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Ellen C. Woodcock   April 18, 2012

Buenos Aires, Formless:
Transformation and Fragmentation of the Urban Sphere, 1989-2002

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Abstract

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This work traces the transformations in the urban sphere of Buenos Aires, beginning with the election of President Carlos Menem in 1989 and culminating with the political and economic crisis of 2001 and 2002. By focusing on several specific transformations in the urban terrain—the renovation of Puerto Madero, the growth of shopping malls, the expansion of gated communities in the periphery, the popular insurrections of the crisis, and the informal trash recyclers that infiltrated the urban center in its aftermath—this work evidences the physical alterations that accompanied the period's incomplete consolidation of a hegemonic order, this order's subsequent rupture, and the formlessness that characterized the city in the wake of the most dire crisis in Argentine history.

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Contents

Introduction

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

– Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*[1]

"Formlessness" is a powerful conceptual tool; it defies the modernist belief that all subjects and their constructions must have positions, arguments, or purposes. It serves to conceptualize that which stands outside of the traditional tensions between "form" and content," allowing one to pick apart these categorizations that seem "increasingly useless" in the postmodern context but all the while "increasingly contentious."[2] Formlessness gives new significance to those types of materials or spaces that are resistant to any type of rational categorization. It constitutes an uprooting of the traditional categories of "form" and "content" in what Georges Bataille designates as "slippage," an operation that "is neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept."[3] Formlessness is constituted in a series of operations, rather than definitions, because it cannot be defined in terms of any one idea; rather, it is the absence of

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[1] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis:
[2] Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 9.
[3] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Use Value of 'Formless,'" in Bois and Kraus, eds., *Formless*, 15.

rational categorizations. As Bataille has noted, "It is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down [*déclasser*] in the world."[4] In his analysis of Bataille's work, Yve-Alain Bois expands upon this conceptualization:

> It is not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolizable theme, a given quality, as it is a term allowing one to operate a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder. Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very *act* of their delivery… The formless is an operation.[5]

The "operational existence" of the formless allows it the conceptual power to ascribe meaning to categorically resistant materials and subjects.

By ascribing the contemporary urban sphere an operational formlessness, those fragmented and radically resistant spaces within it gain new meaning and importance. In the context of postmodern urban discourse, it is necessary to rethink not only the urban terrain's readily visible material realities, but also to consider the underlying frameworks and orders (or lack thereof) through which one constructs an understanding of the urban. In the same way that the formless has shaped the critical approaches that are taken to interpret postmodern aesthetic works, it has immense potential for ascribing significance and meaning to the ambiguities, fluidities, and fragmentations of the contemporary urban landscape. Formlessness becomes a mean through which a city that resists existing theoretical structures can be meaningfully conceptualized. The city of Buenos Aires, today a globally connected metropolis with over three million inhabitants, has experienced a series of political, social, and cultural transformations within the past two decades that have left its identity fragmented and inconsistent with traditional

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[4] Georges Bataille, "Le Cheval académique," *Documents* 1, no. 1 (1929), 31 as cited by Bois, "The Use Value," 18.
[5] Bois, "The Use Value," 18.

paradigms of classification. The daily flows of people, materials, and ideas within its urban boundaries, amassed under the context of its recent transformations, operate in an urban landscape that resists the acquiescence of an overarching identity.

This work seeks explores the urban transformations in Greater Buenos Aires from 1989 to 2002, beginning with the adoption of a neo-liberal economic model under President Carlos Menem and ending with the political and economic crisis. It investigates strategically selected spatial transformations in the urban sphere, focusing on the regeneration of Puerto Madero, the proliferation of North American-inspired shopping malls, the expansion of gated communities, the popular insurrections of the crisis, and the insurgence of informal trash collectors in central neighborhoods. These movements are analyzed through an interdisciplinary lens by considering the material changes in the urban setting, the lived adaptations of its citizens, and the discursive responses presented by representational paradigms for understanding contemporary urban life and one's interaction with the evolving city. By considering this "spatial triad"—a concept of understanding the relations between social and spatial transformation developed and revised by an array of (post) modern thinkers—it becomes possible to conceive of Buenos Aires as both a physical terrain and a representational iconography, a complex dynamic that consistently produces space itself. This changing urban topography exists through both real and imagined concepts that transform the ways in which it is used and inhabited, producing novel experiences that influence the urban citizen's political, economic, social, and cultural practices.

Urban culture in twentieth-century Buenos Aires has shifted to accommodate both the adoption of new political and economic worldviews and the spatial transformations that they (often ambiguously) inform and create. Combining revisionist theories of hegemony and space, analysis of the social and urban implications of Argentine modernization projects, and

exploration of the material, lived, and representational dynamics of space in Buenos Aires, this work demonstrates that the city's (post) modern transformations have produced an urban and social terrain that is fragmented by socioeconomic and cultural enclaves that frustrate any attempt to characterize it as a singular, or even relatively homogenous, entity. Throughout the twentieth century, Buenos Aires has been the center of a series of political, economic, and social transformations. While the factors influencing these shifts cannot be condensed into any superficial list, they have been broadly triggered by both specific events and ambiguous processes, including ideological shifts in self-identification, social consensuses promoted by authoritarian regimes, the emergence of new class sectors in the urban population, and popular discontent regarding political and economic instability, to name several. However, upon narrowing the lens to the period from 1989 to 2002, it becomes clear that the presence of dominant political and social logics dissipates as the city has become transformed by its own global aspirations of modernity into an increasingly fragmented urban and social terrain, where no singular, homogenous cultural logic can prevail.

In order to understand the declining applicability of any dominant cultural logic to Buenos Aires as an urban entity, it is necessary to first present an overview of the development of hegemony as a concept that has had considerable influence in a wide range of disciplines. First constructed by way of traditional Marxist theory, the concept was developed in its cultural context in the beginning of the twentieth century by Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Acknowledging the contributions of fellow-Marxists Plekhanov and Lenin, Gramsci continued to use hegemony as the process by which the laboring class gained leadership over the forces opposed to capitalism, uniting them into "a new, homogenous politico-economic historical

bloc, without internal contradictions."[6] He later broadened the concept of hegemony so as to

analyze the means through which ruling classes negotiated the consensus of the subordinate

group in their own domination. Gramsci theorized that the ruling classes "exercise such a power

of attraction" that they are able to subjugate the leadership of the other social groups, thereby

creating "a system of solidarity" between the leaders and intellectuals of all groups. In other

words, the worldview of the ruling class is so widely propagated by its intellectuals that it

becomes the "common sense" of an entire society, without having to use force to maintain its

dominance. Through this approach, Gramsci was able to understand why capitalism could

survive in the bourgeois democracies of the West.[7]

Although Gramsci's theory of hegemony has been expanded upon and revised by a

number of scholars, this work employs its revisions by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and

Chantal Mouffe. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, published in 1985, they argue that

hegemony describes the synchronic articulation that occurs between the stages of development in

Marxist theory. Although Marx considered these stages to be successive, they have been

interrupted by these synchronic articulations, resulting in "unequal and combined development"

that marks an inconsistency in the rationality, positivity, and transparency of traditional Marxist

categories, whereby the limits of rationalist logic are evidenced by the structural ambiguities of

its categorizations (such as "class," "capital," etc.). The "arbitrariness" and the "contingency"

that cannot be subsumed under these logical categories interrupt the succession of stages in

Marxist theory and thereby produce a void in which the agents of socialist change

(fundamentally the working class) "assume democratic tasks which had not been foreseen in the

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[6] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (London, 1971), 80 as cited in David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1981), 185.
[7] McLellan, *Marxism*, 186.

classical strategy."[8] These unforeseen tasks are at a discursive center, what Laclau and Mouffe

call a "privileged" locus, which becomes a signifier of an absent universality. This locus is an

"empty signifier" because it constitutes an incommensurable tension between differential and

equivocal logics, ultimately producing a "failed totality" of incomplete discourses that are the

very structures of politics. Thus, politics becomes a struggle to fill this void with a given

content. Laclau expands on this incomplete signifier:

> The argument I have developed is that, at this point, there is the possibility that one
>
> difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an
>
> incommensurable totality. In that way, its body is split between the particularity which it
>
> still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer. This operation of
>
> taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have
>
> called *hegemony*. And, given that this embodied totality or universality is, as we have
>
> seen, an impossible object, the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an
>
> *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.[9]

Despite the impossibility of the totalizing project, politics becomes a struggle to suture the

differential and equivocal logics that render the discursive center—an "empty signifier"—

incomplete, and thus seeks to generate a universal hegemony.

Laclau and Mouffe argue that the impossibility of the hegemonic project creates

antagonisms, "a variety of autonomous struggles which are themselves overdetermined by forms

of hegemonic articulation."[10] Stating the limitations of traditional Marxist theory to explain the

deep dislocation effects generated by capitalism at the international level, they have sought to

radicalize and transform Marx's notion of the social agent and of social antagonisms. They

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[8] Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso: London (1990), 94-95, 120-121.
[9] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso: London (2005), 70-71.
[10] Laclau, *New Reflections*, 128.

refute the notion of the "subject" as a substantial and essential entity, given in advance, which dominates the social process without being produced by the contingency of the discursive process itself. Instead, they affirm a series of particular "subject-positions" that do not have a signification that is fixed in advance, but instead change "according to the way they are articulated in a series of equivalences through the metaphoric surplus which defines the identity of one of them."[11] These subject-positions are realized in comparison and contrast with one another through experience, and the identity of each is marked with the "metaphoric surplus"— the excess of identifying characteristics—of the other positions. For Laclau and Mouffe, the relationship between the classes is antagonistic, whereby the various subject-positions prevent one another from fully realizing their identities. In the most radical dimension of antagonism, however, it is not the external enemy (the opposing, antagonistic subject-position) that prevents a subject-position from achieving identity with itself; rather, "every identity is already in itself blocked, marked by an impossibility, and the external enemy is simply the small piece, the rest of reality upon which we 'project' or 'externalize this intrinsic, immanent impossibility."[12]

In other words, the Laclau and Mouffe view the subject as an empty place correlative to the antagonism of the hegemonic relationship. The subject in an antagonistic relationship defines his or her position by negatively comparing (contrasting) it to the position of the antagonist adversary, and the subject is thus a "subject of lack:" it is correlative to its own limit and caught in an endless and impossible search for completion. Necessary for masking this antagonism, social "fantasy" is the elementary ideological mode that provides the crucial suturing effect for the consolidation of a hegemonic order. It is a scenario that fills out "the voids of the social structure, masking its constitutive antagonism by the fullness of enjoyment

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[11] Slavoj Žižek, "Beyond Discourse-Analysis," appendix to *New Reflections*, 250.
[12] Žižek, "Beyond Discourse," 251-252.

(racist enjoyment, for example)."[13] Thus, hegemony articulates the contours of a political project

with a "fetishist logic of the ideal" that masks its signifying and antagonistic limitations. The

hegemonic project masks the fact that the "signifying field is always structured around a certain

fundamental deadlock," although this deadlock does not entail resignation but "enthusiastic

resignation" through the experience of a certain impossibility.[14]

The concept of cultural hegemony is central to Laura Podalsky's *Specular City*, which

traces the changes in popular culture industries, consumer practices, and architectural design in

Buenos Aires during the interim governments of 1955-1973 between Juan Perón's presidencies.

Podalsky analyzes the relations between the material and discursive trends proliferating in

Buenos Aires, focusing particularly on the emergence of a middle-class culture in the 1960s, to

argue that the city's transformation during this era contributed to what she calls the formulation

of a "new hegemonic project."[15] Drawing from the work of Neil Larsen, she maintains that the

reformulations of cultural order taking place in Buenos Aires from 1955-1973 occurred in spite

of the period's political volatility, seeing as "the promotion of social consensus through the

cultural field is an ongoing project, ever present, if seldom realized, regardless of the type of

government." Such a period of instability serves instead as "a point of articulation, as a means

through which to interpellate a variety of sectors in a new vision of the social order."[16] The need

to promote social consensus, on behalf of both military regimes and various civilian sectors, was

thus never eliminated in spite of the nation's frequent shifts between military and civilian

governments.

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[13] Žižek, "Beyond Discourse," 254.
[14] Žižek, "Beyond Discourse," 259-260.
[15] Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973*,
Philadelphia: Temple University Press (2004), 5.
[16] Podalsky, *Specular City*, 7.

Podalsky's contributions to studies of cultural transformations in Argentina are also highly relevant to the arguments of this work, although here I seek to disprove the successful consolidation of a hegemonic order, rather than promote it. In the Buenos Aires of recent decades, the points of articulation through which to examine the roles of various actors and agents in the formulation of a new vision of the social order multiply; as the modernizing project transforms the urban terrain, the number of enclaves within the collective territory of the city expand, and the resulting fragmentation of the urban sectors creates many new, and often unnoticed, points in which some type of order might be articulated. As the sites "through which to alter shared social values and subjectivity itself" that Podalsky describes grow increasingly indiscernible from one another, the efficacy of a given hegemonic project in generating social consensus becomes doubtful.[17] Combining Podalsky's analysis with the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, it becomes evident that an increase in the sites of articulation corresponds with an increased antagonism between subject-positions that becomes increasingly difficult for the hegemonic order's social imaginary to mask.

The political project of the 1990s was proposed at the end of a decade marked by severe political and economic instability, at a time when the lack of social and political consensus was so great that Menem's neo-liberal ideology could be promoted without widespread antagonism. It promised stability and prosperity, a powerful assurance that could have provided the "crucial suturing effect" for the consolidation of a hegemonic order. Chapters 1 and 2 prove that the neo-liberal project's "fetishist logic of the ideal" articulated a hegemonic order in several fragmented and incomplete ways: by promoting a global ideal of prosperity and a culture of private consumerism, evident in the regeneration of Puerto Madero, the development of shopping malls,

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[17] Podalsky notes that even if the success of the project in creating new consensus during the 1960s becomes questionable, "there is little doubt that urban culture had been radically and irrevocably transformed in a way that later facilitated the neo-liberal/pro-capitalist policies of the late 1970s and 1980s," in *Specular City*, 7.

and the expansion of gated neighborhoods in the periphery. Yet these chapters also demonstrate that the project's fundamental ideology also intensified antagonisms in the urban sphere, which made the complete consolidation of a hegemonic order implausible. The culminating point in which the growing antagonisms of the 1990s overtook the hegemonic project occurs in Chapter 3, when the crisis of 2001 and 2002 demonstrated the incompetence of Argentine political and economic institutions in representing the needs of their constituency. This process, in which the hegemonic order was only partially consolidated and then subsequently ruptured, can be traced not only through its associated social and political transformations, but also through the alterations in the urban landscape of Buenos Aires from the year of Menem's election to the aftermath of the crisis.

In order to conceive and synthesize recent social and urban transformations in Buenos Aires, it is first necessary to consider the complex dynamics that produce space. How does the production of urban space correlate with (or differ from) larger social transformations? What is its role in shaping an individual's perception of his or her lived environment? These are questions posed by Podalsky in *Specular City*, and her subsequent methods once again align to the goals of this work as she analyzes the role of the city as space in formulating a new cultural hegemony. By first considering recent theoretical observations about space, she modifies existing theories to create her own conceptual model for analyzing space, which includes three spatial elements: built environment, lived practices, and discursive representations.[18]

The concept of a tripartite model of space can be traced back to the work of Henri Lefebvre. A Marxist urban sociologist, Lefebvre was concerned with addressing the role of space in capitalism, arguing that it had weakened, if not resolved, its internal contradictions by

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[18] Podalsky, *Specular City*, 12.

