

Chapter 7

Revisiting Argentina 2001–13:

From “¡*Qué se vayan todos!*” to the Peronist Decade

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Explaining how Argentina made the transition from widespread uprising and calls for “¡*Qué se vayan todos!*” to a capitulation to the national and popular model and its progressively intensive implementation is not an easy or straightforward task. This would merit lengthy examination and multiple layers of analysis but is not what will be done here. Instead I will focus on only some of the key aspects of this phenomenon, namely, the changes in the language employed in demonstrations, the ideological disputes and the displacement, and expansion of the boundaries of social conflict. The premise for this analysis is the assertion that although the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner have not undertaken deep political reform as their supporters claim, their administrations can neither be framed as simple continuity with the 1990s in terms of its policy. In fact, the ambiguities and tensions between continuity and rupture (the duality of Kirchnerist discourse), has become the common thread in a political environment in which the core component has become a new version of the national-popular model; a Peronism of the middle classes in the context of the “Consensus on Commodities.” This has had profound implications for Argentine politics.

As is widely accepted, Argentina’s national-popular tradition goes back to the Justicialist Movement, which was founded by Juan D. Perón in 1946. However, more generally, the “national-popular” conceptualization can be traced back to Antonio Gramsci’s writings several years before (1971).¹ In this analysis I draw upon De Ipola and Portantiero’s (1994) discussion on the turning point for the national-popular model in Latin America, a model that is closely linked to traditional populism. According to the authors, the duality of populism (with its popular base on the one hand, and creation of a state-constructed order on the other) requires three levels of analysis: First, in terms of national-popular demands and traditions; second, populism as a nationalist movement that provides citizenship for the masses; and third, populism as a specific form of state commitment.² Within this framework I would like to emphasize the importance of the national-popular tradition, which can be defined as a political-ideological variant that draws on “midterm memory” (i.e., the populist experiences of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s). The model tends to rest on three pillars: the assertion of the nation, the redistributive and conciliatory state, and charismatic leadership linked to the organized masses. Generally speaking, the dynamics of the national-popular tradition can be located in the tension between a national revolutionary project that is undertaken by the people *along with* their leader on the one hand, and a controlled-participation project *under the guidance of* the leader and the tutelage of the state on the other hand. The national-popular tradition in Latin America usually takes the form of the latter, particularly in the case of Argentina.

On examining this country’s political evolution during the last decade, four key moments can be identified. First are the events of the December 2001–2 uprisings that had considerable social impact: This moment was characterized by generalized crisis and new forms of social participation, with the repression at Puente Pueyrredón in 2002 acting as a watershed. The second crucial juncture is the inauguration of Néstor Kirchner as president in 2003, which, with the aid of society and the social movement organizations, shaped a new political scenario. The third moment is identified in the conflict between the national government and the rural sectors in 2008. This included the passing of the *Ley de Medios* in 2009 and the sudden death of former president Néstor Kirchner in 2010. This third moment (2008–10) marks an intensification of the national-

¹ Publish in Levey, C., Ozarow, D., & Wylde, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Argentina since the 2001 crisis: recovering the past, reclaiming the future*. Springer.

popular component and an attempt to construct hegemony. Finally, the fourth moment is characterized by the beginning of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's second mandate (2011–), and reveals new incarnations of the national-popular project, that are associated with the central role of the middle class in Argentine politics.

From “Qué se vayan todos” to a New Political Activism

The crisis of neoliberal hegemony that struck Argentina at the end of 2001 was of great significance, coming after ten years of neoliberal policies that had greatly transformed the country's social structure. These transformations created a new lens through which society could be viewed as imagination and reality converged amid the gravity of the crisis. Argentina had hit rock bottom: its successive episodes of structural adjustment, the unprecedented *corralito*, the inevitable disruption of the wage-payment chain, the proliferation of local currencies and barter club networks to replace the increasingly unavailable national currency and their expansion into many urban centers where they had not been used since the hyperinflationary period of 1989. The social responses included looting as well as the unforgettable *cacerolazos* of the night of December, 19, 2001. This societal mobilization was met with the most significant wave of state repression that has been witnessed in Argentina since the return to democracy in 1983 and left over 30 people dead and hundreds wounded. The resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa followed by parliament's *election of*, and then subsequent *removal of* four provisional presidents in just two weeks, clearly demonstrate the institutional implications of the crisis.

