

## CULTURE AND POLITICS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS The case of the 'movimiento autonomista' in Argentina

By Gabriela Agatiello

On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004, visiting social activists Soledad Bordegaray, Graciela Monteagudo, Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein gave an insightful presentation of the Argentina Autonomista Project. Co-sponsored by CERLAC (York), the Transformative Learning Centre (OISE/UT), the LACS programme (York), Sociology (York), OPIRG (U of T), Politics (Ryerson), the Gindin Chair in Social Justice & Democracy (Ryerson) and the Centre for Social Justice, the presentations focused on culture and politics in social movements and the case of the 'movimiento autonomista' in Argentina. A large crowd attended the evening at the OISE auditorium and actively participated in discussions following the presentations.

Graciela Monteagudo, an Argentine human rights and community activist, began the evening with her famous 'cantastorias', a form of story-telling through song. Combining song and images, she told the history of Argentina from the 1950s up to the 2001 financial crisis and the ensuing popular movements that have gained momentum across the country. As she went along, Monteagudo pointed to a giant series of colourful drawings that illustrated the history. The audience laughed, sang along, and took in a history lesson. Using cartoons and song in this manner made accessible and understandable what is often portrayed as complicated economic history. This is a technique used by Monteagudo and others to raise awareness on the impacts of neoliberalism on Argentine society and motivate popular participation.

Monteagudo's animated performance was followed by Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein, who introduced a short clip from their new documentary "THE TAKE" which takes viewers inside Argentina's

occupied factories. The clip tells the story of Zanon, a tile factory in Argentina that was occupied by the workers after months of unpaid wages, and then sudden firings and the factory closure in 2001. In defiance, the workers staged a reverse strike and locked themselves inside the factory, kept the machines running, and refused to stop working. Zanon was one of the first factories to be transformed in this way, and its success has inspired other workers across the country to gain control of their factories.

Following the clip, Soledad Bordegaray spoke about the struggles of unemployed workers in Argentina, highlighting her involvement in the unemployed workers movement MTD La Matanza. This organization was started in 1995 as a reaction to Argentina's economic and unemployment crisis that resulted from the neoliberal restructuring of the economy during the 1990s. When everyday necessities such as paying the electricity bill became impossible, a group of people in her neighbourhood decided to come together and pool their resources to help each other meet their basic needs. Initially the movement preoccupied itself with their need for survival, demanding that the state deliver on what it had promised. However, they soon realized that the problem of unemployment was endemic to the capitalist structure. With a change of strategy, they allied themselves with movements that had prior histories of resistance, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and began a campaign of resistance. Refusing to accept government handouts and fall prey to government cooptation—as had been the case with so many other unemployed worker's

groups—Bordegaray's movement moved towards autonomy.

Bordegaray also described some of the numerous activities the group is involved in. They recently founded an autonomous school which currently has forty children enrolled; they produced a very successful book titled "From Guilt to Self-Management"; they are in the process of publishing another book; and their bakery project which began as a small enterprise has gradually expanded. When asked about the process of consensus-building used by her organization, Bordegaray commented that though the process takes time and is not always perfect, it is an important aspect of participation and the horizontal organization of the movement. She gave the example of choosing a school name. Although it took parents five months to decide, in the end they were all happy with the name chosen: CIELito, which means little sky or heaven, and also stands for "growing by imagining freedom."

Following the presentations, audience members were invited to pose questions and offer their comments. A lively discussion ensued. Asked if the situation in Argentina could be exported to other countries, the Argentine women responded that each experience is uniquely situated in its historical context and that rather than a model to export, the experience of Argentina serves as a case study of what could happen to any country that has undergone such profound economic restructuring. Lewis added that we in Canada should think about what is *importable*, and how such struggles and resistance can be of relevance in the Canadian context.

Asked about the possibility of mounting a political movement, Monteagudo pointed out that historically it has been difficult for Argentines to accept their differences and work together to build a movement; it is an obstacle that they have yet to surmount. The years spent under the dictatorship broke apart the fabric of society and it has taken Argentines years to get back on the street again and fight for justice. Another problem she indicated was that historically, particularly in the 1970s, civil society organizations and movements were extremely hierarchical and often separated themselves from the people. The movements that are now prevalent have reacted quite strongly against this culture of hierarchy and tend to avoid anything that resembles structure, as is evident by the autonomous movements and their horizontal organization. Increasingly, however, some groups have begun to realize that it is not possible to build a political front while avoiding any sort of structure, and so have begun to modify their stance as a result.

Klein also pointed out that any analysis of whether a political movement is feasible must take into account how deeply rooted Peronism is in Argentine political culture, and how it has managed to co-opt so much of the Left. Being the ruling party outside of dictatorship governments for so long, it has been very successful at co-opting many of the unions. If neoliberalism in Argentina is an exaggerated form of what we see around the world, Peronism certainly adds an added layer of complexity to the mix.

Another audience member asked the panelists to discuss the possibility that these movements could be co-opted and whether they could lose their significance through being forced to legalize or institutionalize. Bordegaray responded that her movement's school has been legalized and recognizes that institutionalization is necessary in certain situations. For example in the case of the school, it is important to have official legal recognition if they are to open up opportunities for students in the future. They don't fear these steps towards institutionalization

because of the horizontal relations and consensus decision-making that are such an integral part of their movement. Lewis was of the opinion that although co-optation of the recovered companies is going on under the Kirchner government, it is a problem that must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. There are certain *piquetero* (unemployed workers) groups that are literally the arms of the government, while there are also movements like Bordegaray's which are truly autonomous. These divisions have often been used instrumentally by the government to set various sectors of the unemployed workers' movement against each other.

The panelists were asked to comment on the bankruptcy law and give their views on what needs to happen in Argentina both internally and externally to make it possible for expropriated factories like Zanon to continue operating. Lewis pointed out that Zanon – technically operating illegally – is actually the only factory at the moment that is under worker's control, resisting cooperatization and demanding instead that the factory be state-owned and run by workers. The majority of the recovered companies have formed cooperatives and were able to obtain temporary expropriation laws passed by the municipal legislatures that allowed them to operate legally after they had occupied their workplaces and got them back into production. However, most of these laws were for only two years and in the next six months will be coming up for renewal. The next few months are thus critical to the movement and nobody is certain what will happen. Considering how fragmented Argentine politics is at the moment, Lewis indicated that there will probably not be a coherent policy made by the president but rather decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis. However, various sectors of the popular movement have been pushing for specific policy changes in the bankruptcy law that would put workers first as creditors, so that taking over a business and running it in order to pay themselves back for what was lost would be the first solution and not something that needs to be the subject of a great social struggle.

The autonomous movement in Argentina is a testament to the power of collective forces to work together for social change. It remains to be seen whether this inspiring popular rebellion will be successful in transforming the politics of the future, but what is evident is that Argentines are increasingly taking democratic struggles into their own hands.



For more information on the Argentina Autonomista Project, see: [www.autonomista.org](http://www.autonomista.org)

To support the workers of the Zanon factory, sign an on-line petition at <http://www.petitiononline.com/zanon/petition.html>

For more information on the documentary "The Take", or to find theatre listings near you, see <http://www.nfb.ca/thetake/>



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