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occupying and producing space.[19] Understanding space to be the key to the successful evolution

of capitalism in the twentieth century, Lefebvre proposed his own complex conceptualization of

space in the form of a tripartite model in his work, *The Production of Space*, first published in

French in 1974.[20] The first element of the model, "spatial practice," refers to the production and

reproduction of space, as well as the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each

social formation. Second, he outlines "representations of space," or the conceptualized space of

bureaucrats and scientists ("a certain type of artist with a scientific bent") who consider that

which is perceived to be synonymous to that which is understood to be true. The third and final

component of his model is that of "representational spaces," or space as "directly lived through

its associated images and symbols" and thus the space of not only inhabitants but also artists,

writers, and philosophers who aspire to do more than just describe space. In this innovative and

influential model, Lefebvre is suggestive in highlighting the underlying relation between space

and social power. While the ideal "representations of space" held by urban bureaucrats allow for

spatial transformations that benefit the dominant classes, the "lived space" constituted in the

model's third element suggests that inhabitants are able to repossess space through their own

means. Thus, he argues, it is not ideologies of space but the "forces of production and the

relations of production that produce social space."[21]

Lefebvre's theorization of space has been comprehensively adopted and revised by an

array of social geographers in their analyses of the production of "postmodern" space during late

capitalism. Concerned by the spatial transformations in his home city of Los Angeles, Edward

Soja breaks down the city's geographical history in *Postmodern Geographies* and reflects on the

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[19] Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*, trans. Frank Bryant, New York: St. Martin's Press (1976) as cited in Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory*, New York: Verso (1989), 91.
[20] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Cambridge: Blackwell (1991).
[21] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* as cited in Podalsky, *Specular City*, 11-12.

impossibility of "totalizing visions, attractive though they may be" in capturing all of the

"meanings and significations of the urban." Noting that what is perceived in the city and in the

spatiality of its social realm is "stubbornly simultaneous," while the written language used to

describe those elements is "successive," he questions if the "task of comprehensive, holistic

regional description" is realistically possible.[22] Maintaining Los Angeles as his focal point of

reflection, Soja later updates Lefebvre's spatial triad with his own concept of spatial trialectics in

Thirdspace, where the "thirdspace" constitutes spaces that are both real and imagined. These

"real-and-imagined other spaces" open possibilities for "a new cultural politics… that is both

radically postmodern and consciously spatialized from the beginning."[23]

Reaffirming the role of representational processes in producing space, geographer David

Harvey emphasizes the importance of symbolic practices over materiality. He upholds the roles

of "materiality, representation, and imagination" in forming the linking dynamic that produces

space, arguing for the "need to understand not merely how places acquire material qualities

[since the] evaluative and hierarchical ranking of places occurs, for example, largely through

activities of representation.[24] This proximity of connectedness between the material and the

representational productions of space reinstates the two as mutually influential (or

consequential).

The reoccurring theme perhaps most central in the theories of Lefebvre, Soja, and Harvey

is thus one that expresses the importance of representational and symbolic practices in the

production and reproduction of urban space. While the material and physical elements of spatial

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[22] Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 247.
[23] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Cambridge: Blackwell (1996), 96.
[24] David Harvey, From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Post-Modernity," in *Mapping the Future: Local Culture, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putman, and George Robertson, New York: Routledge (1993) as cited in Podalsky, *Specular City*, 11.

production are often obvious given their corporeal and tangible components, many of the lived

and nearly all of the representational processes that produce space are frequently concealed from

immediate perception and require greater conscious involvement on the part of the perceiver.

This work will utilize a tripartite model for analyzing space, emphasizing the role of each

component in producing the "space" of contemporary Buenos Aires, an urban terrain that is in an

ongoing process of transformation engendered as much by changes in topography as it is by

innovations in aesthetic representation. The production of space is informed by both static

components and dynamic processes, and the three elements that constitute it—the material, the

lived, and the representational—are mutually influential and may overlap at any given point in

time. For the purposes of this work, the "material" element of space refers to physical

environment. It is readily sensible, and consists of built structures and fixed points in the

geographical plane but also includes those spaces that have been deconstructed or abandoned.

While the *casa rosada*, the subway system, Avenida Nueve de Julio, or the structural confines of

one's apartment are material elements of space, so are the transient structures of the *villas*

miserias and the empty lots of demolished buildings. On the other hand, the "lived" element of

space is comprised of day-to-day activities and processes; these can be deeply engrained

quotidian habits or newly formed adaptations, both of which allow the urban inhabitant to

survive (or thrive) in the urban setting. Lived practices can include catching the bus,

participating in a strike or political demonstration, cooking a meal, conversing with friends,

going to a nightclub, begging for change, shopping at expensive boutiques, or building an

informal residence in a park. Finally, the "representational" element of space is found in the

designs, descriptions, and interpretations created by inhabitants to represent certain aspects of the

urban environment in which they live. These can be architectural or infrastructural plans

commissioned by governments or private enterprises, individual attitudes or conceptions

regarding the urban environment, or aesthetic works by any individual who aspires to describe or

interpret the city through artistic or literary means.

What constitutes a modernized city in the age of postmodernism? Can one speak of a

specifically Latin American postmodernism? These are questions posed by Neil Larsen in

Reading North by South. In resolving this inquiry, he points to the fact that these questions are

immediately complicated by two others, the first concerning the specific cultural objectivity of

"postmodernism" and the second concerning the definition of "modernism" in the Latin

American sense. In addressing the "postmodern" concern, Larson notes that despite the term's

"rapid proliferation in recent intellectual and cultural discourse" and its seemingly

"uncontroversial application" to certain cultural and artistic areas, "there remain suspicions that

the postmodern 'turn' is rather a case of willful over-interpretation of superficial trends within

fashion than any objective shift in artistic and literary method and structure on the order of the

modernist 'revolution' itself."[25] On the second concern regarding a modernism specific to Latin

America, he notes the lack of a "general consensus" on what it might comprise and in what ways

it may have "diverged from modernist orthodoxy." In this sense, he argues, "the very question

of a Latin American postmodernism may seem absurdly premature and out of place—if not

simply the sign of a naively colonizing literary historicism that assumes that culture, like high

technology, flows in one direction only."[26]

Cynicism aside, Harvey points to an unavoidable dilemma in the discourse on Latin

American (post) modernism: the fact that both concepts emerged in the vastly different fields of

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[25] Neil Larsen, *Reading North by South: On Latin American Literature, Culture, and Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1995), 155.
[26] Larsen, *Reading North*, 155.

European and North American thought. Comparing Latin American "modernism" with traditional "modernist orthodoxy" is in this sense like comparing two incommensurable entities. Yet such comparisons have existed in *porteño* discourse throughout the twentieth century. As Néstor García Canclini points out, even debates about defining the "city" are often based in oppositional comparisons, most notably the rural-urban model popular in the first half of the twentieth century. This view was given particular prominence in Argentina by virtue of world theorists like Gino Germani, who "spoke of the city as a nucleus of modernity, precisely because it is there that we can dispense with mandatory, primary relations of belonging—those intense personal, familial, or neighborhood contacts found in small towns or cities."[27] In contrasting the communal space of the countryside, where primary relationships dominated, to the anonymous space of the city, where one could freely select social and environmental relationships, Germani divides space into two separate entities by way of descriptive differentiation. García Canclini notes, however, that this distinction between the rural and the urban is limited to superficial traits that do not account for the intersections of lived practices that occur in urban space and those that happen in rural space. For instance, "one often sees *campesinos* traveling through the city in horse-drawn carriages, or the urban space used as if it were rural, as if it would be difficult to imagine a car passing by there."[28]

Perceiving the city as having been invaded by the countryside is one of the many *porteño* preoccupations that consistently arise in addressing the cultural identity of Buenos Aires. The Argentine architect and historian Adrián Gorelik addresses several of these preoccupations in his essay, "Buenos Aires is (Latin) America, Too," which traces different stages in the history of Buenos Aires to demonstrate the city's cultural self-identification with international influences.

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[27] Néstor García Canclini, "What is a City?" in *City/Art: The Urban Scene in Latin America*, ed. Rebecca E. Biron, Durham: Duke University Press (2009), 37.
[28] García Canclini, "What is a City?" 38.

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His analysis suggests that "Buenos Aires is forever preoccupied with where and to whom it belongs, seeking models and embodiments of virtue and progress in other international cities," most notably those in Europe and North America.[29] He views the contemporary crisis in Buenos Aires as that of not only reclaiming a Latin American identity, but also that of addressing "in more general and long-historical terms that other side of the mirror in which the city sees itself: Latin America as an idea, a project, a destiny." In this sense, the signifier "Latin America" has become an inversion in that it has found an opposite meaning: what used to be an idealistic project now appears to be a condemning destiny. Buenos Aires can no longer turn a blind eye to the presence of the *villas* and the migrants (the "Latin American") as the insecurity surrounding their occupation of public space grows. Similarly, the "Latin American" component acts as a repetition, a frequent rupture that reveals society's shock upon recognizing the presence of the "radically other."[30]

Gorelik traces these inversions and repetitions of the ever-present Latin American element of Buenos Aires through different stages in the city's history. Beginning with the Revolución de Mayo, he shows that the concept of Buenos Aires as a "European" city evolved as a method of resisting Spanish heritage and therefore serving as an "instrument for American emancipation," offering the new territory a "uniquely liberating taste of the future."[31] As the pace of modernizing projects in Europe began to ebb in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Buenos Aires found itself identifying with the American power to the north. At the same time, the city's increasing inflow of poor immigrants and adoption of eclectic architectural design constituted social transformations and new modernizing processes that made

[29] Adrián Gorelik, "Buenos Aires is (Latin) America, Too," in *City/Art: The Urban Scene in Latin America*, ed. Rebecca E. Biron, Durham: Duke University Press (2009), 62.
[30] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 62.
[31] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 62.

the "too-European elite" aware of the separation happening between the cities of Europe and the "provincial chaos of Buenos Aires."[32]

As "European" Buenos Aires looked increasingly to the north, it welcomed the attention of European visitors who were invited to Buenos Aires for its centenary celebrations in the 1910s. Assuming the absence of "exoticism," or indigenous traits in the population, these visitors initiated a "paradoxical comparative system" between New York City and Buenos Aires that flattered the vanity of *porteños* while further undermining "the city's fragile sense of self."[33] Another development during this period was the city's adoption of a grid system that connected the historical center with the newer suburbs of the lower classes, facilitating movement for all classes in the urban sphere. Gorelik notes the lasting impact of the city's spatial design:

> Within a few decades the urban grid became the most accurate expression of the state's desire to integrate a conflictive and plural society; along with public education, which was key to that policy, it could be said that the repetitive city blocks of Buenos Aires were formed as an urban reassurance of broad social mobility. Thus, the "American" foundation of the city would become one of the essential components of the "European" aspect of its public spaces.[34]

Important to not only the "reassurance of broad social mobility," the grid system has served as representational foreground for celebrated Argentine authors like Jorge Luis Borges.

By the mid-1940s, Buenos Aires had completed many of its largest modernizing reforms to the city's center: the construction of major streets (Avenida General Paz and Avenida Nueve de Julio), completion of the subway system, and installation of the Obelisk. In achieving its modern form, the city fully assumed its "European character," which was taken to be common

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[32] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 63.
[33] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 65.
[34] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 66-67.

knowledge by the 1950s.[35] However, this consolidation of the city's cultural identity occurred

with a simultaneous metropolitan expansion, constituted by rural migrations from the provinces

and bordering nations that would form what is now known as Greater Buenos Aires. Although

the urban preoccupation with the effects of a rural, "Latin American" infiltration of the city

resurfaced once again, Gorelik argues that this wave of migration did not have the same cultural

implications in Buenos Aires as it did in other Latin American cities like Mexico City, which

experienced both a massive wave of rural migrations and a subsequent shift in the city's cultural

representations.

Gorelik offers two reasons for the migration wave's lack of effect on cultural identity in

Buenos Aires. First, he argues that the city comes from "a much older modernity" that provides

a "solid core of transversal recognition" within the urban confines, through which Buenos Aires

becomes a "shared analogous city" that distributes urban identity "across the territory of

expansion in a hierarchical graduation from the center to the periphery."[36] This hierarchical

distribution of cultural identity reinstates Buenos Aires' paradoxical preoccupation with

maintaining its "European" character, which further separates the city culturally and

institutionally from the transformations taking place beyond its historic center. Further

facilitating this process, the second factor that Gorelik points to is the relative size of the urban

expansion in Buenos Aires during this period, which was less extensive than in other Latin

American countries during the same period.

However, mass rural-to-urban migration that began in the late 1940s was a trend only in

its beginning stages that triggered a movement of revisionary urban planning in the 1950s.

Confronted by challenges specific to their spatial and cultural contexts, Latin American cities

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[35] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 67.
[36] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 68.

began to question their compatibility with the modernization processes experienced by more advanced countries in the past.[37] Rather than allowing their cities to become "a laboratory for the theory of development," urban planners challenged the foundations of the Western modernization process "to the point of generating radically critical alternatives… in the face of certain functionalist theoretical postulates that pathologized Latin American urbanization."[38] Yet Gorelik argues that if this revision sought to show the misalignments of the Western modernization theory with regard to the Latin American context, it actually demonstrated that urbanization was a "sign of underdevelopment as well as a cause of its perpetuation."[39] Given the issues central to the modernizing debate in Buenos Aires—the question of social housing, the problem of the periphery, and the condemnation of the state—Gorelik sees no "differential element in Buenos Aires with respect to the Latin American context," which suggests that any change ameliorating the strained relations between the center and the periphery would have to be preceded by radical political change.[40]

The polarization of rural and urban politics was exacerbated by the Peronist movement, in which the rural, poor, and working classes were given newfound political power. During the interim years between Perón's rule, the urban middle class—"the proudest product of European Buenos Aires"—became the greatest obstacle to urban reform, and their resistance "ironically became reason for celebration."[41] With the return of Perón's dictatorial regime in 1973 and the following rule of the military junta until 1983, discourse on the modernizing plan for Buenos

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[37] As Gorelik notes, "The numerous international conferences of the 1940s revealed that the Latin American city marked an ideal point in the transition continuum, neither lagging behind, like the rest of the third world, whose urban explosion Latin America shared, nor so far ahead that it impeded 'an intelligent and foresighted design' that could avoid the perils of earlier, unregulated modernization in more advanced countries." In "Buenos Aires," 69.
[38] These postulates include concepts such as over-urbanization, primarization, and the traditional/modern dichotomy. Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 70.
[39] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 70.
[40] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 71.
[41] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 72.

Aires grew stagnant until the mid-1980s. Understanding Buenos Aires to be a space of conflict and cultural heterogeneity, the revolution of urban thought during this period introduced a completely new system of references in regard to addressing the question of modernity. Gorelik notes that this revolution coincided with three important, paradoxical factors: the international height of the postmodern debate, the end of the dictatorship, and the fragmentation of the old "modern project" in Buenos Aires.[42] While the heightened postmodern debate gave new value to the role of urban culture in interpreting modern life, it paradoxically reinstated themes that were misaligned to the Latin American context, in which urban culture had gone from "full confidence in modernity to completely rejecting it." On the other hand, although the end of the dictatorship allowed for a newfound consideration of the city as public space for both political and cultural use, its celebration was juxtaposed by the "notorious material decay of the city," which served as an "acknowledgement of the failure and death of previous urban planning policies."[43] Finally, the fragmentation of the old "modern project" that connected cultural identity to Buenos Aires' multiple modern-European pasts coincided with a new form of social fragmentation, in which social life grew increasingly segregated as sectors of the middle and upper classes adopted the private patterns of North American-inspired consumerism and the urban sphere became increasingly privatized through the investments and developments of by private enterprises. These processes are described in depth in Chapter 1.