The year 2002—“our extraordinary year”—seemed to open up a great historical opportunity: a profound crisis in the contemporary hegemony of neoliberalism. This was visible in the disintegration of the dominant model, and had its origins in the social uprisings of December 2001 when people took to the streets crying “Away with all of them!” In the midst of economic breakdown, Argentina was transformed into a social and political laboratory, as demonstrated by the increasing number of sites of rebellion. Furthermore, its citizens challenged conventional forms of political representation and sought to molecularly reconstruct social bonds from the bottom up. Indeed, rather than being a phenomenon confined to the capital or big cities, these events had a national resonance. Furthermore, throughout 2002 political trials were staged that removed local mayors in more than 30 localities in 15 Argentine provinces.³

It should be borne in mind that the neoliberal policies of the 1990s had led to greater social exclusion, which was closely linked to the growing problem of unemployment during that time. In a context of impoverishment and decollectivization of the popular classes, a number of organizations of the unemployed (*piqueteros*) were formed. These new organizations employed direct action as a tactic, including road blocks or pickets, community work in the neighborhoods, control of the distribution of welfare plans that were granted by the government, and the staging of democratic assemblies. These actors played a central role in the social and political spheres from 1999 onward, particularly in the mass mobilizations of 2002 in Buenos Aires, during which protestors voiced their demands to the state. In this way, the crisis of 2001–2 would strengthen the grassroots organizations of Argentina's unemployed and lead to the emergence of a myriad of popular movements. Such movements are linked to three different political and ideological tendencies: orthodox Marxism, the national-popular base (not connected, at this point, with the Peronist party), and the new autonomist narrative of which numerous practical examples were experimented with at that time. The latter was most clearly expressed in the neighborhood assemblies that emerged in major cities (principally Buenos Aires), as well as among independent organizations' decision-making models such as the unemployed and various cultural collectives.

However, these three political and ideological tendencies were far from being fully articulated. Metaphorically speaking, 2002 was the year in which the Antonio Negri of the “multitude” (2004) defeated Gramsci and even enjoyed a decisive victory over Lenin. On the one hand, Gramsci's proposal for the construction of a counter-hegemonic block—as promoted by the Argentine Workers' Central Union (CTA) and its allies—failed to play a leading role in these events. At the end of 2002, the CTA held a national congress and decided that it was time to transform itself into a political and social movement, akin to the Brazilian *Central Única dos Trabalhadores*—CTU (Brazilian Workers' Central Union). However, by this late stage, their

proposal was rendered all but redundant and the organization remained peripheral to the main associations who were already in recovery.

On the other hand, the autonomist narrative had already emerged as the touchstone of a new militant subjectivity, mainly among the younger population and those critical of the organizational characteristics of the classist Marxist-Leninist left. A new political activism, characterized by a rejection of “delegative democracy” (O’ Donnell 1994) and by an opening-up to new political experiences, emerged during the chaos of those first few months, with fear and uncertainty converging in the absence of institutional points of reference. The neighborhood assemblies showed that the crisis of representation was profound: they sought to dismiss, as if by magic, the entire political class (political parties, trade unions, etc.). The uprisings included even those from professional and middle-class backgrounds and large numbers of “ordinary citizens.”⁴

However, sociopolitical dynamics are always recursive and the principles of autonomy of the urban assemblies came under strain. Participation faded and beleaguered by endless political discussions and schisms, these experiments were finally worn down by the demands for institutional stability that emanated from a society exhausted by crisis. Similarly, the repression at Puente Pueyrredón on June 26, 2002—the result of a joint operation by the Federal police, the Gendarmerie, and the Buenos Aires provincial police force—was another turning point. It dealt a blow to the *piqueteros*, and above all the autonomous organizations to which Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki—the two youths killed during the violence—belonged.⁵ Fear of repression reminiscent of the past military dictatorship dealt a blow to these mobilized groups.

Similarly, the condemnation of the Puente Pueyrredón repression also became a catalyst for the incorporation of new groups of politically active young middle-class people to join the autonomous *piqueteros* organizations in an attempt to create cross-class links with excluded popular sectors. A new politically active generation was thus consolidated: the post-2001 generation, which was ideologically influenced by notions of territoriality,⁶ assembly activism, the demand for autonomy and the horizontalism of social relations.

