-SF said, “It is about time they feel some fear of the people and that they stop shitting on us all, as if they haven’t done a thing.”

A scratch can be spontaneous, as when in late December, 2001 a diner at a café in the upscale Paseo Alcorta shopping mall noticed Rodolfo Barra, the Minister of Justice under former President Carlos Menem, sipping tea at a nearby table. The diner drew a crowd when he spat at Barra and said “What are you doing here among decent people? Thief! Son-of-a-bitch! Because of characters like you and Menem, we are the way we are. Get out of here.” Barra countered, “I’m free to circulate where I please,” but was soon escorted out by mall security guards.

On February 2, 2002 Foreign Minister Carlos Ruckauf was



Photo by Carmen Espinoza

*Banks in the financial district have been the targets of constant scratches and protests. Most have covered their entire exteriors with protective metal.*

scratched at the Madrid airport by fellow Argentines on the same flight home as he. Ruckauf counterattacked with words and his wife gave them the finger. During the flight, passengers improvised a *cacerolazo* by banging their hands and silverware on their tray-tables. The flight made an unscheduled stop in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where Ruckauf deplaned.

A scratch can also be planned. The first organized scratches were pulled together by HIJOS, an organization of sons and daughters of people who were “disappeared” during the most recent dictatorship. I’ve seen flyers for demonstrations at the homes of former repressors, and

neighborhood assemblies also plan them as integral parts of their weekly protests.

A tragic scratch took place in front of the home of Peronist Congresswoman Mirta Rubini in the city of Junín. Her son is now under arrest for having shot into the crowd, leaving a young man severely wounded. After the shot was fired, protestors set the house on fire, causing near-total destruction.

*Escraches* are a daily occurrence—just one indicator of the depth of the contempt Argentines’ feel for almost all politicians and hundreds of other public figures.

ties got into a fistfight at the *Interbarrial*. I assume the only combatants were men. Afterward, participants approved a one-assembly/one-vote policy that has effectively marginalized party hacks. I wonder: how would the vote on participatory budgeting have gone had the new system been in place?

Just a month or two ago, Alan would have argued that leftist militants were probably the main threat to the assemblies’ future. However, at SO-SF, he’s observed that as the neighbors get to know each other, the militants are less and less effective and even come less often to the meetings. And now that they’ve been neutralized at the *Interbarrial* (no small feat), he thinks the negative effects

of their efforts at co-optation will continue to diminish.

### The Future of the Assemblies: Uncertainty, Like Most Things These Days

Based on numerous lists floating around on the internet, my best, conservative estimate of the current number of assemblies in Metropolitan Buenos Aires is about 150. A recent survey shows nearly one in five adults in greater Buenos Aires have participated in an assembly, and 14 percent nationally. Indeed, there seem to be many dozens if not hundreds more assemblies in the interior in the provinces of Córdoba, Entre Ríos, La Pampa, Neuquén, Río Negro, Santa Fe and San Juan. I have seen

a list of 35 assemblies in and around the city of Rosario alone.

No one in our small but growing inner circle of friends participates in an assembly. My friend Lina who works at the Ministry of Education said, “[The slogan] ‘*Que se vayan todos*,’ which immediately brought to my mind the years of dictatorship. But my main issue is this: why didn’t anybody *cacerolear* during the years of [former President Carlos] Menem, or when the Supreme Court released him from detention [when corruption charges against him were dropped]?” she asked. “We’re all accomplices, everyone who bought into the one-to-one [peg of the peso to the dollar], everyone who bought their blender in installments. We all enjoyed [the dollar peg] while unemployment was rising to almost 30 percent as a result.”

She went on, “I now think the *cacerolazos* and assemblies are a valid escape valve and necessary for people’s psychic health. I also think the assemblies are a necessary vehicle for participation in politics. But they seem to be closer to anarchy than a democratic system.”

Sebastián, the young guy from SO-SF, expressed a different concern. “Right now I’m in the stage of feeling totally disheartened. I know I’ll come out of it. It’s unbelievable to watch the assemblies reproduce the same po-



The assemblies draw their identity from the public space in which they meet. The new Altos de Palermo group meets at this intersection a couple of blocks from our home.

litical behavior that we started out criticizing: talking and talking without taking action, manipulations, political operating,” he said. “It’s what you read about in sociology textbooks, how such dynamics are reproduced over and over. But I still couldn’t believe it when I saw it in front of me. It’s just like *Animal Farm*!”

Clearly, assembly attendance is way down compared to the first weeks of January. The group at SO-SF rarely numbers more than 100, and I’ve heard reports of similar declines at other sites. On the other hand, attendance is stable and new assemblies continue to appear. Several weeks ago, I saw a white, computer-printed sign the size of a three-by-five index card pasted to a bus stop shelter inviting neighbors to gather on a corner in front of the Alto Palermo shopping mall just two blocks from our apartment.

The first meeting I attended was the assembly’s second. After standing among about 125 people for over two hours, my feet hurt. About then a short woman in her mid-60s or so leaned over and whispered, “How did you find out about the assembly?” When I mentioned the sign, she broke into a huge grin and whispered in my ear, “That was me! I put that sign on that bus stop. In fact, I plastered the neighborhood.”

Meanwhile, a male health worker debated whether to take the assembly’s banner to a *piquetero* march. “I am not a *piquetero*, I am an *asambleísta*,” an assembly-ist, if you will. I’ve noted this identity-laden term has installed itself in Argentine Spanish.