If the revolutionary urban thought generated in the 1980s had contributed any concrete revisions to the discourse on urban reform, its contributions were limited given the deep fragmentation within the city's socio-spatial order. As Gorelik notes, "The discovery of the political and urban possibilities of public space occurred at the very moment in which public

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[42] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 73.
[43] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 73.

space suffered an attack from privatization."[44] This process of micro-privatization in the private

sphere was demonstrated by changes in the material and lived practices of those who could

afford to enclose themselves from disorder in the public realm. Influenced by the consumer

practices of North Americans in Miami, members of the upper class promoted the construction

of shopping malls throughout the city's center and wealthy northern neighborhoods, which

offered private alternatives "to the intensity of the public space outside its arcades."[45] Similarly,

this period also saw the rapid construction of private guardhouses erected on the corners of

residential neighborhoods in Greater Buenos Aires, granting residents greater privacy but

interrupting "the flow of an integrated public." These transformations of the material and lived

elements of urban space exemplified broader changes during this period, including the increase

in concentrated private investments, the withdrawal of state intervention (influenced as much by

lack of political innovation as by a lack of control), and further fragmentation of social and urban

space.

The accommodation of these changes into the foundation of a new urban system of

modernization in the 1990s confirms the role of neo-liberal and global ideologies in dominating

Buenos Aires' institutional order while simultaneously deepening the divides in its social order.

Accepting this fragmentation as "the necessary condition for a modernizing leap," the new

system under Carlos Menem (president of Argentina from 1989-1999) abandoned Peronism's

identification with the rural and impoverished masses in favor of cultivating a favorable

relationship with the United States, leader of the advanced capitalist nations. Further promoting

its reputation abroad, Argentina strengthened its diplomatic relations with the international

community on and off the continent. Under Economics Minister Domingo Cavallo, the country

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[44] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 74.
[45] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 74.

aligned macroeconomic policy with the reigning neo-liberal ideology; under the new system, the government implemented a program of massive privatization and labor deregulation, adopted the Convertibility Plan to stall inflation, and established an Argentine Currency Board that subsequently pegged the peso to the U.S. dollar.[46]

Recalling the fundamental incompatibility of Latin American and Western (post) modernisms, one can imagine the implications of Menem and Cavallo's new modernizing system, which based its assumption of successful development on the experiences of advanced capitalist societies. According to Gorelik, the adoption of this system "assumes the end of modern urban expansion."[47] However, this is an assumption that the government of this era would not have considered given their neo-liberal discipline. Instead of conceptualizing the possible emergence of fundamental dilemmas in their model, the regime would have unknowingly mistaken the model's success in foreign societies for universality. If the growth-oriented system was to work efficiently, the government may have assumed that divisions and inequalities within its society would iron out in the long run.

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[46] Paul H. Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism: From Menem to the Kirchners*, Santa Barbara: Praeger (2009), 52-57.
[47] Gorelik, "Buenos Aires," 75.

Chapter One

Privatized Public Space in *Shoppings* and Puerto Madero

On the evening of October 15, 1997, the newly revitalized Puerto Madero hosted an important guest in one of its new waterfront restaurants: dining out to experience a traditional *porteño* meal were President Bill Clinton and his wife. In a meticulously detailed account of the evening published the next day in *Clarín*, which created a specific section to cover the North American president's week-long visit, the details of the president's dining experience were not spared:

> Relaxed and in good humor, Clinton tried grilled steak, empanadas and salad while he watched the motionless cranes of Puerto Madero through the large window. He accompanied his meal with red wine and mineral water, seated next to a painting of an ombú tree in the restaurant Las Lilas. When leaving, he waited for two twin limousines, license 8002, in which he escaped the crowds.[48][49]

It is not clear who suggested the Las Lilas restaurant to President Clinton. It is curious to note, however, that the President of the United States had his first Argentine meal in Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires' newest waterfront "neighborhood," still undergoing massive renovation under the direction of internationally acclaimed urban designers and leading foreign investors. Given President Clinton's well-known love for home-style American soul food, wouldn't he have enjoyed dining in a traditional *parrilla* in San Telmo, the historic heart of Buenos Aires?

Although the selection of Puerto Madero could have been by chance or, more likely, a matter of security arrangement, the documentation of President Clinton's evening there is

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[48] Pablo Calvo and Nancy Pazos, "La visita: la primera actividad en Buenos Aires," *Clarín*, 16 Oct. 1997.
[49] Translation by this author. All following translations from Spanish to English are made by this author, unless otherwise stated.

nonetheless notable. The occasion of the president's visit—referred to by Clarín as "*la visita*" ("the visit")—marked an important date in history for an Argentine nation then at its peak of neo-liberal ideology. A diplomatic visit from the president of the capitalist powerhouse to the north was sure to be important for the consolidation of Argentina as an emerging economic power in the international playing field. The excitement and attention surrounding President Clinton's visit, following his every move from the moment he stepped off of Air Force One until he boarded it once again a week later, attest to a *porteño* enthusiasm for its North American neighbor. A rather thorough narration of the U.S. president's first moments on Argentine soil followed the *Clarín* report on his dining experience:

> Clinton and Carlos Menem embraced yesterday at 7:54 PM at Ezeiza Airport in an
> unusual reception for diplomatic codes, given the presence of the Argentine president and
> his entire government on the runway. Among the largest deployment of security ever
> seen at the international airport, Clinton debarked from the Air Force One airplane hand-
> in-hand with his wife, Hillary, with the salute of canons in the background and the cold
> wind in front of him… After [the greeting with Menem] came the turn of second-tier
> ministers and functionaries and three little blonde children dressed in gaucho attire, who
> gave flowers to both presidents. Once he reached the end of the red carpet, Clinton and
> Menem spoke for 22 seconds—translator between them—and said goodbye for the day.
> The North American got into a black limousine that cannot go faster than 90 kilometers
> per hour because of the weight of its doors, made of steel and reinforced glass. He waved
> with his left hand and smiled at the Argentine reporters two meters in front of him and
> left via the Richieri highway, escorted by some fifty police cars. In the moments before
> his arrival, the North American security agents moved like they do in the movies: they
> exchanged orders over radio earphones, running with cases full of large weapons and
> scanning the horizon with infrared binoculars from the roof… Menem took care of every

detail to make sure that Clinton would feel his warmth. As recently as yesterday he

signed Decree 1073 that accepted the donation of two creole horses to give as gifts.[50]

"*La visita*" was certainly off to a great start.

The landscape of Puerto Madero that President Clinton saw that evening was drastically

different from what it had been at the start of the decade. Having been closed to the public by

the military dictatorship in 1976, Puerto Madero sat idle until the mid-1980s when it reopened in

a state of deterioration and ruin. However, 1989 marked the commencement of a massive

regeneration project aiming to transform the space into an emblem of Buenos Aires' rise to urban

modernity. On November 15, the Ministry of Works and Public Services, the Department of the

Interior, and the City of Buenos Aires signed the acts of incorporation of the *Corporación*

Antiguo Puerto Madero SA (Old Puerto Madero Corporation), a joint-stock company in which

the federal and city governments participated as equal partners. Signed in the neo-liberal spirit

of the economic revitalization ideologies constituted in the Law of State Reform and Economic

Emergency, the deal allowed the formerly public docklands to be privatized under the

presumption that its regeneration—along with desired improvements to other abandoned public

spaces—would be more efficiently carried out under the management of a profit-seeking agent

operating under Argentina's newly liberalized market conditions. During the period between

1989 and 1991, negotiations over land rights and planning strategies ensued as various parties

expressed concern for the area's future development. These parties included port operators, local

architectural groups, Spanish urban planning consultative firms, and international real estate

developers (including, at one point, Donald Trump).[51] After a final agreement was reached in

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[50] Calvo and Pazos, "La visita."
[51] See chapter on the administration of the Puerto Madero project by Alfredo Garay, planning director under the Menem administration, in Jorge F. Liernur, ed., *Puerto Madero Waterfront* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2007), 76.

June 1991, the project's plan was implemented by the CAPM administration, which contracted a Spanish urban planning team to conduct the area's main architectural design and sold bids to private entities for construction and use rights.[52]

The plan sought to encompass two main elements of urban planning, the first of which was a premeditated design that would extend Buenos Aires' gridded block system so as to promote the area as a new "neighborhood" that would serve as a strategic area for the development of urban businesses. Based on this vision, private developers constructed modernistic high rises for commercial and residential uses on rectangular city blocks. The second planning element central to the project's implementation was that of historical conservation, carried out in the renovation of the area's old waterfront brick warehouses dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, which were revitalized and converted into mainly commercial spaces, including offices, restaurants, and university buildings for the new campus of a private Catholic university. Representing the visions of CAPM's public and private actors, Puerto Madero was fully transformed in less than ten years as a posh waterfront district serving the business, residential, and leisure demands of Buenos Aires' up-and-coming populations. Real estate prices rivaled those of the city's traditionally privileged northern neighborhoods and (as seen by President Clinton's visit) its commercial and cultural services catered almost exclusively to the same upper classes and wealthy tourists.[53]

In many ways, the project implemented by CAPM was a success. It unlocked the area for complete physical reinvention while simultaneously attracting investment inflows and international attention, creating what Gorelik has called "a postcard image of Buenos Aires for

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[52] Liernur, *Puerto Madero*, 9.
[53] Laurence Crot, " 'Scenographic' and 'Cosmetic' Planning: Globalization and Territorial Restructuring in Buenos Aires," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28, no. 3 (2006), 235; Guillermo Tella, *Un crack en la ciudad: Rupturas y continuidades en la trama urbana de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires: Nobuku (2007), 78-79.

the twenty-first century." However, the plan's spectacular delivery of modern urban design and

prestige has failed in two respects. First, it has failed to create mechanisms that enable the

enormous gains in value generated from within the area to be used throughout the rest of the city;

regarding the business deals it made with private interests in Puerto Madero, the city of Buenos

Aires has not significantly benefited. Secondly, the plan has failed to create positive spillover

effects for the city's most deteriorated areas in its traditional downtown and southern region,

countermanding the project's goal of creating greater continuity between the city and the port.

Thus one major question prevails: exactly *who* was the reinvented space of Puerto Madero

intended to serve? The private interests that fueled the port's regeneration recreated it in such a

way that it became an exclusive space for the consumption and accommodation of the city's

upper classes. Although the old, abandoned Puerto Madero—disconnected from its previous

use—served no one, the "public" status of its space was subverted in light of the important role

played by local and international private capital in its regeneration. As Gorelik notes, the Puerto

Madero project is symbolic of the city's trend toward "megaprojects" that contrast with its

traditional planning system centered on European notions of central public space; working

against traditional planning logic, such projects have contributed to the emergence of a

decentralized city model characteristic of Latin American modernization:

> Of course Puerto Madero is not itself responsible for this global change. But the policy
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> of the urban fragment and the "grand projects" that had in Puerto Madero its moment of
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> glory implicitly led to this result. Unlike what occurred in European cities, the logic of
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> the fragment has worked in Buenos Aires as the urban counterpart of increasing social
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> fragmentation.[54]

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[54] Adrián Gorelik, "The Puerto Madero Competition and Urban Ideas in Buenos Aires in the 1980s," in Liernur 2007.

While the success of the Puerto Madero project in transforming the area into a contemporary and cosmopolitan district vastly improved from its previous state of abandonment is notable, the project's effects on the city's larger socio-spatial terrain cannot be ignored. A space invented by the hands of European designers, private interests, and public actors preoccupied with a globalized sense of the urban ideal, Puerto Madero remains an enclave excluding the rest of the city and fails to promote social and territorial integration within Buenos Aires. President Clinton's evening out in the neighborhood was clearly strategic: in showing off Buenos Aires' newest, most globally cosmopolitan district to their North American neighbor, his hosts avoided sending him to less glamorous districts of the traditional city center where he might have come across less ideal versions of the city (from that perspective). The planning priorities in Puerto Madero's regeneration are characteristic of an epochal shift seen in the 1990s toward urban decentralization and social and territorial fragmentation that simultaneously reject Buenos Aires' Latin American urban identity and reassert it. The contemporary design and high-end culture that attributed Puerto Madero its exclusive nature became commonplace elements in many other private real estate developments during this period. Combined with the growth of consumer culture fueled by the prosperity of the dollarized peso, these new trends in private real estate development also contributed to the rise of an even more profound phenomenon: *shoppings*.

Early in the morning of December 30, 1990, the city of Buenos Aires passed an ordinance signed by Mayor Carlos Grosso that placed an entire section of a public school under the management of a private development group in what became known as *el escándalo de la escuela-shopping*: the public-school-turned-shopping-mall scandal that fueled public animosity and vehement urban debate for the next two decades. The ordinance passed that morning by city

council members transferred the use rights of the bottom floor of Escuela Presidente Mitre, a public school located near the Once train station in the city center, to developer Salomón Salem in exchange for his withdrawal of any charges against the city for his loss of a concession bid for spaces in a local commercial center. Under the agreement, the bottom floor of the school could be used for the construction of commercial enterprises that would operate as part of the Centro de Abastecimiento, a complex with twenty-five commercial spaces across the street. Fourteen businesses were constructed within the school by the following year, initiating widespread waves of public discontent over the concession of a highly valued public space that quickly turned the building into an emblem of the private-public spatial tensions that characterized the 1990s. The emergence of the *escuela-shopping* in part of the city's historic center was merely the impetus for a series of allegations of abuse and corruption against Grosso, various members of his administration, and several developers that launched nearly twenty years of unending lawsuits and dilatory legal proceedings. It wasn't until 2010 that the city government approved legislation that evicted the businesses from the building and legally ended the concession, reinstating full rights of the space for educational purposes.[55]

The *escuela-shopping* scandal is a noteworthy event in that it speaks to the social and political contexts in which many of the period's urban transformations took place. Perhaps most evident is the fact that the city government's decision to grant Salem use rights to Escuela Presidente Mitre was made without the popular consent of the constituency. Given the pure novelty (or absurdity) of the concept—transferring the rights to the lower portion of a public

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[55] Grosso resigned from office in 1992 and went to trial beginning in 1994; over the next sixteen years his case went before eight magistrates. Alleged for their involvement were dozens of individuals, including developers like Salem, the administration's Minster of Education, and even future President Ibarra (who was involved in the city government at the time of the scandal). After years of legal battle, the businesses vacated the premises without resistance in February of 2010 and legal rights were reinstated to the school in April. Grosso was eventually cleared of those charges affiliated with the concession. See articles published in April 2010 from *Página 12* covering the proceedings: Eduardo Videla, "Una reparación 20 años después" and "La escuela que dejará de ser shopping;" "La Ciudad de Buenos Aires recuperará la 'escuela shopping.'"

school building to a private developer of retail stores—it would have been advisable, even rational, for an administration operating under normal democratic protocol to consider the potential public reactions to such a policy. Not only did Grosso's administration neglect to take into consideration the reactions of infuriated parents and community members, it favored the interests of a private business over the concerns of the public. The potential ramifications of an angry Salomón Salem pressing charges over a lost bid to a shopping complex were prioritized over the potential social consequences that could ensue from marginalizing children within their own school building. As Raúl Fernández, who led the 2010 political initiative to return the space to its educational ends, stated to *Página 12*: "The concession of the *escuela-shopping* is not only an emblem of corruption but also a symbol of the state's defection in the support of public schools."[56] The *escuela-shopping* exemplifies an undeniable trend of the Argentine political sphere in the 1990s toward favoring private investment, frequently at the expense of the general public. The rigorous neoliberal ideology according to which the Menem administration structured its political agenda extended itself not only through economic reforms like the State Reform and Economic Emergency Law but also through the administration's day-to-day activities; Menemism's business logic equally manifested itself in the administration's interactions with local actors, whose interests could be weighed in terms of profitability.