This new political activism, rooted in assembly and territorial participation, was more self-critical and therefore less hyperbolically autonomist than it was in 2002. Thus it spread to other organizational spaces, including the many cultural collectives that began to take off in the fields of video-activism, alternative journalism, and popular education. This activist subjectivity would also be found in the new citizen assemblies that emerged in opposition to large open-pit mining. The first of these, located in Esquel in the Patagonian province of Chubut, appeared in 2002 at the height of the assembly movement’s popularity. From 2004 onward, the citizen assemblies would extend to 15 provinces where the rapid expansion of transnational mining posed a threat. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that these assemblies (which tend to exhibit a multi-class character but uphold a strong middle-class presence), are the heirs to the political activism forged in 2001. Subsequently, the year 2006 saw the birth of the *Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas*—UAC (Union of Citizen Assemblies), an autonomist space shared by the different grassroots assemblies.

The Return to Normality and the Emergence of a National-Popular Discourse

The evolution of national-popular *Kirchnerismo* was gradual. At the start of 2003, the decline of the new popular protest movements as well as the break-up of the organizations of the unemployed gradually diluted the expectations of a political reconstruction “from the bottom up” and gave way to demands for order and normality. In this sense, as soon as he assumed the presidency, Néstor Kirchner adopted this social message as demonstrated in his inauguration speech in which he voiced his commitment to the changes that were necessary for Argentina to become “a serious country, a normal country.”⁷

One of the characteristics of the early days of the Kirchner administration was the construction of a progressive discourse “from the top.” This was facilitated by the emergence of a progressive space at regional level and the return—albeit timid at that stage—of national-popular politics, together with a new appreciation for the role of the state. It should be remembered that Kirchner’s initial measures as president contributed to the reconfiguration of the political and institutional apparatus: the positive changes in the Supreme Court of Justice,⁸ the prioritization of human rights as state policy in relation to the violations committed by the state

during the 1970s and 1980s, the recognition of the separation of politics in relation to management of the economy and especially to Argentina's default, and, finally, Kirchner's pursuit of a heterodox economic policy. These steps demanded the repositioning of a range of social organizations including, in particular, the human rights associations—among them, the Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and HIJOS (the sons and daughters of disappeared Argentines)—who had been dealt a blow by successive impunity laws that were passed by the Alfonsín and Menem governments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Several organizations of the unemployed, rooted in the national-popular tradition also began to reconsider their postures, but until that point had remained unconnected to the Justicialist Party.

Towards the end of 2004, with the rapid consolidation and popularity of Néstor Kirchner's government, the political scene had changed significantly. There were also important changes in the domestic economic conditions, already visible from mid-2003, following the devaluation of the Argentine currency and the end of *Convertibilidad*. Post-*Convertibilidad* Argentina became associated with economic and industrial recovery and the first shift in the boundaries of social conflict appeared during this time. In the context of economic growth without policies that proactively redistributed income, and due to the increasingly precarious working environment, it signaled the return of union conflicts. This was led by the traditional General Workers' Confederation (CGT) after a decade of inactivity due to its shift toward "business unionism."

During this post-*Convertibilidad* period, the industrial sector recovered strongly. In terms of job creation, in 2007 the industrial sector employed 36 percent of workers, 7 percent more than in 2002. However, this process of reindustrialization was more a result of macroeconomic growth and of maintaining "a high and competitive exchange rate" through Central Bank intervention. Therefore, the economic and manufacturing recovery that took place from 2003 onward did not succeed in reversing the consequences of years of neoliberal deindustrialization (Azziazu and Schoor 2010). Furthermore, even today average real-terms salaries for workers have barely recovered their pre-2001 levels.

Finally, the regime's commitment to a policy of (re)industrialization must not be over exaggerated. If initially, after the end of *Convertibilidad* in 2002, growth was largely dependent on the export of agricultural and extractive products (principally soya and its by-products) and facilitated by high international commodity prices,⁹ then like other Latin American countries, in the past ten years Argentina has steered away from the Washington Consensus to the Commodities Consensus (Svampa 2013a). Changes in the global division of labor have produced a neo-developmental agro-extractive production model in the Latin American region that is based upon the appropriation and excessive exploitation of nonrenewable natural resources. Crucially this has been the case regardless of the explicit political differences or specific ideological characteristics of each government. In other words, in the name of the new Commodities Consensus and its "comparative advantages," the different administrations that have governed since 2001 have tended to accept the role of agro-exporter in the global geopolitical order, without considering the destructuring impact either on the economy (the return to a primary economy and new forms of dependency) or on the population and land (through new forms of domination that are based on the rationale of dispossession). To this we can add the emergence of China to the explanations for the revitalization of the primary sector, although this Asian giant has quickly established itself as an unequal trade partner with the region.

