

Social Movements, Conflicts and a Perspective of Inclusive Democracy in Argentina

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The recent series of events in Argentina could be fruitfully used for an exercise of reflection on the Inclusive Democracy project in the process of analysing the different strategies facing those suffering the hard economic, social and political crisis of this country. For this reason, the notions of direct and participative democracy will be taken into account, since these notions are the ones in fact present in the current discussion in Argentina, maintaining in general terms, a common ground with the important project of Inclusive Democracy.

The notion of representative democracy has reached a crisis point for the first time in relatively massive form. Apart from the discredit suffered by the democracy notion in a strictly political sense in the last decades, today, it is the deeper notion of democratic representation together with the capitalist regime themselves that began to be questioned since the popular rebellion of December 2001. This way, out of the discredit of the political system, an attempt of critical reflection to revalue the community notions of democracy in accordance with a participative-inclusive democracy, started to emerge. In the months following the popular rebellion, this debate took pace in most of the political and social organisations and also in the media (which are run, as in the entire world, by big economic-financial corporations). But this debate, as well as the state of social and political upheaval, was fading slowly as the economic situation entered a plateau of certain stability (although this did not mean any amelioration of the deep and almost terminal crisis into which the development model has entered). Only those social actors who have been most critical of the dominant system (movements of unemployed workers, workers of taken over factories and what was left of popular assemblies) continue to support some form of direct democracy approaches, while the rest of the population returned somehow to the apathy of the last decade.

Collective action and social movements

The watchword "que se vayan todos" (leave you all) used in the popular protest of December 2001 surprised everybody not only because of its spontaneity but also because of its sudden and unexpected appearance. But this original "que se vayan todos" was sustained in a naive way, i.e. in the belief that it was "politics" (in the sense of the activity of professional politicians, statecraft) the cause of all the problems in Argentina. In spite of this, a strongly critical spirit to the model of representative democracy which is dominated by professional politicians was very much present in the popular rebellion. This is what led

in the following months firstly to the organisation of the popular assemblies (based on a system of direct democracy) in Buenos Aires and other urban centres and, secondly a joint action with the social actors (the movement of unemployed workers and the workers of taken over factories) who were already opposing the system with diverse strategies and objectives. In this process of debate, reflection and collective action, the watchword "que se vayan todos" was being qualified and filled with a more complex content, meaning incipiently "that all the mentors of the neoliberal model should leave, including the economic power". Therefore, from a critical viewpoint, the issue of the validity of the professional politicians' representative democracy together with the issue of the existence of a growth economy started to be regarded as the same issue.

While most of the population was not interested in government policies, since the "cacerolazo" (pot banging protest) of 19 and 20 December the issue of a desired society started to be discussed in a deeper way, at least for some months. An expression of this change was the neighbourhood assemblies, a new form of social and political organisation that was born in various neighbourhoods of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and in some other cities of the country. In these assemblies the local problems related to work, health and urban infrastructure were open to discussion together with the general economic and political situation of the country. It was a relatively heterogeneous phenomenon that hardly developed from the gestation stage, since these assemblies lost momentum in various ways in the second half of 2002. In some cases these assemblies were "taken over" by the most orthodox left parties that ended up dissolving them and fundamentally removing any possibility to carry out some exercise of participative or inclusive democracy, as was expected from the beginning. In 2003, only some of the assemblies still remained with a lot fewer participants who represented those citizens with a higher level of commitment to the struggle. The rest of the population has returned to their habitual "internal exile", playing the role assigned to them by the rules established by the market economy and representative democracy.

To sum up, as the year 2002 advanced, the protest was watered down in intensity and the spontaneous middle class mobilisation of the beginning of the year was restricted only to the popular assemblies. However, the popular organisations based on the various movements of unemployed workers not only continued their fight but also deepened their demands. Also, these unemployed workers' organisations at the beginning of 2002 achieved some of their goals: unity and solidarity as well as understanding from the rest of the society. At the end of 2002, in the context of the watering down of the general protest, this unity and understanding was slowly fading. As a result, the movements of unemployed workers started once more to be seen through their traditional historical image of marginal groups.