Moreover, favorable conditions for private investment and the stability of the dollarized peso created a new, stimulated market environment that caused massive growth in consumer demand for goods and services.   The 1990s transformed Buenos Aires into a city dominated by consumption, and import commodities flooded into the country as demand climbed to unprecedented levels. Formalized by this process was retail consumerism's forefront trademark: the shopping mall. Characteristic of their origins in North American consumerism, malls

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[56] Statement taken from article above, "Una reparación 20 años después," 6 April 2010.

became known in Buenos Aires as "*shoppings*," and although they began to appear in the urban landscape thirty years later than in their country of origin, they were constructed at a much more accelerated rate and quickly evolved into symbols of the city's purported rise to global prosperity.[57] In a temporal context saturated with political, economic, and cultural influences from the U.S., private developers in Buenos Aires recognized the potential profitability in bringing the North American-style shopping mall to Argentina, where wealthy consumers were already raving about the dazzling malls and arcades they had seen in their travels to Miami and New York. Seeking to emulate the allure of those complexes, developers replicated their architectural and interior designs, marked by sheer enormity, regularity and normalized order, and pristine aesthetics. While the exterior design of the *shopping* contained the shopper in a multi-level mega-complex that separated him or her from the outside urban climate, the interior design was marked by openness, cleanliness, and order that made its merchandise easily accessible for the consumer.

In addition to replicating the designs of their North American predecessors, the new *shoppings* also promoted the adoption of transnational consumer practices and ideologies of material wealth. *Shoppings* displayed the cosmopolitan merchandise of the global market, including novel technology, North American and European fashion, and luxury imports, complete with brand names like Cartier, Lacoste, Adidas, and Nike. Having just experienced an era of material and social deterioration in the city, *porteños* in the 1990s were fascinated by the new products pouring into the consumer market by way of the city's newest commercial centers. Most of the stores within *shoppings* used strategic branding techniques to market themselves as being emblematic of transnational trends; even if they didn't boast the exclusive brand names of

[57] The adopted use of the English word "shopping" signifies a desire to identify to a particular type of commercial establishment (as seen in its English-speaking neighbor to the north). Guillermo Tella, *Un crack en la ciudad: Rupturas y continuidades en la trama urbana de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Nobuku, 2007), 82.

North America and Europe, stores sought to rearticulate their high-end and cutting-edge qualities, often displaying their name and promotions in English[58] and advertising an "exceptional (and exceptionally transnational) lifestyle that was way above the reach of most mall visitors."[59] By imitating a central set of physical and subjective qualities seen in the shopping malls of modernized countries, *shoppings* were designed to not only to ensure their profitability, but also to consolidate predominance over the entire retail market.

However, their predominance in the commercial sector did not mean that the products sold by *shoppings* catered to the actual demands and income levels within the market. Despite the wave of relative prosperity that characterized the beginning of the decade, members of the middle class found the majority of the high-end goods sold in *shoppings* to be physically available but realistically inaccessible and affordable only to wealthy *porteños*. Yet this barrier did not deter the middle class from frequenting the city's most prominent commercial centers, even if only to browse the merchandise and experience the dazzling splendor of their modernity. As Beatriz Sarlo notes, the attraction of the *shopping* is generated by its "celebrity" exhibition of merchandise, in which even those who cannot afford the material lives of the wealthy can "observe it as if leafing through a magazine of the rich and famous." In turn, the conceptual clarity of its design—its convenience, mapped organization, branded storefronts—converted those fascinated visitors into expert consumers, who by way of their experience could become knowledgeable about the hierarchy of that material world even if the majority of its offerings were inaccessible.[60] The fascination with material wealth is an effect generated by the cyclical

[58] The use of North American language and symbols in Argentine consumer culture could constitute its own linguistic or anthropological study on altered cultural contexts (perhaps literally "lost in translation")—i.e. names of Argentine-managed clothing stores like "Drugstore;" the confederate flag logo of J.L. Cook.

[59] Emanuela Guan, "Spectacles of Modernity: Transnational Imagination and Local Hegemonies in Neoliberal Buenos Aires," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2002): 198.

[60] Beatriz Sarlo, *La ciudad vista*, Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores (2009), 21.

dependency between increasing propensity to consume and accelerated expansion of *shoppings*, in which each fuels the proliferation of the other in a cycle that solidifies a cultural ideology of consumerism and private wealth. In this manner, the influences of North American consumer practices and their promotion and re-articulation in the *porteño* urban sphere consolidated an ideology of consumerism and material wealth that was manifested in the daily activities of the urban population.

The influx of *shoppings* and their promotion of material consumerism conclusively altered the recreational and economic habits of *porteños*; however a more subtle aspect of their dominance is in the manner that they affected and transformed urban imaginaries in Buenos Aires, demonstrated by the ways in which the restructuring of urban space and, in turn, the perceptions surrounding it. In order to understand the implications the new complexes had on the existing urban terrain, it is worthwhile to begin by examining the privately-managed processes by which they were planned and constructed. While developers building complexes in the periphery could select and purchase undeveloped plots of open land for construction, the site selections of commercial developments in the city's centers and sub-centers were limited to a set number of existing urban spaces no longer useful for other viable means—typically vacant buildings and warehouses left by processes of deindustrialization—which had to be subsequently purchased (often after extensive negotiations with owners and city officials) and reconverted. The city's largest shopping complex, for example, was built in the space of Buenos Aires' historical central market located in Abasto, which had been abandoned for more than a decade following the market's relocation outside of the federal district. The process of "recycling" old urban spaces into new commercial centers marked an intervention in the existing order of the city's urban terrain in that it sought to recondition and reinstate value in deteriorated historical

buildings on the one hand, while on the other it aimed to install the homogenizing qualities that characterized the new dynamic of the commercial sector.[61]

As seen previously in the case of Puerto Madero, the recycling process was limited by its internal juxtaposing goals of conservation and innovation, and the maintenance of traditional architectural features was often sacrificed for contemporary and homogeneous design. While the edifices of some *shoppings*, like the Abasto complex, maintained some of their historic character, others were completely transformed. Given the sheer size of the complexes, their presence in the visual urban landscape was unavoidable. Moreover, their presence in the long-established neighborhoods on the city had clear and often profound effects on surrounding localities. The Abasto complex completed in 1998 is a prime example of the way in which large-scale commercial development has generated profound transformation in surrounding urban spheres. When the plan to develop the largest shopping complex in all of Buenos Aires was announced in 1996, it initiated a two-year-long frenzy of speculation in the real estate market as prominent developers and commercial enterprises scrambled to bid for one of the complex's prized retail spaces or for properties in the immediate area. On the eve of its opening in November 1998, an article in *Clarín* confirmed the astronomical real estate prices in the area, which had only recently been one of the most deteriorated and dangerous parts of the city. Properties directly across from the Abasto complex were being valued at 1,000 to 1,500 dollars per square meter, a rate that doubled if directly across from the front of the complex on the avenue of Corrientes; one property situated on the corner of Corrientes was valued at approximately 9 million dollars. Anticipating a surge in money demand from crowds of consumers, ten banks were established in 1998 alone, all within 200 meters of one another.

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[61] Tella, *Un crack*, 83.

Although the Abasto mall sparked large investments in the surrounding area that increased the value of the surrounding terrain, its overall implications for the neighborhood were rather ambiguous. As Mariana Iglesias and Silviana Schuchner of *Clarín* report:

Apart from the dust and noise in which they've lived for the last year, neighborhood residents are happy that now they can at least walk along Corrientes without the fear of being robbed. In the other streets surrounding the *shopping*, they say they can only walk during the day because at night the area, at least for now, continues to be a no man's land. Residents believe that the private security of the *shopping* will push out some of the thieves, but that it will not be sufficient enough to make them vacate the neighborhood completely. 'They say that all of this will be filled with French and German tourists, but that it's more important that a lot of police are sent, because if not everyone's going to be robbed,' said an employee of La Recova del Abasto, a restaurant that opened a year ago on the corner of the Carlos Gardel walkway.

The landscape is contrasting: the dazzling façade of Abasto can be seen from one direction, but across the street there is only abandonment. On Anchorena, the glass of the *shopping* reflects boarded-up houses, garages full of scrap metal, and El Progresso, a café that now only sells Peruvian food. The Carlos Gardel walkway has the worst reputation among the streets that surround the *shopping*: cracked walls, abandoned houses, and bleak plots occupied by marginal groups that aren't listed in any census. Irsa, the firm that built the *shopping*, bought some of the occupied plots and promised the informal inhabitants other property or money so that they would move. 'The owner wanted us to leave, so every time that I see the *shopping* I think of a miracle,'[62] says Carlos Della Paolera, 43, seated in a deck chair in front of the bleak terrain where countless families

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[62] Referring to the "miracle" by which the tenants stayed: "El dueño nos quería desalojar, así que cada vez que veo el shopping pienso en el milagro…"

live. For one reason or another, Abasto brought back the hope that had been taken away

when its doors opened.[63]

The optimistic tone with which the authors end the article speaks to the ambiguous nature of the

social and spatial transformations taking place in the neighborhood. On the one hand, some of

the residents report gratitude for the development of the new complex, predicting that it will push

out some of the area's thefts and hoping that it will bring more law enforcement to the area. For

these neighbors, the presence of the *shopping* gives them a sense of increased security; it

represents order and modernity that will superimpose the less ideal qualities of the

neighborhood—those represented by the "abandoned houses," "garages full of scrap," "cracked

walls," and "bleak plots" that imply a state of complete deterioration. Invaded by foreign and

unwanted elements—like the Peruvian restaurant and informal tenants—that have flourished in

the deterioration and abandonment, these residents hope that the Abasto will infuse their

neighborhood with order and modernity, hiding or eliminating its less-than-ideal qualities and

making it comparable to the city's wealthiest districts (or perhaps other urban districts of foreign

places).

On the other hand, the development of the Abasto complex threatened the welfare of

some residents. When the informal tenants living nearby became an inconvenience for the

shopping mall's developer, the firm attempted to facilitate the tenants' removal from the area by

offering them money or land elsewhere. Yet at the time the article was written, the tenants

continued to occupy the land along Carlos Gardel and refused to vacate its premises. As one

informal resident put it, they were able to stay by way of a "miracle" that he is reminded of every

time he sees the enormous, dazzling Abasto complex. The Abasto promoted a social logic of

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[63] Translated from Mariana Iglesias and Silvina Schuchner, "Las obras en Abasto le cambian la cara al barrio," *Clarín*, 1 Nov. 1998.

order, security, and modernity that was praised by some residents and rejected by others. The informal residents' continued occupation of the area, in spite of the developer's attempts to push them out, represents a form of resistance, a repeated act that challenged the dominant authority in the locality. Their rejection of the developer's assertion of rights to the space they inhabited marks one of many points of rupture that occurred in the urban terrain throughout the period.

The ambiguous outcome of the Abasto complex for its surrounding locality is not unique, however; the construction of *shoppings* in the throughout the city during the 1990s promoted a new cultural logic and significantly altered the urban environment. Although they increased the value of the surrounding real estate, the increases in business competition and real estate value had the subsequent effect of squeezing out traditional modes of commerce in Buenos Aires and permanently changing the commercial sector. *Shoppings* were successful because of their efficient designs and operations, marked by their size, order, cleanliness, and availability of products; they created a new market equilibrium under which their homogenous designs and offerings attracted masses of consumers, but also altered the business practices of existing establishments. They created a process of imitation within the surrounding area, whereby "the small neighborhood supermarket imitates the big supermarket," cramming more on its shelves even though the model is spatially and economically infeasible.[64]   Spaciously designed and knowledgeable of consumer preferences, *shoppings* (and other types of mega-complexes) were able to follow the changing demands of the consumer market and maintain the upper hand in the commercial sector, playing by rules they wrote themselves.

The changes in the commercial business sector associated with the growth of *shoppings* were concurrent with changes in the urban terrain of Buenos Aires and in the practices and perceptions of its inhabitants. Yet *shoppings* also transformed the ideologies surrounding an

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[64] Sarlo, *La ciudad*, 18.

urban discourse with deep historical roots in Argentine society. The discourse on private versus

public space was profoundly shaped by the political and social contexts of the 1990s,

demonstrated by the case of Puerto Madero and also by the growth of *shoppings* throughout the

city. Urban discourse centered on a central question: were the spaces of *shoppings* public or

private? From one perspective, one could argue that they might be type of public plaza: a

recreational space that anyone can enter and use freely, as many *porteños* did. Yet within their

walls exists an unmistakable sense of isolation from the outside world. In theory, one could use

the multiple entrances of an urban shopping mall as a shortcut between blocks or streets, but as

Sarlo has observed, few people do because "this trajectory, although possible, is not anticipated

in the program, which seeks to separate itself from the city and reign over it in obdurate

difference."[65] This dissociation with the urban terrain makes the *shopping* an enclave

fragmented from the surrounding space of the city and therefore from the immediate effects of

the events that happen there.

This quality was particularly important toward the latter part of the decade in the midst of

rising unemployment and crime throughout the city. The residents who hoped that the Abasto

mall would bring greater security to their neighborhood hadn't generated the idea on their own;

they had merely adopted the existing consensus held by many members of the middle and upper

classes that the *shopping* was an enclave of order and modernity, separated from what they saw

as a state of societal chaos outside its doors. Starkly contrasted from its surroundings, the

shopping became a popular haven for middle and upper class citizens who had come to think of

public space as invaded by the lower classes, which were consequently associated with dirtiness

and crime and blamed for the city's decadence. This is why the developer of Abasto sought to

remove the informal settlement nearby, which could have threatened the mall's normalized

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[65] Sarlo, *La ciudad*, 17.

environment by reminding shoppers of their discomfort in the open urban space. Given the

simultaneous expansions of *shoppings* and the idea that the city was returning to a state of

insecurity, the qualities of the *shopping* became those that were needed by urbanites who lived

fearfully in the city; although the acts of buying and consuming were the mall's fundamental

activities, the less obvious reason behind its popularity was "the serenity of invisible control."[66]

Even within the mall's primary activities of buying and consuming there existed a

clandestine form of segregation among the consumers who frequented it. Although the strategic

display and organization of merchandise give the consumer the inclusive sense of being able to

experience almost any product, the level to which products are accessible is predetermined by a

consumer's economic status, thus making the act of consuming exclusive. This exclusive nature

perpetuates the products' allure, which in turn coincides with the fascination surrounding the

cosmopolitan, transnational, cutting-edge, and high-end trends set by the world's loci of

modernity. The two-fold, exterior-interior exclusivity of *shoppings*, articulated by dissociation

from the urban sphere and discrete discrimination among consumers, convert a seemingly public

space into a privately managed entity with qualities that satisfy and align with a cultural

hegemonic order that is continuously rearticulated with the accelerated expansion of *shoppings*

throughout the city.