To return to the dynamic of national politics, the Néstor Kirchner government's attempts to tactically redefine its progressive identity were clustered around three main axes: antineoliberal rhetoric, the vindication of human rights as state policy, and a Latin Americanist discourse. However, there was also an attempt to construct a political alliance of progressive forces, a policy that was rather erratic and was soon discarded. For a while though it provided a place for the *piqueteros*, whose roots originated in the national-popular matrix. Three groups—*Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat*—FTV (Federation for Land, Housing and Habitat), *Barrios de Pie* (Neighborhoods on the Move), and *Movimiento Evita* (the Evita Movement)—joined the government under the politically correct name of "social organizations." But the protagonists of these organizations were only handed minor positions in the administration, above all in the area of social issues. Essentially, the majority of society still viewed this social actor as a *dangerous class, residual lumpen-proletariat* or simply as an expression of left-wing clientelism, under the protection of the new government.

In fact, even from early on, *Kirchnerismo* opted instead to focus its support base on the traditional trade union sector. In 2004 the CGT reunited under the leadership of the head of the lorry drivers' union, Hugo Moyano (who, during the 1990s, headed the Argentine Workers' Movement—MTA). As a Peronist union grouping, the CGT combined an appeal to the national-popular tradition with a managerial style and which made them a natural ally. The strong growth of the services sector, the near disappearance of the railway industry as a means of passenger transport after its privatization, the development of regional trade, national government subsidies and, the transportation of soya and other grains to the ports on their way to the external market, reinvigorated labor's collective power in these transport sectors where the CGT had a strong presence.

Polarizing Discourses and the Intensification of the National-Popular Component

The conflict between the government and the rural producers in 2008 occurred shortly after Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's inauguration and sparked a reinvigoration of *Kirchnerismo*'s national-popular heritage. The conflict originated from an increase in the export duties placed on agricultural products from 35 percent to 44 percent. Somewhat unprecedented, the rural opposition included both the large organizations; (the traditional *Sociedad Rural Argentina*—SRA [Argentine Rural Society], which represents large landowners) and representatives of the small- and medium-sized farmers' organization—*Federación Argentina Agraria*—FAA (the Argentine Agrarian Federation). Both carried out a series of road blocks, strikes and lockouts, thus for over one hundred days the country suffered from food shortage in many regions.

The standoff revealed the importance of the transformation in the agricultural sector during the past decade and the central role of the soya model in Argentina's current economic structure.¹⁰ It brought the different players in the new agro-business model into the political arena and unveiled its complex framework and main features (principally the trend towards the single-crop farming of soya). The conflict also provided visibility for some of the minor partners (the small farmers who instigated the road blocks) and it shed some light on the plight of those who were excluded by the soya model, namely, the indigenous and peasant communities who suffer displacement and dispossession due to the clearing of lands, especially in Northern Argentina.

The ferocity of the economic conflict meant that it had clear political dimensions: both in terms of the inflexible response of the government (calling the protests "pickets of abundance") and the speedy reaction of some sectors of the middle class in Buenos Aires, which took to the streets in support of the agrarian sectors while questioning the authoritarian political style of the government. This led to a renewal of old polarized oppositions, which are a key part of Argentine historical tradition and are deeply anchored in the national-popular discourse: "Civilization or Barbarism," "Peronism or Anti-Peronism," "People or Anti-people." The conflict itself was a watershed: within this framework, the government gained the active support of a group of progressive intellectuals and academics, calling themselves *Carta Abierta* (the Open Letter) and whom defended the ruling institutions and interpreted the agrarian protests as a "conflict seeking to depose the government."

Several months later, the government recovered the initiative and political polarization grew even stronger with the conflict caused by the proposal of the *Ley de Medios* in 2009, which in this case pitted the government against *Clarín*—the multimedia conglomerate, which, up until the conflict with the agrarian sectors, had generally benefited from Kirchnerist policies and had been broadly supportive of the government in its editorial line. The debates surrounding the proposed law generated enthusiastic support from a large number of reporters, artists, and educational sectors who had, at that point, adopted an attitude of tacit support or passive consensus towards *Kirchnerismo*.