Meanwhile, Friday night *cacerolazos* had become a weekly event. These weekly marches got smaller each time until it was finally decided to hold them only once a month, on the anniversary of the December 20 protests and deaths. I’ve heard some folks wonder if constant marching wasn’t a government strategy to wear out the people and the protest. One night a new guy at Altos de Palermo yelled out, “Can’t we meet two nights a week? Matters are urgent and Argentina can’t wait!” His voice didn’t ring sincere to me, and I immediately wondered if he was an infiltrator.

At that meeting I learned the various Palermo assemblies wanted to create a Palermo-wide inter-neighborhood assembly. Then about 9:30 p.m. one Tuesday night in early March, I heard a loud and large column of *caceroleros* marching down our street. My heart began pounding—it reminded me so vividly of the now-historic December mobilizations. I hopped the elevator, walked along for a few blocks and discovered that this was the new *Inter-Palermo*, headed to “scratch” politicians in the area. One woman marching with her two kids told me they were headed to the home of then-Economy Minister Jorge Remes Lenicov on Paraguay Street.

Shortly after, I turned around. I wanted to see what happened, but my gut told me “no.” As I made my way



*The night the new "Inter-Palermo" group of assemblies marched to "scratch" politicians in the neighborhood, these cops were stationed at the intersection of Santa Fe and Coronel Díaz Avenues.*

home, I saw cops on hefty, intimidating four-wheel motorcycles. Moments later, three buses filled with cops in riot gear with billy cubs practically hanging out the windows drove by in the direction of the marchers. Just after, a police pick-up truck stopped to ask a cab driver how to get to Paraguay and some other street. My stomach tightened as I finished my walk home.

Despite some degree of protest-fatigue, the middle-class has indisputably emerged as a political actor. In recent days, there have been no mass mobilizations, though I tend to doubt we've seen the last event-changing *cacerolazo*. According to economist Claudio Lozano of the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos*, "On December 20<sup>th</sup> when people said "bullshit" to the state of siege, [for the first time since the dictatorship] they lost their fear." This is just one shift in the culture I've seen happen before my eyes.

Before I came to Argentina, I was excited to move to a country where people debate the political and economic systems under which they want to live. But when we arrived, it seemed I was wrong. "There is no *proyecto de país*" or project for the country, said Patricia Arnalda, a Congressional aide (see MJF-3). Furthermore, there seemed to be little or no debate about the country's future. According to Alan, three 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 they do things).

Men and women in the assemblies are saying explicitly that it is time to put an end to such thinking by get-

ting involved. One of the powerful new slogans coming out of the assemblies is "*Nunca más no te metás*" or "Never again don't get involved." Since it was the title of the graphic, horrifying official report on the disappeared persons during the last dictatorship, the phrase "*Nunca más*" is loaded with history and meaning.

Indeed, I've heard over and over that December 20<sup>th</sup> marks a "before" and "after" in Argentina. In this context, Alan and I debate the assemblies' future. I tend to think they will eventually disappear, or, more likely, mutate into smaller groups with more limited and specific aims, like the people with savings trapped in *el corralito* who meet on Mondays and Thursdays to protest, discuss legal action and otherwise connect with one another.

If nothing else, what will happen when the weather turns cold? I heard on the radio that Altos de Palermo will meet in the municipal building down the street from us. I was surprised they would agree to use city space, though after long internal debates, SO-SF decided to meet with the city legislature and the

San Telmo group got city officials to supply a plot of land for a community garden.

And Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe? No warm meeting place yet, though Alan notes that the assembly's activities are becoming more specific and efficient. People are developing organizing experience and interpersonal bonds, and the general trend is one of consolidation, greater sophistication and strengthening of the group. He is clearly energized by watching fellow Argentines as they become involved with the country and the neighborhood,



*The night the Inter-Palermo marched through our neighborhood for the first time, this couple stopped along the curb in front of an ice-cream shop to applaud the neighborhood assemblies.*

get to know each other, debate the future, express their feelings and experiment with solutions to problems.

According to Francisco “Barba” Gutierrez, long-time leader in the Union of Metal Workers and now Congressman for the city of Quilmes in the Buenos Aires outskirts:

“Today there is no one who is not protesting. Every day all over the country there are protests. This questioning of the economy is systemic. And more than just the economy, it is political, it is everything.

“My personal opinion is that there will be no military solution, no messianic politician either. The people will never trust in those solutions. The possibility of personalistic leadership is over in Argentina. Leadership is now collective, that is what will emerge. This is what is happening in the assemblies. They are discussing issues beyond *el corralito*. They are talking about how to generate jobs and incomes. Now there are natural leaders emerging. This is true among the *piqueteros* also.

“If [President] Duhalde believes he can continue with the same model in just a different form, I don’t think it is viable. In that case, we are moving toward a confrontation, one that is democratic, that is peaceful, that is popular. It is not what the right-wingers imagine or dream about: a situation in which the army takes over. That is not possible. The people have already taken over. A new Argentina is coming. And we are figuring out what type of a country we are going to construct.”

When I proposed to write about gender issues in a rapidly-changing society, little did I imagine how rapidly that change would be taking place—possibly even cultural change. Furthermore, fistfights and women in the kitchen notwithstanding, I certainly wasn’t prepared to find such overwhelmingly egalitarian gender dynamics in the neighborhood assemblies.

Once again, this place makes my head spin. □



According to Francisco “Barba” Gutierrez, “A new Argentina is coming. And we are figuring out what type of a country we are going to construct.”

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