In his 1994 essay, "Ciudad de negocios," Gorelik has argued that this accelerated

emergence was only made possible by a drop in the tension over public space, traditionally

concerned with inclusivity but more recently transformed by the replacement of the industrial-

city system with the business-city system. The logic that produces this latter system "accepts the

expiration of private space as industry, of public space as a means of support, and of space as the

vision of politics," thus converting "public space into private business and the urban society into

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[66] Sarlo, *La ciudad*, 23.

a simple sum of competent interests."[67] The public space under private management, epitomized

by the shopping mall model, becomes what Marc Augé has called a "non-place" and what

Gorelik calls a "non-city." According to Gorelik, the rupture from the tradition of creating

inclusive public spaces in Buenos Aires occurred in this moment, when public space was

infiltrated by the management of private interests, as seen in the *escuela-shopping* scandal.

Although shopping malls distorted traditional notions of public space, they were successful

because of the fact that they offered the order and security (a hegemonic notion) that were being

demanded in public spaces.

The expansion of *shoppings* and the Puerto Madero project represent two important

examples of the ways in which the neo-liberal agenda of the 1990s radically altered the urban

sphere in Buenos Aires. They transformed the material landscape of the city in a highly visual

manner, but more importantly, they altered a wide range of citizens' daily practices and recreated

a dominant urban ideology that embraced the "cosmopolitan" practices of North American

consumerism and believed whole-heartedly in the neo-liberal dream of prosperity. The city's

many new material faces, like the glass high rises that towered over the waterfront of Puerto

Madero and the modernistic facades of newly constructed *shoppings* that protruded from their

surrounding architecture, would remain permanently in the urban landscape. The period's more

fluid practices and imaginaries, however, would become increasingly irrelevant as the decade

came to a close.

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[67] Adrián Gorelik, *Miradas sobre Buenos Aires: Historia cultural y crítica urbana*, (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004), 189-206.

Chapter Two

Barrios cerrados, *Countries*, and "Suburbanization of the Elites" [68]

"I would never go back to the Capital again." [69]

34-year-old Eduardo Gürtner was decisive in his rejection of the city as a suitable place for his family to live. Having recently moved from the city to a private neighborhood in its suburbs, Eduardo, his wife, Andrea, and their two small children had become part of the wave of upper-middle class *porteños* that fled the Capital Federal for the security and pristine landscapes of the *barrios cerrados* and *urbanizaciones privadas* in its surrounding periphery. Proud to share their story, they told a reporter from *Clarín* how they sold their apartment in Belgrano and moved into a spacious house in La Campiña, one of the many new private residential developments in the rapidly expanding peripheral city of Pilar. Living in one of the neighborhood's 36 houses, the Gürtners expressed gratitude for the green spaces, safety, and small-community feel they had found there. "Here the kids are very happy and grow up in better health. They run and play all day, they move throughout the neighborhood with complete liberty, and at night they hardly even watch television," commented Andrea, who had already chosen a bilingual school 10 minutes away. She added that she and Eduardo also had a better way of life in La Campiña; they saved money by not going out as much, preferring to entertain friends in the privacy of their own home. As an architect, Eduardo had many new professional opportunities working in the area's explosive development. More important for him, however, were the security features offered by the neighborhood's developer, which included patrolmen

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on mopeds and infrared motion-detector alarm systems around the perimeter of every home. "We don't have bars on our windows and we sleep soundly with the windows open," he said. "What's more, when we do go to the Capital we have to stop to remember that we have to close up the car. Here we only do it when it rains."

The Gürtners were part of a large demographic trend of the 1990s, designated by Torres as "suburbanization of the elites," in which upper-middle class suburban enclaves extended into the extreme periphery of Buenos Aires in search of larger spaces for consumption, security (from the relative insecurity of the urban center), and a natural environment. Eduardo and Andrea Gürtner fit the profile of the new Pilar resident perfectly: they were a young couple with small children who sought to live in open air and security. The new residents of the periphery's expanding private communities, commonly referred to as "*urbanizaciones privadas*," tended to share similar characteristics in terms of age, familial status, and occupation. Most were couples in their thirties or forties with young children who were members of a new, expanding "service class," composed of professionals who held positions as managers, specialists, or executives in Argentina's growing service sector and whose professional status was thus differentiated from the those of the traditional working class.[70] This professional identity was important not only for determining who new residents were, but also in consolidating a level of social homogeneity within the new private neighborhoods; in pertaining to a sector of the professional working class, residents inevitably demonstrated a level of economic status by purchasing a home in a gated community. Supplementing the sense of physical enclosure provided by gates, walls, guard towers, and alarm systems, the sense of social likeness, ensured by the economic filter that

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[70] The new "service class" as explored by Maristella Svampa, "Clases medias, cuestión social y nuevos marcos de sociabilidad," *Punto de vista* 67 (Aug. 2000), 35.

granted residents admittance to a particular neighborhood, further reinforced the notion that *barrios cerrados* were isolated enclaves removed from the urban center.

The similar profiles of new inhabitants and the residential preferences they exhibited also helped to shape the practices of the peripheral communities in which they lived. Serving as a prime example of the way in which explosive patterns of suburbanization shaped the private enclaves of the periphery, the city of Pilar experienced not only sharp growth in population but also large increases in investment and consumption. In another article published the same day as the Gürtners' story, *Clarín* reported that the population of Pilar had increased from 130 thousand to 230 thousand in only five years, with more than 5,000 families living in the roughly 70 *countries* and *barrios privados* there. When the article was published in February 1998, there were 35 new neighborhoods being completed in the area, 19 of which were already inhabited. Optimistic calculations released by both the municipal government and private analysts forecasted population levels of up to 500 thousand by 2005, a speculation indicative of the widespread hype surrounding the area's booming real estate market. According to *Clarín*, foreign investments made from 1995 to 1998 in Pilar totaled 275 million dollars, representing 10 percent of total foreign investment in the entire province of Buenos Aires.[71]

In part, this concentrated surge in investment was encouraged by the completion of a major public project in 1996 that improved and expanded the Panamericana highway connecting Pilar with downtown Buenos Aires. Drastically reducing the length of the commute into the city for working residents (now less than one hour), the Panamericana's grand opening marked the beginning of Pilar's most explosive period of growth. Its improved access to the urban center encouraged more families to relocate in one of the area's private neighborhoods, and developers

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[71] Graciela Gioberchio and Mariana Iglesias, "Pilar, un fenómeno de gente, nuevos barrios e industrias," *Clarín*, 22 Feb. 1998.

expedited construction to keep up with booming demand. Moreover, the explosive residential

growth following the project's 1996 completion was accompanied by a surge in the growth of

Pilar's commercial and business sectors as domestic and foreign investors were eager to

capitalize on the increasing consumer demands of a rapidly growing upper-middle class

population. By 1998, *Clarín* reported that Pilar had 47 bilingual schools, two private

universities, twelve banks, a multi-cinema complex, a handful of domestic and imported car

dealerships, and a new shopping mall with 100 stores to meet the rising needs of its growing

consumer base. Business-savvy residents were also enthusiastic to accomodate Pilar's growing

demand for high-end goods. Elisa Youakim, the owner of a perfume shop with more than two

thousand regular customers, told *Clarín*, "Here people consume a lot, and sales have doubled in

the past year." Another business owner, Mirta Cormery, whose retail network had expanded to

include five jewelry stores and two gift shops, concurred: "We try to get people accustomed to

buying everything here and not having to go into the city for anything."[72] The increased demand

for goods and services like luxury goods and prestigious schools demonstrates the elevated

socioeconomic statuses of Pilar's residents and helps to illustrate their collective values and

desires for a new suburban lifestyle.

The case of Pilar—and of the Gürtners—helps to illustrate the process of suburbanization

and peripheral dispersion that occurred at a dramatic pace throughout the 1990s, characterized by

the migration of upper-middle class professionals with young children who left their residences

in the urban center for the security and green landscapes of the private communities outside of

the city. As several scholars have noted, this process of suburbanization occurred much later in

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[72] Gioberchio, "Pilar."

Buenos Aires than in the North American metropolises where the phenomenon first took place.[73]

Historically speaking, however, this trend was not entirely novel in Buenos Aires, and the

metropolis had experienced several waves of demographic growth into its periphery since the

beginning of the twentieth century. In the decades around the turn of the century, Argentina

experienced rapid population growth as large groups of immigrants entered the country by way

of the ports in Buenos Aires and along the Río de la Plata. The city's demographic expansion

during this period subsequently led to outward growth into the periphery and displacement of

certain central neighborhoods.[74] Several decades later, between the 1940s and 1960s, Buenos

Aires experienced a secondary wave of migrations, first from rural areas toward the urban center,

as migrants were attracted by the city's new economic opportunities generated from the

government's adoption of an economic regime centered on import-substitution. In order to

accommodate this massive increase in the urban working class, the Argentine government

implemented a series supportive social policies, including the provision of cheap plots of

peripheral land for residential use (*loteos económicos*[75]) and the subsidization of public

transportation between the city center and the expanding suburbs, which facilitated new

processes of suburbanization as industrial workers could continue working in the city while

providing for their families on the city's outskirts.

The wave of suburbanization seen in the 1990s in greater Buenos Aires was also

preceded by the historic emergence of private communities in the periphery dating back to the

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[73] Horacio A. Torres, "Cambios socioterritoriales en Buenos Aires durante la década de 1990," *EURE (Santiago)* 27, no. 80 (May 2001), doi: 10.4067/S0250-71612001008000003.

[74] Data from a 1914 census reported that 30 percent of the Argentine population was born outside the country (compared with 5.1 percent in 1991). From Richard Scobie, *Buenos Aires: From Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, as referenced in Crot, "Scenographic," 239.

[75] *Loteos económicos* were first provisioned by the Perón administration between 1945 and 1955; they were later abolished in 1977 under the military dictatorship. Nora Clichevsky, *El Mercado de tierras en la area de expansion de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires: CEUR-Instituto Torcuato di Tella (1975) as referenced in Crot, "Scenographic," 240.

beginning of the century, when the first sporting clubs and secondary country residences began

to appear in the areas outside of Buenos Aires. With the introduction of the automobile and the

initial development of roadways connecting the periphery with the center, these sporting clubs

and country residences grew in number and eventually merged to form residential country clubs.

Adopting a name representative of their Anglo origins, *countries* were traditionally intended to

be part-time weekend and holiday residences for the city's elite classes until the 1970s, when the

violence and oppression of the military dictatorship prompted many members of Buenos Aires'

privileged classes to leave the city and reside permanently in the seclusion of their countryside

homes. As some scholars have noted, this historic pattern of territorial displacement—in which

privileged *porteños* fled the insecurity of the urban center—predates contemporary trends and

thus undermines the "sense of complete novelty" that some authors attribute to the recent rise in

gated communities in metropolitan Buenos Aires.[76] The notions of an idyllic countryside

representative of Argentina's gaucho heritage and of the social security provided by its isolation

from the urban center are preexistent ideologies held by members of Buenos Aires' upper

classes. Even today, foreign tourists visiting Buenos Aires are often encouraged to spend several

days outside of the city in one of the province's countless *estancias*, sprawling ranches (many of

them more like resorts) that allow the outsider to experience the "gaucho" lifestyle reminiscent

of Argentina's patriotic history. Many *porteños* continue to appreciate the fresh air and open

spaces of the countryside. While the pattern of territorial displacement characterized by the

countries of the past does not compare in magnitude to the recent explosion of *barrios cerrados*,

it marks an important point of convergence in the motivations that have driven both recent and

historic demographic shifts toward the periphery.

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[76] Crot, "Scenographic," 240.

However, the process of suburbanization occurring in the 1990s marks an important point of rupture with past trends, both with the historic emergence of *countries* and with the wave of peripheral dispersion between 1940 and 1960. Perhaps the recent trend's most evident rupture is with the process of suburbanization occurring in the middle of the century, which can be directly attributed to the strategic social policies of the period's government aimed to meet the needs of working-class, mainly low-income groups by facilitating their relocation into the periphery with the subsidization of public transport into the city. While the suburbanization of the 1990s was also encouraged in part by government investment in infrastructure connecting the urban center with the periphery, the nature of the expenditure was entirely different. Rather than extending public transportation services, the Menem administration initiated massive projects for the improvement and expansion of the city's highway network, intended to facilitate domestic trade flows as part of a larger neoliberal agenda. The Panamericana highway connecting Pilar to downtown Buenos Aires was one of these infrastructural projects, which also included the expansion of the Acceso Norte, Acceso Oeste, Autopista Ezeiza, and Autopista Buenos Aires-La Plata highway systems that essentially connected the city to the entire periphery and beyond.[77] While the expansion of the highway system extended access to the farthest rings of the periphery, it was not supplemented by equivalent investment in public transportation. Thus, access to nearly the entire third ring and much of the second ring (those farthest from the city center) was limited to transportation by car and thus most accessible to the middle and upper classes—those who could afford the available mode of transportation.

The implications of the extended highway system become fairly evident in statistics that show population growth in the three separate rings of the periphery. Census data report that

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[77] Expansion of the highway system in Crot, "Scenographic," 241; Sonia Vidal-Koppmann, "Fragmentación socio-espacial en la periferia de la region metropolitan de Buenos Aires," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 8 no. 1 (2009), 81-82.

between 1991 and 2001, the areas with largest demographic increases were in the second and third peripheral rings and in areas where there had been rapid development of private urbanizations. While the average population growth in districts of the second ring was 25.7 percent, the highest rates of population growth were in the districts of the third ring, where the average population growth was 47.2 percent. With a striking 67.4 percent growth in population, Pilar was the third-ring district with the largest demographic increase. In contrast, the city of Buenos Aires experienced negative 7.6 percent population dip in the same period, and in the first ring of the periphery, where few (apart for in San Isidro and San Fernando) private developments were located, net population growth hovered at around 5 percent with negative growth in several districts. By 2000, there were more than 400 private residential developments in Gran Buenos Aires along three major axes in the north-northeast, east, and south-southeast directions of the city, separated by the routes of respective highways and forming a fragmented pattern of urbanization.[78] The peripheral rings were segmented by stark differences between prosperous residential sectors and marginalized areas that lacked basic living conditions. In order to reach the pristine landscapes of private neighborhoods and country clubs, one had to take highways that passed through informal settlements, open dumps, and industrial pollution. The accelerated dispersion into the periphery during the 1990s generated not only a series of fragmented sub-centralities, but also exacerbated the discontinuities in its social fabric.

The new private urbanizations of the 1990s also broke away from the traditional forms of the *countries* established throughout the century, altering their forms and also merging into new forms of private residential communities. As Maristella Svampa points out, although many of the historic *countries* continued in existence throughout the 1990s, they underwent a "process of generational and social siphoning" in which traditional, elite weekend country-goers were being

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[78] Statistics reported from Vidal-Koppmann, "Fragmentación," 83-86.

replaced by new, permanent residents who were also members of Buenos Aires' upper classes, but who sought a "more pragmatic and less ostentatious lifestyle than their predecessors."[79] Although the new residents accounted for only about half of all residents, they triggered a transformation in the established *countries* as they demanded internal changes that made them more suitable for a permanent lifestyle. New residents valued better infrastructure, improved planning norms, social guidelines for control and tranquility, and increased participation in decision-making. Svampa notes that this transition has been a rather fluid process of adaptation toward the social and generational profile of the new resident.