However, the sudden death of Néstor Kirchner in October 2010 constituted another transformative event and sparked an intensification of the national-popular project. This phenomenon had two major consequences: first, it reinforced the polarizing discourse as the "grand narrative." This heralded a new dawn for *Kirchnerismo*, and aggravated preexisting tensions between the popular sectors and the antigovernment opposition (monopolies, corporations, and anti-Peronists). As in other periods in Argentina's history, this dichotomy, which was initially a way of analytically dealing with the complexity of social tensions during times

of conflict, ultimately became a general frame of intelligibility for the political reality. Second, Kirchner's death broadened the scope of alliances, through the explicit incorporation of young Argentines from the middle class. Groups like *La Cámpora* (founded by the Kirchners' son, Máximo) emerged throughout the country. These were characterized by double-edged political participation: on the one hand, as high-office holders in the state apparatus and on the other, through fostering grassroots participation.

A fourth period then emerged with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's second mandate, when in October 2011 she achieved an overwhelming 54 percent of the votes and recovered the parliamentary majority in Congress that the government had lost in 2009. However, in recent years the government has weakened significantly, as reflected in the breakdown of the social alliances that it had meticulously constructed. On the one hand there has been the rupture with Peronist syndicalism as represented by Hugo Moyano, head of the CGT and key ally of the government since 2003. Thus the union base of *Kirchnerismo* has since been confined to a sector of the CTA that was led by Hugo Yasky, and which is more closely associated with the middle sectors (teachers and state employees). On the other hand, relations soured with significant sectors of the middle class, as demonstrated in the mass antigovernment mobilizations undertaken between September 2012 and April 2013, that exposed discontent vis-à-vis a range of institutional issues (a rejection of the possibility of the president's reelection, corruption, and in support of a politically impartial judiciary), as well the issue of crime and the government's currency control policies.¹¹ Finally, the allegedly excessive executive power was encapsulated in Fernández de Kirchner's hyper-presidentialist style, visible in the growing conflict between the different branches of government since the executive's encroachment of the judiciary.¹² In this context which has exposed (a) the incorporation of those from within the ranks of *La Cámpora* into the state apparatus, (b) the increasing consolidation of executive power, and (c) a rupture in relations with its syndicalist wing (CGT), *Kirchnerismo* continued to emphasize its middle-class character, in which the working and lower classes feature only as silent partners. In effect, *Kirchnerismo* has ended up becoming a middle-class populism that attempts to speak for the working class, while also seeking to discredit other sectors of the mobilized middle class (which it identifies as being politically "rightist").

As a consequence, Argentina embarked upon a path of political and social polarization that is remarkably similar to that of other Latin American countries (such as Venezuela) in the last ten years. Nevertheless, the Kirchnerist model exhibits others elements. First, while the cases of Venezuela and Bolivia can be considered working-class populisms as evidenced by the political and social empowerment of their subaltern sectors,¹³ in Argentina there is a clear predominance of the middle class that goes beyond merely symbolic references. Second, the Argentine model does not seem to be concerned with either constitutional reform or the renewal of institutions (and therefore with the democratic aspirations of several subordinate sectors) as has been the case in Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Finally, the Kirchnerist model continues to demonstrate traditional elements in its alliances with "business union" sectors of the labor movement and with provincial governors (caudillos) who exhibit authoritarian leadership styles. These tendencies have clearly been inherited from the organizational legacy of the *Justicialista* (Peronist) party.

The Widening Boundaries of the Social Conflicts

The government of Cristina Fernández Kirchner lost the political power struggle with the agrarian sectors in Parliament in July 2008. As a result, a period of anxiety followed, which was visible in her highly disappointing defeat in the parliamentary elections that followed a year later. In spite of this, *Kirchnerismo*'s recovery was swift thanks to a combination of active policies that were implemented by the state, such as the new *Ley de Medios*,¹⁴ the *Ley de Matrimonio Igualitario* (the Equal Marriage Law that permits same-sex marriage), the nationalization of the pension system and, above all, the *Asignación Universal por Hijo* (Universal Child Allowance), a measure that was proposed years earlier by opposition parties and progressive social organizations, and which the president passed by executive decree in 2009.

Furthermore, in October 2010 the new grassroots unionism, linked to the classist tendency, was dealt a severe blow when Mariano Ferreyra, a member of the Trotskyist *Partido Obrero* (Workers' Party) was killed during a tertiarized railway workers protest that was organized to demand full-employee rights. This crime led to the imprisonment of one of the CGT's most powerful union leaders and revealed both the intensity of internal

trade union tensions and also the nebulous connections between low job security and “business union” logic, union hooliganism, and national government support (Svampa 2012). These cast significant doubts on the quality and expansion of the labor model as promoted by government and was exacerbated by the splintering of the CTA,—the ideological pluralist union federation—and which encountered insurmountable obstacles in the growing internal division between government and opposition sectors.