These movements of "piqueteros" (so called because of the highway blockades or pickets) spread their activities extensively in the last few years in different types of organisations as well as in different political projects. At present, all unemployed workers organisations share the idea that it is not enough in order to find a way out of the social crisis simply to protest and resist to the crisis through the highways blockade, the taking over or occupation of public buildings, the negotiation with public officials, the food demands to supermarkets, the maintenance of kitchen soups in neighbourhoods, the opening of health community centres, etc.. Instead, the way out of the social crisis is considered in political terms. However, it is important to take into account that there is not only one picketer political project, but several. On the one hand, there are those projects that adopt a stand

of constructive dialogue with the various left and centre-left parties or mildly militant Unions, and on the other, there are those other projects that focus on strengthening the social mobilisation with the aim of building new power and solidarity bonds in a kind of a “parallel society.”

The picketers organisations that respond to leaders Luis D’Elia and Juan Carlos Alderete, that is to say “Federación de Tierra y Vivienda – FTV” (Land and Housing Federation) and “Corriente Clasista y Combativa – CCC” (Classist and Combative Grouping), propose the formation of a government of national unity embodying a populist and reformist ideology. In this proposal the picketers would be part of a bigger coalition. This political imaginary includes a reformist workers Union (“Central de Trabajadores Argentinos”), the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (APYMES), a National Front against Poverty (“Frente Nacional de Lucha contra la Pobreza”), the Association of University Students (“Federación Universitaria Argentina”), the Association of Small and Medium Farmers (“Federación Agraria Argentina”) and some Human Rights Organisations. On the other hand, the “Coordinadora Anibal Verón” (Aníbal Verón Coordinating), mobilises a wide-ranging series of groupings of unemployed workers who maintain their autonomy and independence, although they agree that the issue is not to reach power now, since this power would be coloured by the values of a system which can give no answers to society’s problems . These groupings fight to radically change the system and they claim that they are doing it right now, from the bottom (with no need to conquest power). It is for this reason that direct democracy and political and social ‘horizontality’ are constituent parts of their working practices. The unemployed workers movements are located fundamentally in spaces forgotten by the system and they are creating a kind of a parallel society that includes the world of production, health, education and political formation. The idea of “Counterpower” constitutes the theoretical base of some of these groups. Finally, there are some groups under the denomination of “Bloque Piquetero Nacional” (National Picketeer Block), which includes the groupings of unemployed workers who are bound to the orthodox Marxists parties. They believe that Argentina, after the events of 19 and 20 December, entered in a revolutionary process and therefore they try to win the streets and to recruit the biggest number possible of militants with the aim to deepen their political strategy for the taking over of power .

Also the process of setting under workers’ control the companies which went in bankrupt or were abandoned by their owners, gained more and more importance in the last two years. In spite of the differences, the recent history of those companies that ended up under workers’ control, followed a similar course as in the past: delay in workers’ payments, abandonment of the companies by their employers, passivity of the bureaucratic Unions, occupation as a last resort for maintaining their working posts . About 200 factories are estimated to be under workers’ control in the whole country; these workers are also constituting an integral movement of recovered enterprises as alternative bases to capitalism and representative democracy. This organisation of the workers of recovered companies has already published a newspaper and they hold assemblies in which two options for the administration of the factories are been debated: one option is to continue developing co-operatives which aim at a horizontal and equitable organisation (in contrast to most of the historical co-operatives in the country); another option proposed by a minority is to nationalise the recovered enterprises maintaining the workers’ control. While the first option usually has a bigger acceptance among national and municipal officials, left parties and militant Unions mainly support the second.

From market economy and representative democracy to inclusive democracy

The Argentina Republic represents undoubtedly one of the highest exponents in the so called 'Washington's consent' that proposed for Latin America a post-dictatorship era based on representative 'democracy' and on the empowerment of the market economy. This democracy formally contrasted with the authoritarian governments of the past whereas the empowerment of the market economy represented continuity and the deepening of the new form of capitalism that expanded after the protectionist period. Far from any Keynesian vision, this consent (resembling the original pure liberalism) opposes any significant state presence in the free game of the market forces. The Nation is also attacked in this new consent (justifying the capitalist globalisation), as long as it offers serious limitations to the expansion of the market. The democracy conception is also more than superficial, legitimating only formally this new stage without proposing any revision of the Latin American dictatorial past. However the important thing is that the strong limitations of the democratic model present in capitalist societies become evident once again. This capitalist representative democracy is principally based on the concentration of power at the hands of the representatives and the submission of the ones represented. The neoliberal practices, based primarily on financial and fiscal changes that favour the growth of inequality under the alleged aim to achieve a macroeconomic equilibrium, encouraged various types of economic procedures in which the transparency in the transactions was absent. The new prophets of the Argentinian economy, all of them "Chicago boys", defenders of the Consent of Washington, generated an ideology (through the political elites and the media) aiming to mask the deep process of social exclusion that the global capitalism was developing. The political representatives began to use the power of their represented fellows increasingly, with the sole aim to come to terms with the economic elites, in exchange for various personal benefits. This way it became impossible to separate neoliberal capitalism, systemic corruption and representative democracy. Whereas the capitalist nation-State with representative democracy has always been a system based on inequality and individualistic competition, the neoliberal capitalism has vastly enhanced inequality, destroying the existing scarce control mechanisms and imposing the free market. To sum up, the Argentina Republic has since 1983 been immersed in a "democratic process" which sets the market against the modern nation-State. This way, the work begun by the dictatorships in the 1960s and the 1970s has continued through the installed weak democracies which simply aimed at imposing the reforms needed for the total success of the market economy.