More characteristic of the period, however, was the development of new *countries* and *barrios cerrados* that catered to members of both the middle and upper classes and had broad implications for existing urban ideologies. To begin with, the increasing popularity of these new residential forms helped to consolidate a new set of ideals among their inhabitants. While new residents still embraced a return to the idyllic countryside, their altered residential uses and preferences transformed its intrinsic significance and the ways in which it was manifested in material design and construction, social and quotidian practices, and urban imaginaries. Stemming from a traditional Argentine discourse on the value of the countryside in the nation's interior, new residents valued a natural lifestyle, in which their children could roam freely throughout the neighborhood, benefit from the health of fresh air, and receive a solid education. These ideas regarding a life lived outside of the city are articulated almost verbatim by Andrea Gürtner, who was pleased to see her children happy, healthy, and promised a prestigious education in a bilingual school. This type of "natural lifestyle" adopted by new permanent residents like the Gürtners was part of a new urban ideal that rejected the traditional urban center as an optimal place of residency and instead sought to return to man's roots in nature. Many of

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[79] Svampa, "Clases medias," 36.

the new private urbanizations demonstrated this new ideal in the way in which they publicized themselves: while the urbanization of Pilar del Este called itself a "green city," Estancias del Pilar referred to itself as a "city in the country," and Nordelta advertised itself as the first "town-city" in Latin America.[80]

The new private urbanizations applied the traditional Argentine discourse of the idyllic, natural interior to a new vision of urban modernity. While this vision can be seen in the names of the *barrios cerrados* and *countries* of the 1990s, it becomes even more evident in their designs concerned with a "quality of life" found in nature and in the countryside. In an August 1999 editorial in *La Nación*, reporters interviewed several architectural firms on the most popular designs that had surfaced in recently developed private urbanizations:

> Devoted to classic images, the middle-class family usually is inclined toward picturesque typologies and the new neighborhoods are filled with Norman or English-style houses. Classic styles, but at the moment less requested than what are called the *villas italianizantes*, or the *country*-style houses with flat walls and definite volumes, explain architects from the De los Heros-Ferrero studio, which has a clientele that appreciates the adaptation of the constructed image to the flat landscape of the pampas that, in addition, recreates, the original architecture of our country (also that adopted by the immigrants at the beginning of the century).[81]

It is interesting to note that this architectural concern for nature and the countryside breaks from the urban tradition in Buenos Aires, which has historically embraced a European architectural tradition (as is evident in the historic center).[82] However, while the architectural design of the houses in *barrios cerrados* and *countries* reflected a sort of patriotic pride for the rural Argentine

[80] Svampa, "Clases medias," 38.

[81] Mónica Garmendia, Alfredo Guidali, and Marcelo Rizzo, "¿Hacia nuevas formas de vida?" *La Nación*, 4 Aug. 1999.

[82] James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*, New York: Oxford University Press (1974), 13.

tradition in the pampas, the greater layout of the suburban towns and cities in which they were

located reflected the modern needs and values of their new inhabitants. The same editorial

reports:

> Without doubt, the so-called satellite city of Nordelta is the establishment known for
>
> excellence. The master plan, approved in 1991, contemplates the creation of a
>
> collection/group with an estimated population of more than 100,000 inhabitants…
>
> Developed on a terrain of 1548 hectares, previously idle and flooded, it will have its own
>
> high schools and universities, medical clinics, 27-hole golf course, 270 hectare lake,
>
> marinas with a port on the Luján River, a canal, and various commercial centers.[83]

Reminiscent of *Clarín*'s description of Pilar, the depiction of Nordelta in *La Nación* emphasizes

its modern amenities, superior design, and overall "excellence." The two fragments from the

editorial provide insight into the ideals and values that were being promoted in the new private

urbanizations of the 1990s, a marketing rhetoric that engaged the idea of Argentina's idyllic rural

traditions with new concepts of urban modernity that resonated with the young members of

Buenos Aires' expanding service class.

Covering an area of 1,600 hectares, the "town-city" of Nordelta is particularly notable

because it was the first large-scale, gated community to be built in Argentina. Designed and

constructed by the property developers Consultatio in the beginning of the decade, Nordelta was

attributed a level of "excellence" stemming from its premeditated organization that intended to

not only satisfy, but to go beyond the values and expectations of potential residents. In addition

to giving residents access to green spaces and safe common areas, Nordelta's design also

included lavish amenities, including a golf course and boating marinas. Eight years after its plan

was approved, a reporter from *Clarín* interviewed the president of Consultatio regarding

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[83] Garmendia, Guidali, and Rizzo, "¿Hacia nuevas formas de vida?"

Nordelta's development and subsequent success in the area's growing real estate market for private communities. Elaborating on Nordelta's detailed design, Consultatio's president noted that:

> …the city is designed with the aim of seeking a balance between green spaces, water and urban areas; urban landscapes, the location of streets, schools, neighborhoods, universities, shopping centers… The environment provided is marked by its urban and aesthetic harmony and different population densities, as well as adequate distribution of traffic.[84]

Nordelta's "urban and aesthetic harmony," demographic controls, and functional regulations not only differentiate it from surrounding areas of the periphery, but also serve to juxtapose the perceived problems of the urban center. As the article's interviewer commented, "in this way, certain city problems will be avoided, as is the case in cities where population growth increases at an unimagined pace, given their chaotic origins, and problems such as traffic jams appear." By "avoiding" such urban problems through meticulous design and regulation, gated communities like Nordelta sought to become isolated from the chaos of the urban center, and thus dissociated from the city itself. Constituting such values in the realization of their novel designs, the decade's new *barrios cerrados* and *countries* also had the effect of creating territorial enclaves throughout the periphery. Demonstrated by their exclusive designs and highly regulated operations, *barrios cerrados* were distinguished by the superlative organization of their communities and simultaneously dissociated from the problematic environments outside their borders.

The elements of exclusivity and control within the new private urbanizations took both physical and representational forms and mark another important point of rupture with the private

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[84] Article in *Clarín*, 30 October 1999, as quoted by Pírez, "Buenos Aires," 155.

country residences of past decades. While *countries* did become permanent refuges for the elite fleeing the military dictatorship in the 1970s, the popularity of similar private urbanizations in the 1990s was facilitated in part *by* the government, which, as previously demonstrated, facilitated travel into the periphery by heavily investing in the highway system. The government's neoliberal agenda was also responsible for increasing business in the service sectors that provided a large majority of residents' income, for freeing up market conditions for both domestic and public investments in real estate and peripheral land development, and for allowing developers to work around existing planning codes. Furthermore, although the elite classes of the 1970s and the middle and upper classes of the 1990s chose permanent residency in the periphery so as to avoid the insecurity of the urban center, the nature of the "insecurity" was vastly different at those times. Rather than fleeing the violence and oppression of a military dictatorship, the new suburban residents of the 1990s were instead concerned with avoiding a new urban reality marked by the democratic government's inability to meet the needs of its urban constituents from all classes. Citizens who left the city for the suburbs frequently shared the perception that the city had deteriorated toward a state of chaos, marked by the invasion of marginalized "others"—who they associated with crime, dirtiness, and poverty—in the urban public sphere. The government under Menem did not foresee many of the social consequences of its neoliberal agenda, and while those with the economic resources could leave the city that was newly distasteful to them, those without such power were forced to make do in whatever urban spaces and resources were left open to them.

Opposing the insecurity and chaos of the urban center, the exclusivity and control of the periphery's new private urbanizations gave residents a sense of safety and allowed them to avoid the problematic reality of the city. These comforting elements were enforced by physical

forms—walls, fences, alarm systems, guard towers—and also by less obvious, nonmaterial

barriers. Landscaping techniques could also serve to enforce property boundaries in a less brutal

manner, especially in a setting where the value of nature was highly idealized. Furthermore,

social exclusivity was also an important, although rarely acknowledged, aspect of enclosure.

Ensured by the economic filter that granted residents access to neighborhoods by purchasing

their homes, and physically manifested in consistent neighborhood designs, the social and

material homogeneity of *barrios cerrados* eliminated both diversity and surprise. The ideology

behind maintaining a homogenous social fabric was that it could limit and control the practices

carried out in the common space so as to protect itself from unwanted uses, such as begging,

loitering, prostitution, and other unwelcome urban maladies. Those who did not fit into this

homogenous social fabric could be immediately spotted—an issue that became a central debate

in the latter part of the decade as the insecurity of the urban center seemed to radiate outward

toward the communities of the periphery. While some barriers in private urbanizations, such as

walls and guard towers, served as harsh reminders of their private interiors, others, such as

landscaping and socioeconomic filtering, were less obvious in their intent. As Lacarrieu and

Thuillier have noted, the "lightness" of some methods of enclosure and the "weightiness" of

others create a more or less "invisibility" of privatized space, lessening the validity of any case

that questioned their right to enclose.[85]

The socioeconomic filtering that allowed private enclaves of the periphery to maintain a

sense of homogeneity and social control with regard to the surrounding territory was also applied

within various types of establishments. Similar to the mechanisms of interior exclusivity seen in

shoppings, different *barrios cerrados* and *countries* were often distinguished amongst

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[85] Monica Lacarrieu and Guy Thuillier, "Las urbanizaciones privadas en Buenos Aires y su significación," *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 19 (Dec. 2001), 103.

themselves in terms of socioeconomic level. Developers often targeted certain types of groups in the designs of neighborhoods, often creating "sibling" replicas to exclusive neighborhoods that were of a slightly decreased quality and targeted toward middle classes, as opposed to the elite classes of their predecessors. These variations among private urbanizations were often stark, reminding residents to exactly which type of neighborhood they belonged. In her study of private urbanizations in the late 1990s, Maristella Svampa noted that the most exclusive neighborhoods of the Menem era were located in Malvinas Argentinas; the homes located in those neighborhoods evoked images of the "luxurious mansions of Beverly Hills" seen in North American television films. The area had some of the most prestigious bilingual schools in the country and was widely regarded as one of the most exclusive districts in Gran Buenos Aires.[86]

The dual exclusivity of and within private urbanizations is significant in two regards. First, it implies that social and territorial fragmentation has occurred on a micro scale within the private enclaves of the periphery. Not only do residents of these enclaves seek to separate themselves from the "others" that inhabit the less exclusive spaces outside the boundaries of their private communities, but they also engage in an internal process of self-segregation. Residents distinguish themselves according to the distinctive characteristics of their neighborhoods, judged according to their values in terms of real estate and their prestige in terms of social composition. This trend can be traced back to many of the *countries* of past decades, which engaged in strict selection processes and often discriminated against certain groups (many were anti-Semitic). While this process of self-discrimination also occurs among residents in different sectors and neighborhoods of the city, for instance, the pre-existing homogeneity of suburban enclaves makes the process there a matter of distinguishing among similar classes. Svampa has presented this process as problematic for defining the present "middle class," whereby the residents in the

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[86] Svampa, "Clases medias," 40.

periphery's suburban enclaves seem to represent a new type of "middle class" that distinguishes itself by its new lifestyle.[87] Citing the work of other authors, she emphasizes the tendency of this group to affiliate with society's higher classes and to emulate their consumption practices and lifestyle choices. It is important to note, however, that the inclination of this group toward adopting the practices of the elite cannot be applied to the middle class as a collective group and rather implies a fragmentation within that group.[88] This form of social fragmentation is also seen in the levels of consumption that different groups engage in while frequenting *shoppings*, whether in the urban center or in the new complexes of the periphery.

This leads to a second conclusion about the dual exclusivity of private urbanizations. In considering the transformations on a macro scale, the forms of exclusivity seen in both the city of Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area suggest that the changes in the periphery are concurrent with those in the urban center. Tella has noted that the growth of the metropolitan city has happened through the expansive generation of "gentrified" enclaves in which those from the outside are barred from entering and those from within do not want to leave.[89] Gentrification implies a process in which the elite ("gentry") acquire property in marginalized areas by raising the value of those areas and pushing out the previous residents. While the territory on which most private urbanizations in the periphery were constructed was previously undeveloped and uninhabited and thus did not displace any individuals, the rapid increases in real estate values and subsequent enclosure from outside groups which occurred in the establishment of *barrios cerrados* and *countries* has transformed those spaces into the exclusive domain of the middle and upper classes. The inhabitants of private urbanizations, whose interaction with lower classes is

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[87] Svampa, "Clases medias," 36.
[88] Svampa differentiates between the "organizational" sector (to which many of the residents of private urbanizations belong) and the "cultural" sector of the service class. While the "organizational" sector is of a more conservative political base, the "cultural" sector falls closer to more radical parties.
[89] Tella, *Un crack en la ciudad*, 70-71.

limited to giving directions to the maids, gardeners, and other service employees they hire, assume a "gentrified" role in the social and territorial fragmentation of the periphery. The separation of peripheral enclaves can also be seen in the distinction between the rings of the periphery; whereas *barrios cerrados* and *countries* tend to be located in the second and third rings, the first ring remains largely inhabited by lower-class sectors, a tradition dating back to the provision of *loteos económicos* and maintained by the available modes of public transportation. Finally, the metropolitan expansion by way of "gentrified" enclaves returns to the sphere of the urban center, in which the privately financed developments in the city during the period tended to cater to the interests and activities of the urban "gentry," while pushing out lower class sectors, as seen in the cases of Puerto Madero and *shoppings*.

As Teresa Pires do Caldeira has argued, private urbanizations create "instruments to explicitly create separation […] and fundamentally, in referring to their internal space, construct themselves inwardly, like independent worlds that proscribe exterior life."[90] They complicate the notion of the "outside," which can mean the area outside the neighborhood, but also the area within the neighborhood that is outside of one's residence. Lacarrieu and Thuillier maintain that this confusion surrounding the notions of inside/outside and open/closed confounds the observer's ability to understand his or her experience in a given space. The urban transformations concentrated in the periphery not only confound the traditional significance of "closed" and "open" spaces, but also imply a recent adjustment to the notion of urban centrality. Contrary to the traditional notion of public space in Buenos Aires, private urbanizations seek to exclude and enclose. Although they often contain communal spaces, such as tennis courts or

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[90] Teresa Pires do Caldeira, "Enclaves fortificados: a nova segregação urbana," 1997, translated from quotation in Lacarrieu and Thuillier, "Las urbanizaciones," 105.

playgrounds, these spaces are highly controlled and selective, and have provoked public disputes over who is entitled access to them.

One of the most notorious disputes over the "right to enclose" a gated neighborhood occurred in Villa de Mayo, a district in Malvinas Argentinas. The neighborhood at the center of debate was CUBA (Club Universitario de Buenos Aires), a *country* that was not technically delimited but that had been, for the most part, closed to outsiders for forty years. In 1997, a conflict arose when residents began complaining of "outsiders" entering the neighborhood and using communal spaces. When the residents insisted that the neighborhood be fenced in— "*cerrado*"—a fierce dispute broke out between the mayor of Malvinas Argentinas, the neighbors of CUBA, and the "outside" neighbors over the extent to which residents of CUBA were legally authorized to close their neighborhood from the surrounding area. On March 18, 1997, Mayor Jesús Cariglino sent municipal bulldozers and trucks to the neighborhood and ordered the destruction of its new guard towers and portions of its perimeter fences. A member of the center-left political party Partido Justicialista, Cariglino had talked of "democratizing the city," warning against "the danger of this new phenomenon: social segmentation and the formation of urban ghettos" and promoting the idea that "safety should be for everyone, rich and poor." In a statement to *La Nación,* he defended his actions, arguing that he had taken the necessary legal steps and that the demolition of the watchtowers and fences was "an act of justice that returned to the town of Malvinas Argentinas the streets citizens always used but that have been closed for the past year."[91]

However, residents of Cuba were outraged over the incident. *La Nación* quoted several of their reactions:

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[91] Cynthia Palacios, "Derriban garitas en el barrio de CUBA en Villa de Mayo," *La Nación*, 19 March 1997.