Meanwhile, in recent years the conflicts related to the defense of environment, and the demand for land and housing are intensifying. This issue is a consequence of the use of production models related to agribusinesses, large tourist ventures, and open-pit mining and more recently still, against shale gas (fracking). These issues are considerably more complex when we consider the role of organizations of peasants and indigenous peoples. It is worth revisiting the report by James Anaya (2012), special rapporteur for the United Nations, about the indigenous people in Argentina as evidence of the severity of the situation. In the report he highlights the environmental and cultural impact, the lack of compliance with ILO 169 (which demands prior free and informed consultation in indigenous areas), the infringement of Law 26160, which orders the exemption of indigenous land and the suspension of forced eviction (which still continue and are frequently violent), the difficulty that these communities face in accessing justice (which is because of the repeated and systematic rulings of provincial courts in favor of Transnational Corporations and large private landowners), and finally the criminalization and repression of protests.

Furthermore, related to these recent developments, as mentioned earlier, are the assemblies that have emerged in opposition to large transnational mining ventures. As has been the case in other Latin American countries, these socioenvironmental movements can be found in small- and medium-sized localities in mountainous areas and their foothills. In spite of existing asymmetries within these movements, between 2003 and 2009 these have successfully lobbied for laws that prohibit open-pit mining with polluting substances in seven Argentine provinces. One of the most important achievements in this field was the *Ley de Protección de Glaciares* (National Law for the Protection of Glaciers), which was passed in September 2010, despite having been vetoed by President Fernández de Kirchner in 2008. The difficulties in getting the law passed demonstrates the considerable influence of the mining lobby (including the Canadian Barrick Gold company, whose activity has since been affected by the enforcement of the law)¹⁵ to prevent such measures.

Peronism as Hegemony

Several hypotheses were put forward in relation to the future of Argentina’s political trajectory during the early years of the twenty-first century. Even so, in the midst of the crisis, few could foresee a rapid top-down political reconstruction. Although the political party system did not collapse as many believed, in the face of a deep representative crisis it appeared that there would be a change of political elites. Although this did not end up happening, both the collapse of the governing coalition—the Alliance between the traditional *Unión Radical Cívica*—UCR (Radical Civic Union) and the progressive sectors and the subsequent postcrisis economic recovery strengthened the myth that Peronism was the only political force that could guarantee governance in a society characterized by multiple conflicts. Nevertheless, during the opening years of the new century, one could be forgiven for arguing that much water had flowed under the Peronist bridge and that neoliberalism had left indelible marks on the activist memory of the Argentine people. In other words, it seemed inconceivable that after Peronism’s remarkable shift toward neoliberalism in the 1990s that had led to a profound crisis in political participation, as a political force it could once again rebrand itself by seeking recourse to three key concepts of the national-popular tradition. In the end it did precisely this through a recovery of (i) an appreciation for the central role of state, (ii) the predominance of the party leader, and (iii) the reconstruction of activist apparatus (trade unionist, social, political, and cultural).

In contrast to Eduardo Duhalde and his formula of “default plus repression,” Néstor Kirchner proposed a viable and attractive formula that combined contemporary Latin American progressivism with traditional appeals to political pragmatism, a concentration of power, cooption, clientelism, and subordination of key actors to the leader, among others. Retrospectively, it is worth mentioning that, since the return to democratic rule in 1983, Peronism has governed in Argentina for 22 of these 30 years and that and that during this time it has manifest two quite distinct political incarnations; it’s neoliberal character during the 1990s under the two

administrations of Carlos Menem and then latterly since Néstor Kirchner became president in 2003, it has revealed progressive and increasingly “national-popular” virtues. Peronism’s national-popular trajectory has intensified further since 2008 under Cristina’s mantle. In fact, as Juan Carlos Torre (1999) points out, Peronism is “a political system in itself,” since it combines both government and opposition simultaneously. This dynamic was illustrated in October 2011, when the political candidates that claimed to be Peronist totaled 70 percent of the valid ballots and 54 percent voted specifically for the reelection of Cristina.