In this context, new social movements and processes of collective action began to emerge with the intention to resist market expansion. Among the existent diversity, only few among the various organisations which emerged started to practise new forms of non-capitalist democracy. For example, some neighborhood assemblies played an outstanding but sometimes ephemeral role due to the loss of interest by most of the citizens in the second half of 2002. Some picketers grouped in the Anibal Verón Movement also began to practise new democratic forms, in which the concept of direct and participative democracy assumed a fundamental importance, together with the ideas of autonomy and counterpower. These movements developed their collective action independently of formal mechanisms of representative democracy since they refused to participate in any election for national or regional authorities. The recovered companies also started to practise a direct democracy in their internal organisation, and in some cases in their community area

as well. But until now, only those that propose to nationalise these companies under workers' control can show a political project extending beyond the work environment and aiming at radical social change.

Thus, neighborhood assemblies, some movements of unemployed workers, and some recovered companies are among those that somehow have rejected, or at least have questioned, the representative and capitalist democracy. Also, the above mentioned movements represent the emergence of embryonic mechanisms of direct or participative democracy that even extend their demands towards a new integral vision of society, very close to the project of Inclusive Democracy. All these movements, together with some small political and social organisations (for example, *Cabildo Abierto Latinoamericano*) that promote the theory of participative democracy, base their work on criticising liberal democracy and on practising radical forms of democracy. However, in all of these popular organisations, differences regarding the new type of democratic organisation exist. Direct democracy practices have been important in almost all the neighborhood assemblies from the beginning, but later on the practice of direct democracy in some cases vanished, while many of these assemblies decreased in size and/or disappeared. Some orthodox left parties (organised on democratic centralism principles) have controlled many of these assemblies and as a consequence, direct democratic practices in them have weakened. In contrast, some of these groupings advanced and deepened their vision of politics closer to the postulates of Inclusive Democracy, not only in terms of political, economic and social democracy, but also in terms of a new citizenship concept. In some cases, the question of ecological democracy has also become pivotal. Such is the case, for example, of the assemblies of the region of Esquel in Patagonia that are fighting against a project of mining exploitation which, if carried out, would end up in an environmental disaster of enormous dimensions. As regards the movements of unemployed workers, it is possible to see important links to the project of Inclusive Democracy in those MTD grouped under *Coordinadora Anibal Verón*. Despite the autonomy (they manage different conceptions of internal organisation) that characterises all of them, they focus their work on the practice of direct and participative democracy in political, economic and social terms. This means that the "community" notion (ecumenicity, autonomy and democracy) has a crucial importance in these groupings. Moreover, an embryonic development of the idea of confederated communities can be observed, since in some cases various solidarity mechanisms among different popular organisations started to develop. As a result, a new form of confederal democracy is emerging based on nearby communities organised into a territorial network at a local and regional scale. Some examples of this process are the networks created among the MTD, the recovered enterprise *Zanon* (a ceramics enterprise) and some Unions in Neuquén, or among some popular assemblies and the recovered enterprise *Brukman* (clothes enterprise) in Buenos Aires, or among some unemployed workers' movements and *Tigre Supermarket* under workers' control in Rosario.

The above mentioned examples are still marginal phenomena, while the majority of the population still remain detached from any perspective of social change, as it was shown in the recent elections in which the various proposals tainted by conservative ideology raised more than 80% of the votes. Moreover, two of the candidates (*Carlos Menem* and *Ricardo Lopez Murphy*) who received 40% of the votes, had openly threatened with a strong suppression of the social protest by military means.