Adolfo Méndez Tronge, resident of the *country* for 17 years, recalled: "Last year, Mayor

Cariglino personally broke this barrier and obtained an ordinance that expunged the

previous resolution. Today, happily, he decided that we no longer have the right that we

had. All the guard did was, after 11 pm, ask where you were going and take the license

plate number of the car that entered."

"These guard towers were to protect the security of our families, nothing more,"

complained Delia de Ponzano. "We feel unprotected in an area with a lot of delinquency.

We never discriminated against anyone. We don't know what Cariglino's reasons for

doing this are."

"The one creating hatred is the mayor. We never differentiated between those from

within [the neighborhood] and those from outside," protested Magdalena Estévez.

Yet some neighbors supported the mayor's actions:

... Marta and Mónica Basile said that CUBA "is an ordinary neighborhood, but seeing as

there are people with money, they closed it. It's discrimination what we did."

Thanks to vehement public outcry and scrupulous media coverage, the debate quickly entered the

public sphere, where the notions of "open" and "closed," "public" and "private" were

questioned. While Cariglino continued to defend his actions, arguing that "there's no reason to

ask me for identification to go through a public street," neighbors, community members, and

politicians accused his government of discrimination against the neighborhood and illegal

destruction of private property. The symbolic battle dragged on for more than three years in the

legal system and the public sphere, where court members, the media, residents, and non-residents

alike disputed over the right to close a space that could not be determined as "public" or "private." In the end, it took the Argentine Supreme Court to decide that CUBA had the fundamental right to enclose itself with a fence.[92]

The curious phenomenon that took place in Malvinas Argentinas indicates the existence of diverse social actors even within the homogenous communities of *barrios cerrados* and further evidences the ongoing socio-territorial debate over the definition of "public" verses "private" space. Although the residents of CUBA won the battle, the fiercely polarized debates that converted it into a national debate and fueled its ascension to the nation's ultimate judicial power demonstrate the lack of any form of general consensus on the legality—or perhaps morality—of the exclusive spatial practices that expanded throughout the 1990s. Moreover, the political polarization that characterized the debate illustrates an extensive fragmentation in Argentina's social and political sectors. Although the *barrios cerrados* and *countries* of the 1990s began, much like the Puerto Madero project and *shoppings* of the urban center, as neo-liberal dreams of prosperity, they came to represent the same type of socio-spatial fragmentation that had spread throughout the city. The young couples and families who rejected the residential lifestyle of the urban center and turned instead to the green spaces of the periphery, romanticized by the idea of a natural lifestyle in the country, consequently promoted the spread of that fragmentation with their infra-red motion detectors and walled-off neighborhoods. Paradoxically, by the end of the decade, the urban insecurity that they initially fled had begun to spread outward toward their gated communities in the suburbs as the nation's economic situation turned sour and crime and unemployment escalated. And by late 2001, not even a nuclear compound could have isolated from the crisis that was beginning to unfold.

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[92] "La Corte dio la razón a los vecinos de CUBA," *La Nación*, 19 Dec. 1998.

Chapter Three

City Unmasked: *Cacerolazos*, *Asambleas* and the *Cartonero* "Other"

> I don't think it's necessary to be a Harvard economist or a political scientist from the
> Sorbonne to understand the roots of our ills and to correctly diagnose the sickness that we
> suffer. It's said that we live in a democracy, but where is the Republic?
>
> – Rodolfo Rabanal, "La Argentina desenmascarada"[93]

The precedent of economic growth and prosperity that characterized the first half of the 1990s had begun to fade by 1996. The fixed-rate convertibility plan that had been successful in attracting foreign and domestic investors in the first part of the decade was being steadily undermined by the rising value of the dollar, and by 1998 Argentina had officially entered an economic depression. Unemployment rates began to climb, and by 2000 there were a reported 1,103 people sleeping in the streets of Buenos Aires.[94] If *porteños* had only known what lay ahead—the most dire economic crisis to ever hit Argentina—this statistic would have barely phased them. After the crisis that erupted in December 2001 subsided by the end of 2002, urban poverty rates had reached 52.2 percent in Greater Buenos Aires and 55.3 percent in the rest of the nation.[95] In Buenos Aires, of that proportion of impoverished people, 24.7 percent were depicted as suffering from poverty so extreme they could not afford adequate food.[96]

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[93] "Argentina Unmasked." Printed in *La Nación*, 19 Dec. 2001.

[94] Survey conducted by the city government as referenced in Gabriel Giubellin, "Más de mil personas duermen en las calles de la ciudad," *Clarín*, 15 Nov. 2000.

[95] INDEC (Argentine government statistics office) data as referenced by Edward Epstein and David Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis of 2001 and Argentine Democracy," in *Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 7.

[96] INDEC data as referenced by Edward Epstein, "The Piquetero Movement in Greater Buenos Aires: Political Protests by the Unemployed During the Crisis," in *Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy*, ed. Epstein and David Pion-Berlin (Lanham: Lexington Books), 98.

In the presidential elections of 1999, Argentines elected Fernando de la Rúa, a UCR

(Radical Party) member, as president with Carlos "Chacho" Álvarez of the FREPASO (Front for

a Country in Solidarity) as his vice president. Together they led the Alianza (Alliance) coalition,

an amalgamation of the UCR and FREPASO parties, which had campaigned against the

Justicialista party by capitalizing on the widespread criticism of Menem's neo-liberal economic

model and promising citizens change and reform. They garnered sufficient public support on

this basis, and upon their inauguration faced an onerous political agenda that included an

economic recession that had been steadily deteriorating since 1998, a government deficit totaling

$145 billion, and widespread popular discontent over unemployment, crime, corruption, and

general government policies.[97] However, after de la Rúa's first few months in office, it became

evident that the Alianza administration was doing little to fulfill the promises of its 1999

campaign, and the new government proved no more responsive to citizen demands than the

Menem administration had been in the latter years of its incumbency.[98] Instead, de la Rúa

upheld many of Menem's "stabilizing" neo-liberal policies that were becoming increasingly

ineffective in averting—if not exacerbating—the looming continuation of the economic

depression. The weakening "stability" of capitalist organization had the subsequent effect of

instead strengthening the capacity of labor and social movements to reveal the system's

inequalities—what Dinerstein has called the "violence of stability."[99]

The "violence" of the capitalist system—constituted by economic factors like the

unemployment rate and overvaluation of the peso and by social factors like deepening

inequalities and urban fragmentation—was increasingly confronted by civic movements as the

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[97] Epstein and Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis," 5.
[98] Epstein and Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis," 6.
[99] Ana C. Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos! Popular Insurrection and the *Asambleas Barriales* in Argentina," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22, no. 2 (2003): 191.

decade came to a close. In 1997, a massive demonstration in Palermo protested the diplomatic

visit of U.S. President Clinton; decrying North America's influence on Argentina and the

inequalities of the general neo-liberal system, protesters marched down the Avenida Santa Fe,

looting businesses and banks, burning American flags, and causing a general state of chaos. In

its aftermath, the demonstration left 206 people detained and 19 police officers injured.[100] In

Greater Buenos Aires, the *piquetero* (picketer) movement grew during the latter part of the

decade, uniting unemployed poor, their families, and others of similar impoverished backgrounds

as they demanded the attention of government officials and inclusion in relief programs. Their

movement grew as many provincial aid programs ran out of funds in the worsening economic

situation, and it received considerable attention from the various "*cortes de ruta*" (road

blockages) it staged, blocking major sections of highways and roads that connected the city with

the province. In 1997, there were 34 organized road blockages in Greater Buenos Aires and the

Capital Federal; in the years surrounding the crisis that number grew to 622 in 2001 and 886 in

2002.[101] As the movement grew, it developed emboldened tactics to interact with a government

"seen as increasingly politically vulnerable due to its inability to resolve the crisis."[102]

    The severity of the economic situation and the government's inability to avert an

oncoming crisis was further evidenced when the de la Rúa administration repositioned Domingo

Cavallo as Minister of Economics in March 2001, following the resignation of José Luis

Machinea on Marc 2 and the two-week-long sting of former Minister of Defense Ficardo López

Murphy, who was replaced by Cavallo after his economic proposals were attacked on all sides of

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[100] "En Palermo hubo graves desmanes," *La Nación*, 17 Oct. 1997; "Polémica por los incidentes," *Clarín*, 18 Oct. 1997.
[101] Epstein, "The Piquetero Movement," 102.
[102] Epstein, "The Piquetero Movement," 96-97.

the political spectrum.[103] His reinstatement represented a dramatic attempt by the

administration[104] to rectify the quickly unraveling economic situation, in which the

Convertibility plan was rapidly falling apart and domestic debt was skyrocketing, exacerbated by

decreasing investor confidence and capital flight out of the country. Known as the "wizard" for

his successful economic policies of the early 1990s, Cavallo demanded, and was granted

"extraordinary powers to deal with the economy," as Lewis has noted:

> Nostalgia for the good times of the early 1990s gave him an aura that temporarily
>
> silenced all opposition to his schemes. Even his enemies were afraid to deny him the
>
> powers he demanded, because they would be blamed if the economy collapsed. He was
>
> now the government's key man, overshadowing even the president. Such adulation
>
> would turn anyone's head, and Cavallo was no exception. His hobnobbing with foreign
>
> presidents, kings, and prime ministers had convinced him that he was a genius. *La*
>
> *Nación*'s economics reporter observed that Cavallo's "long-noticed pride had…swelled
>
> his ego to immeasurable proportions."[105]

However, Cavallo's confidence, along with the authority of the de la Rúa administration, was

questioned almost immediately after his reinstatement. First on his agenda was revising the

Convertibility plan to include the euro, in addition to the dollar, as a peg for the peso; this had

the adverse effect of creating further fear among investors that a devaluation was in the near

future. In late April, Cavallo revised the Central Bank's charter to allow it more discretion

regarding the size of its reserve holdings, a political feat only possible after the resignation of the

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[103] Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 129-130.
[104] Following Menem's reelection in 1995, Cavallo was ousted from the cabinet in 1996 due to his volatile temper, disagreements with other cabinet members, escalating unemployment rates, and public discontent with his economic policies. See Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 95-100.
[105] Joaquín Morales Solá, *El sueño eterno: Ascenso y caída de la Alianza* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 2001), 285 as referenced in Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 130.

head of the Central Bank following a scandal that implicated Menem and his top officials of covering a massive money laundering scheme from narcotics and arms smuggling.[106]

The scandal further tarnished the government's reputation as citizens saw all government officials, regardless of political affiliation, as corrupt and unresponsive to public demands. The de la Rúa administration faced yet another political crisis in September when accusations of bribery within the legislative arm of government surfaced. Disagreeing on the optimal way to avert the scandal, Vice President Álvarez and President de la Rúa came to irreconcible differences after a month of fierce internal debate and reshuffling of official positions. The Alianza coalition was split in two, with UCR members siding with de la Rúa and FREPASO members backing Álvarez, who resigned on October 6 in protest.[107] To make matters even worse in the eyes of the public, the federal court in charge of the case eventually dropped all charges against the accused officials and public faith in the justice system plummeted. The public's anger and frustration with the political system was evident in the legislative elections of October 2001, in which the Alianza lost nearly half of its vote and the number of spoiled and null votes (representing votes for neither party) reached a record high.[108] The government was increasingly unable to regulate and control capital flight (exacerbated by escalating uncertainty and further facilitated by Cavallo's liberalization of the Central Bank's deposit requirements) and social protest. The provincial roadblocks that had been the main form of resistance under

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[106] Pedro Pou was the Central Bank's president appointed by Menem in the late 1990s; his term carried over into the de la Rúa administration despite his "*menemista*" political alliance. His resignation in April 2001 followed an investigation led by a UCR congresswomen that uncovered a multi-billion-dollar network for money laundering from marcotics and arms smuggling, which implicated some of Argentina's leading banks, including Citibank-Argentina, of collaborating with foreign criminals and corrupt officials. Pou and Menem was also implicated in illegal collaboration with the laundering network after U.S. officials traced the entrance of funds from Mexican drug cartels into Argentina under their administration. With Menem under indictment and house arrest, Pou found himself politically isolated in defending his position against Cavallo's attempts to restructure the Central Bank and resigned. For more on the scandal, see Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 130-132.
[107] Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 128.
[108] Epstein and Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis," 9-10.

Menem and escalated under de la Rúa's administration became national forms of protest. From July 13 to August 17, there were three nationally organized roadblocks by the movement of the unemployed lasting for 24, 48, and 36 hours each.

The dire economic and political situation, marked by the government's clear inability to halt the rapid unraveling of the financial system, not only fueled protest by marginalized protesters like the previously established *piqueteros*, but further dissociated the population from their political leaders, forming a simultaneous crisis of political representation. By November, a Gallup poll reported that only 11 percent of the population saw the government as doing a good job.[109] Throughout the same month, the government scrambled to secure funds to cover its massive debt and avoid almost certain default; after being turned away by the U.S. and the IMF for additional loans, Cavallo began pressuring Argentine banks and pension funds to buy essentially worthless government bonds.[110] At this point, the convergence of the financial and representational crises was inevitable. On November 30, $1.3 billion fled the banks as thousands of depositors feared the collapse of their banks or a snap devaluation that would render their pesos worthless, and the Central Bank's reserves fell by $1.7 billion.[111] In an attempt to prevent another bank run and lessen the severity of its liquidity crisis, on December 3 the government imposed exchange controls and placed severe restrictions on cash withdrawals. In what became known as the *corralito* (directly translated to "playpen"), the government limited cash withdrawals to $250 (1,000 pesos) a week, restricted Argentine tourists going abroad from carrying more than $1,000 (later adjusted to $10,000), and required Central Bank approval for

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[109] Epstein and Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis," 7.

[110] Although the bonds were said to be payable in dollars and backed by federal tax receipts, domestic bankers knew that their so-called backing was illusory (the government was broke and already unable to pay its debts to suppliers) and they would not receive their promised returns. The junk status of the bonds would have made them impossible to sell even at large discounts in secondary markets. However, banks knew that they would face penalties if they refused to take the "voluntary" deal, given the atmosphere of hostility against finance. See Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 134.