Once again, and more so than other Latin American brands of populism, Peronism has proved itself capable of harboring the most diverse political and ideological trends within it, while also reasserting its superior political productivity. It is not therefore not particularly surprising that, due to a combination of political logic and strategies of adaptability that are characteristic of the range and flexibility of the ideological framework, those politicians who were rabidly neoliberal during the 1990s became national-popular in the decade that followed. In time, the economic success of the government and the subsequent expansion of the network of alliances in accordance with the national-popular tradition (not only in the traditional sphere of unionism, but also in the sphere of culture and education and the new political participation of young people), together with the resulting reduction and simplification of the political debates, led to the broadening of the base of the government’s political project, and with notable support emerging from the urban middle class. However, as mentioned earlier, in recent times, we have witnessed a rupture between *Kirchnerismo* and several of its social alliances. Furthermore, the new mass antigovernment mobilizations, of which the urban middle class are protagonists, neatly captures the ideological diversity of different sectors of the middle class: if these pro-Kirchnerist sectors claim to represent the popular classes in the name of “a model of social inclusion,” then from the opposition’s side, the mobilized middle sectors are deeply critical of what they claim is the regime’s increasingly authoritarian streak. They now speak about “the threatened republic.”¹⁶ Within the spectrum of “existing populisms,” the renewal of the national-popular tradition, which has been carried out through the deepening of antagonisms and the activation of dichotomous intelligibility frames, can be situated closer to the “organic authoritarian” rather than “pluralist” versions of hegemony.

Nevertheless, although the national-popular base may demand hegemony (especially if supported by the cultural and media sectors) it is incapable of uniting the various fronts of conflict and forms of popular expression. The upsurge of disputes related to land commodification policies, which include the consolidation of property empires, the expansion of agro-business, transnational mining, and more recently fracking, reveal something more than simply the “weak” side of government. In fact, these policies form part of the system of capitalist domination: they are upheld and promoted by the national state and indicate a rise in the logic of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004).¹⁷ As such they reveal a disturbing continuity with the 1990s Menemist model.

Is this coexistence between a politics that is self-construed as “national-popular” and the increase in the logic of dispossession possible, despite being contradictory? I suggest that the answer is not only a question of economic growth rates (i.e., of whether the model proves to be an “economic success”). One characteristic that strengthens the construction of its hegemony is that, in the sphere of struggle, the present coexistence between different development models (industrial; agro-business/mining) is expressed through a significant “disconnection.” As a result, there are few bridges to link the present union struggles and the movements that are resisting land evictions and involved in territory disputes. One of the factors exacerbating this disconnection is the emphasis on a national-popular rhetoric, coupled with a developmentalist social representation, which heightens the political marginalization of the sectors that challenge the mining and agro-business model. Within this framework, it is no coincidence that Kirchnerist intellectual circles and the new, politically active youth tend to adopt a very blinkered view in the face of the potentially explosive character of these problems. Indeed, they tend to deny any governmental responsibility in the logic of dispossession that is present in certain state policies. Conversely, they highlight the weight of social policies and the renovation of pro-labor measures, such as collective negotiation in order to justify its progressive character.

In January 2012, an uprising took place in Famatina, a small town in the province of Rioja, which helped to highlight the struggles against the transnational megamining industry that had been developing nationally since 2003. When it came to tackling the issue, the president made it clear that megamining was a

fundamental and strategic part of the government's economic model. The struggles against megamining have thus played out in the usual way; that is, through a criminalizing logic in the provinces and which reached record levels during 2012, above all in the province of Catamarca, which experienced six episodes of repression in seven months.

Something similar occurred with the train accident at Buenos Aires' "Once" station in February 2012. The tragedy, which resulted in the loss of 51 lives, unveiled the fact that precariousness was not simply an issue that is confined to Argentina's neoliberal past but showed that the million-peso subsidies do little more than support and sustain the profits of businesspeople, many of them who are friends and partners of the government and which have a complete lack of concern for the lives of its service users.

Another current flashpoint that exposes the hypocrisy of the government's official discourse in relation to the corporations is in the expansion of the agricultural frontier. Recently the Primavera Qom community (which is embroiled in a large dispute over land ownership in Chaco and Formosa) made the following somber announcement: between December 2012 and January 2013, four members of the community had been killed in highly suspicious circumstances, amid the indifference of the national government.

Yet curiously at the same time, in May 2012, the government expropriated 51 percent of the Spanish oil company YPF's shares. However, in spite of grandiose talk of renationalization, in July 2013, the Argentine government announced the signing of an agreement with the North American company Chevron (which had been convicted of serious environmental crimes and violations of indigenous rights in Ecuador, when it was known as Texaco). The agreement gave Chevron huge exemptions and benefits in the exploitation of shale gas and oil in the Neuquén mining region. Such an event sparked significant criticism and numerous protests, particularly from the indigenous Mapuche communities. However, there is nothing to suggest that the government will open any sort of negotiation about fracking. Thus Argentina can expect to experience a renewed wave of territorial and social/environmental conflicts.

Conclusion

Everything points to the fact that, in the coming years, the coexistence of the national-popular dynamics and the logic of dispossession will increase, placing Argentina in a fragile and precarious position. We are witnessing the emergence of a new cycle of human rights violations on both a collective and individual level, which is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of dispossession and encouraged and promoted by national public policies. In the last five years alone, 12 indigenous people and peasants have been killed or have died in suspicious circumstances; most of the deaths have been formally recorded as "accidents" by the authorities. The changes in types of repression indicate an increasing process of outsourcing of violence to the provincial police forces, gangs, and assassins who are hired by soy company owners and big landowners.¹⁸ The national government must clearly take responsibility for these actions and while its system of mediation and power networks generally manages to obscure such activities, they become dramatically exposed during such acts of repression.

It remains to be seen what steps the new generation of activists will take regarding the issues of social conflict that arise from these antagonisms in the model and what its capacity for the absorption and neutralization of the disputes (social, political, and economic) proves to be. What is certain is that in a scenario fraught with conflicts and the issue of Peronist succession new questions are arising about the very future of the national-popular model in Argentina.

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Notes

¹ The category can be found in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, defined as a “collective will” and associated with the “moral and intellectual reform,” both seen as necessary conditions for the possibility of historical change through the build up of hegemony. See Gramsci (1971).

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- ² The authors analyze the latter two levels. From my perspective, it is necessary to include the first level, that of national-popular traditions and its successive configurations.
- ³ This topic has been discussed in more detail in Svampa (2013b).
- ⁴ See Chapter by Olga Onuch later in this book.
- ⁵ See Chapter by Ana Dinerstein earlier in this book.
- ⁶ In this sense, territorialization refers to the phenomenon of the displacement of activism from the factory to the neighborhood. In later years with the emergence of new social and environmental movements, the very notion of territoriality would become more complex and multifaceted.
- ⁷ “From Néstor Kirchner’s inauguration speech, May 25, 2003, See http://www.casarosada.gov.ar/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24414&catid=28:discursos-ant.
- ⁸ Following President Néstor Kirchner’s orders, Congress dismissed the members of the Menemist dominated Supreme Court and replaced them with a number of other respected judges.
- ⁹ Some of the pro-government voices argue that growth is due to a solid internal demand and increased investment. See Weisbrot and Sandoval (2007).
- ¹⁰ See chapter by Miguel Rivera-Quinones earlier in this book.
- ¹¹ With the aim of preventing capital flight and ensuring capital remained when it came to fulfilling its commitment to the external debt, in November 2011, the Argentina government implemented a policy of foreign exchange control that restricts the buying and selling of dollars. This measure led to the creation of a parallel dollar market.
- ¹² To this end, the executive promoted a law of judicial reform, known also as the “law for the democratization of judicial system,” that included a series of laws that were approved by the Argentine parliament in April of 2013. Finally the Supreme Court of Justice declared the law unconstitutional in June of the same year.
- ¹³ In this sense, they are more closely related to the populism of the first government of J. D. Perón (1945–55), which delivered a redistribution of social power.
- ¹⁴ See chapter by Saskia Fischer later in this book.
- ¹⁵ The law prohibits all mining activities in 1 percent of the national territory (glacier and periglacier areas) and was passed thanks to multi-sectoral action carried out by environmentalist organizations, citizen assemblies, leftist political groups, and intellectuals, in a context of a strong mining lobbying. However, the law was taken to the courts and its regulation confirms that the national government and the different state institutions are not inclined to enforce it, thus in practice allowing for an increase in mining projects.
- ¹⁶ Here we refer to the demands for republicanism evident in the antigovernment demonstrations. The topic is discussed in Svampa (2012).

¹⁷ Returning to the work of Luxemburg, developed by David Harvey, we can distinguish two different, yet interconnected, phases of capital accumulation: first that which asymmetrically responds to capital and work, linked to processes of broader reproduction and extraction of surplus capital of which industrial capital is the paradigmatic case. Second, there is the phase of “accumulation by dispossession,” that takes into account the capital’s expansion into new territories and forms of life, which Marx himself had identified as “primitive accumulation” and which Harvey identifies as one of the central tenets of contemporary capitalist accumulation.

¹⁸ See Aranda (2013).