[111] "Strapped for Cash," *The Economist*, 6 December 2001.

the transfer of any money abroad. Adding to the woes of the country's hemorrhaging financial

system, on December 5 the IMF denied the release of a scheduled loan worth $1.3 billion, stating

that it was "unable at this stage to recommend completion" of Argentina's loan program unless

the government adopted the dollar or devalued the peso.[112] The organization's internal reports

from November had noted that the country's debt load was unsustainable, that there was little

hope of an increase in exports, that foreign capital was rapidly leaving the country, and that there

was no likelihood of overcoming the political stalemate that prevented fiscal discipline.[113]

With the denial of the latest installment of Argentina's IMF loan, Cavallo temporarily

allowed the administration to pay its bills by seizing all private pension funds and replacing them

with government bonds. Meanwhile, his *corralito* plan backfired as depositors who had been

turned away from their banks ("*ahorristas*") took to the streets in protest; some engaged the

illegal exchange of pesos for dollars by black marketers in nearby alleys and arcades.[114] On

December 12, *porteños* took to the streets with pots and pans in what was one of the first

cacerolazos (pan-banging) of the crisis. First during midday, and then later on in the evening,

middle-class citizens and small-business owners throughout the Capital Federal protested against

the *corralito* and the administration that enforced it, speaking with the clanging of their culinary

"drums." As noted by an article in *Página/12*, the *cacerolazo* was especially visible in the

neighborhoods of Palermo, Belgrano, Almagro, and Caballito:

> The neighborhoods presented a similar scene. On the sidewalks were *cacerolazos* of
>
> shopkeepers and many neighbors who came down from their apartments to express
>
> themselves. On balconies, more pans clanged rhythmically as a mode of civil protest.
>
> And some shouts… There weren't special slogans, because it was evident that any

[112] IMF statement quoted in "Strapped for Cash."
[113] Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 134.
[114] Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 135.

affiliation or familiarity with traditional politics—with partisan politics—had been

repudiated by the anti-political mood of a large portion of those who went out to

protest.[115]

Citizens' anger and frustration with the *corralito* and government officials was manifested again

the next day in continued *cacerolazos* and a nationwide strike of transportation services led by

labor organizations.[116] In the Capital Federal, trains and buses were not running, the subway

system was extremely slow, and traffic going in and out of the city was gridlocked by evening

rush hour. Labor leaders hoped for widespread observation of the strike throughout the nation so

as to make a historic and resounding impact on government leaders; as Rodolfo Daer, a CTA

leader, said to *Página/12*, "the Argentine society as a whole has rejected these economic

measures that are totally unpopular, clout the social fabric and make even more evident poverty

and marginality."[117] In the north of the city, close to 100 members of a truck driver's union

organized in front of Domingo Cavallo's home on Avenida del Libertador and Avenida Ortiz de

Ocampo. Meanwhile, a group of bank employees gathered in downtown Buenos Aires near the

stock exchange to protest the *corralito* and the role of the IMF; they established their presence

with firecrackers, smoke bombs, and roadblocks in front of the market.[118]

The response of the government was varied. Although officials could not deny the

breadth of the week's protests—even skeptical estimates suggested that 59 percent of the nation

had participated in some form during Thursday's transportation strike[119]—President de la Rúa

was intransigent in his response to the demonstrators' motives. "The motives of the strike are

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[115] Martín Granovsky, "Los cacerolazos pusieron en máximo el fuego del enojo y el fastidio," *Página/12*, 13 Dec. 2001.

[116] The national strike was organized by members of the CTA (Confederation of Argentine Workers) and the CGT (General Confederation of Workers).

[117] "Paro contra el 'plan candado,'" *Página/12*, 14 Dec. 2001.

[118] "Paro contra el 'plan candado.'"

[119] Report from the Minister of Work, José Dumón, and Vice Minister of the Interior, Lautaro García Batallán, as stated in "A la noche, todos entendían," *Página/12*, 14 Dec. 2001.

not clear," he said. "They seem to be connected to the bankers' acts… Everyone knows that these [types of acts] were indispensible to the ploys of those who provoked the panic and bank run of that Friday [two weeks ago], causing grave damage to the country's economy."[120] Despite the reassurance by cabinet members that the strike was an apolitical outcry over socioeconomic inequalities like unemployment and low wages, de la Rúa saw the movement as a political attack. Even Menem, who had been recently summoned to the Casa Rosada to assist the administration, reminded officials that "to strike is a right."[121] The administration's stubborn approach to the initial December demonstrations did little to prevent a wave of protest from spreading throughout the country. On Monday, December 16, more protests broke out as supermarkets throughout Gran Buenos Aires were looted and citizens demanded food assistance. What the government had failed to understand was that the economic restrictions they had imposed provoked a unified reaction against the government, in which the middle sectors joined the *piquetero* movements of the working class.[122] The *corralito* had put those who didn't have money at all and those who couldn't get their money out of the banking system in a similar position.

On Wednesday, December 19, the city of Buenos Aires became a battlefield. *Cacerolazos* marched through neighborhoods, supermarkets were looted, and an *escrache* (a demonstration at the home or workplace of a denounced official) formed in front of Cavallo's home demanding his resignation. With demonstrators only meters away in Plaza de Mayo, government officials in the Casa Rosada watched in astonishment as chaos unfurled throughout the nation. With at least five people dead in the day's looting,[123] the administration took drastic

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[120] De la Rúa as quoted in "A la noche."
[121] Menem as quoted in "A la noche."
[122] Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!" 192.
[123] "Fueron cinco las muertes," *Página/12*, 20 Dec. 2001.

action. In a televised address to the nation around eleven o'clock that night, de la Rúa declared

an "*estado de sitio*" ("state of siege"), an emergency measure that enabled the military to repress

gatherings of more than three people in a public space. Once again, the government's attempt to

control the crisis backfired, and the state of siege was "the final straw for many who had come to

perceive the members of the government as insensitive, uncaring, and self-serving."[124] The

administration's desperate attempt to control the massive protests ravaging the country merely

provoked more *porteños* to go to the streets and led to a popular insurrection:

> The end of the day produced a curious phenomenon. By morning, shopkeepers in all the
>
> large cities in Argentina had lowered their blinds for fear of the massive waves of rioters
>
> looting businesses. But just after de la Rúa's speech, the frustration concentrated on the
>
> president. Thousands of people went to the streets with saucepans, frying pans, slotted
>
> spoons, and lids, in a phenomenon that was seen in Belgrano, Caballito, Palermo, Parque
>
> Chacabuco, Villa Crespo, and Almagro.[125] The *cacerolazo* was even bigger than that of
>
> last week, although this time it hadn't been organized by a shopkeepers' union, and it
>
> proliferated despite the fear of new lootings that would reign over the night. Many
>
> people left their homes and took to the streets, and on Independencia and Entre Ríos a
>
> fire in the street accompanied the sound of metal clanging…The neighborhood of San
>
> Telmo concentrated in Plaza de Mayo. In Parque Chacabuco, the neighbors chose the big
>
> Christmas tree to protest around, and when the neighbors of Villa 1114 joined them, the
>
> thousands of protestors decided to march toward José María Moreno and Rivadavia. On
>
> Santa and Juan B. Justo, neighbors blocked the street, and others did the same on Boedo.
>
> The panic turned into condemnation, even though many had absurdly interpreted the state
>
> of siege, which restricts rights, as a curfew that forbids walking at night. The state of

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[124] Epstein and Pion-Berlin, "The Crisis," 5.
[125] All are central neighborhoods in the Capital Federal.

siege, and the speech announcing it, had gone down in history, more and more

pathetically as the night wore on.

"*Qué boludos, qué boludos, el estado de sitio, se lo meten en el culo,*"[126] shouted the

thousands who surrounded the Congress.[127]

Around one in the morning, Cavallo's resignation was announced, and the public's anger and

frustration concentrated instead on President de la Rúa.

The *cacerolazos* of December 19, which began as merely noisy demonstrations, had

quickly transformed into violent protests by the early morning of December 20. Thousands had

gathered in Plaza de Mayo, banging their pans and chanting, *"¡Que se vayan todos y que no

quede ni uno solo!"*[128] Acting under state of siege protocol, federal police swarmed Plaza de

Mayo with tear gas, repressing protestors indiscriminately of age or sex. The battle lasted more

than ten hours through the night, and by its end, six people were killed, hundreds injured, and

hundreds more arrested.[129] An article from *Página/12* reported the incredulous scene:

> This is the rebellion: the enraged city created a fire in the columns of protestors that had
>
> been driven from the plaza, as in so many other areas. Many came from work, others
>
> from their homes, or from boarding houses, or from the club, from dinner or lunch, from
>
> education, from leisure, from the decent life. Then, by the thousands and in every part of
>
> the city, they burst out with a forgotten bravery. They were women, many women, with
>
> their children; untiring young people; couples who escaped hand-in-hand so as not to lose
>
> each other in the multitude, fleeing the gases; men in suits who had lost their jackets and
>
> wore their wet shirts like handkerchiefs to their faces; musicians who played rock,

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[126] This translates roughly to, "What idiots, what idiots, the state of siege, they can shove it up the ass."

[127] "El día (y la noche) del no va más," *Página/12*, 20 Dec. 2001.

[128] The slogan refers to politicians and translates to, "All of them out, so that not one is left!" As referenced by Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!" 187; Damián Corral and Maristella Svampa, "Political Mobilization in Neighborhood Assemblies: The Cases of Villa Crespo and Palermo," in *Broken Promises?*, ed. Edward Epstein and David Bion-Berlin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 117.

[129] Statistic from *Observatoria Social de América Latina* (*OSAL*) no. 6, 72, as referenced in Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!" 192.

cumbia, Colón; motorcyclists pushing back the police better than their enormous horses;

a school teacher wounded in the leg, screaming that she hates them, she hates them. And

standing up, continuing to run, to try to recover the plaza. Knowing, perhaps at that time,

that in these combats five young people had been killed, including a boy whom she had

seen bleeding to death on the cement, with a 9-millimeter bullet in his head…[130]

Similar confrontations between police and demonstrators occurred throughout the nation, and by

the next evening the nationwide death toll had reached 25.[131] At 7:45 PM, after the violence in

the streets and the police repression had reached its "most savage point in Plaza de Mayo," the

government released the statement of de la Rúa's resignation. A mere seven minutes later, the

president made his emblematic getaway[132] from the Casa Rosada by helicopter.[133]

The dawn of December 21 "presented a scene never witnessed before"[134] in the city of

Buenos Aires. By the end of the month, the presidency would change hands four times. Ramón

Puerta, de la Rúa's proper successor under constitutional procedures, first assumed it, but he was

quickly replaced by Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, governor of San Luis, in an emergency joint session

of the legislature. Although he announced a suspension on all foreign debt payments and

proposed new public works programs that would create jobs, his failure to lift the *corralito* led to

another *cacerolazo* on December 28, which began peacefully but quickly turned violent after

some demonstrators vandalized the congress building and attempted to invade the Casa Rosada.

He had also begun to appoint personal allies to official positions, and his popularity among

congress members and provincial governors plunged. His stint in office lasted only a week, and

two days after the protest, he was replaced by Ramón Puerta, who promptly arranged for Oscar

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[130] Cristian Alarcón, "La batalla de Plaza de Mayo," *Página/12*, 21 Dec. 2001.
[131] "De la Rúa renunció, cercado por la crisis y sin respaldo político," *Clarín*, 21 Dec. 2001.
[132] A handful of other executives have escaped from the Casa Rosada in a similar fashion: Alejandro Lanusse in 1973, Isabel Perón in 1976, Raúl Alfonsin in 1987.
[133] "De la Rúa renunció."
[134] Article from *La Nación*, as quoted in Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 136.

Camaño to assume the presidency *ad interim*. Camaño then garnered enough support to select Eduardo Duhalde, governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, to serve the remainder of de la Rúa's term. He entered office on January 1, 2002, and the previously scheduled March elections were to be postponed until December 2003.[135]

The tumultuous events that took place in the last months of 2001 left the leaders of Argentina politically and economically powerless while simultaneously mobilizing millions of citizens into one of the post potent popular insurrections in the nation's history. Both the downward spiral of its political and economic institutions and the vehement civic action that followed had profound implications for Argentina's social and political landscapes. In particular, the *cacerolazos* and *escraches* that began in December and continued intermitantly throughout the first half of 2002 marked an important point of rupture with the weak formation of civic space that characterized the previous decade. For one, they reunited a broad range of individuals from different backgrounds and social classes from all parts of the city, all of whom found a common ground in their rejection of the Argentine political system that had failed to adequately represent them. They allowed different social sectors that had lacked any previous connections to intermix, interact, and take action in a newfound, "complex public space."[136] The significance of the demonstrators' unifying slogan, *"¡Que se vayan todos!"* is that it represents the collective rejection of the formalistic, self-centered political institutions typified by the neo-liberal ideology of the 1990s.[137] As Dinerstein has noted, "'*¡Que se vayan todos!*' demands the impossible and, by doing so, generates an empty space for new meanings to be invented."[138]

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[135] For the presidential transitions of December 2001, see Lewis, *The Agony of Argentine Capitalism*, 136-137.
[136] Corral and Svampa, "Political Mobilization," 119.
[137] A central argument in Corral and Svampa, "Political Mobilization"; Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!"; Valeria F. Falleti, "Reflexión teórica sobre el proceso sociopolítico y la subpolítica. Un studio de caso: el 'cacerolazo' y las asambleas barriales," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 70, no. 2 (April-June 2008): 361-398.
[138] Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!" 194.

In fact, the *cacerolazos* of December 2001 gave rise to an entirely new middle-class civic movement in the city of Buenos Aires: the *asambleas barriales* (neighborhood assemblies). What began as groups of neighbors taking to the streets with pots and pans in December transformed into an organized movement of neighborhood assemblies by the end of January, providing a certain sector of the middle class an important place in public politics. Their heterogeneous composition not only created an inclusive space for civic action in the public sphere, but also gave greater visibility to existing social movements, particularly the *piquetero* groups of the unemployed, which began to foster connections with the more activist sectors of the middle class.[139] By September of 2002, the assemblies had even developed links with *cartoneros*, the groups of extremely impoverished trash collectors who sorted the piles of garbage on street curbs; some assemblies even organized free dining halls and vaccination services for *cartoneros*.[140]

Although several authors have argued for the "positive" impacts of the *asambleas barriales* in generating a new space for civic activism and bridging social gaps between the fragmented middle sectors of Buenos Aires,[141] it must also be noted that in some ways, these movements continued the dissociation between the public and its political institutions. In his article, "Escenas de la crisis," Hugo Vezzetti questions the ultimate productivity of the collective mobilizations that surrounded the crisis. Commenting on several "scenes from the crisis"—the image of the presidential helicopter leaving the Casa Rosada, the *cacerolazos* and *escraches* ("witch hunts against the visible figures in politics"[142]), the police repression in Plaza de Mayo, the repeated denunciation of politicians, the *ahorristas*—Vezzetti argues that the collective

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[139] Corral and Svampa, "Political Mobilization," 118.
[140] Corral and Svampa, "Political Mobilization," 132-134.
[141] Corral and Svampa, "Political Mobilization"; Dinerstein, "¡Que se Vayan Todos!"; Falleti, "Reflexión teórica."
[142] Hugo Vezzetti, "Escenas de la crisis," *Punto de vista* 72 (April 2002), 33.

demonstrations, rebellions, and skirmishes with authority posed larger questions for effective democratic participation in the public sphere. The discrediting of legal and institutional frameworks created an all-consuming climate of social rebellion, composed of a vast range of new and preexisting groups with an even wider scope of agendas and outcries. He draws attention to the issue of effective participation in the construction of a collective willpower "that cannot be conceived as a summation of demands," and to the fact that these movements sought a simultaneous and counterproductive "expansion and consolidation of a public sphere of citizens."[143] In dealing with a crisis that had been dramatically politicized, the entire political system—including citizens and the political actors who they had caused to flee the public sphere—was unable to move on from an "exaltation of the protest to the establishment of a minimal program capable of containing and consolidating a sufficient majority, above all considering that what they open for the immediate future is, in the majority of cases, an equitable distribution of the losses before a promise of benefits."[144] Vezzetti maintains that the evidenced collapse of the state as a mechanism of mediation between rights and obligations is linked to a wider scope of social fragmentation, polarized by the growth of diverse social-protesting groups.

Although the *cacerolazos* and *asambleas* united citizens from every background and part of the city, they consolidated a public dissociation with the Argentine political system. Even though they helped to regain the "lost" public spaces of traditional civic organization in Argentina, they created a social climate of polarized resistance that hindered the consolidation of productive progress. Of course, a crisis of such magnitude would most certainly require months, even years, of readjustment to quell the waves of its aftermath. Perhaps the most important contribution of the civic movements surrounding the crisis is that they reasserted the importance

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[143] Vezzetti, "Escenas," 35.
[144] Vezzetti, "Escenas," 36.

of the citizenry in the main political playing field, which would become a key aspect of future elections.[145]

While *cacerolazos* and *asambleas* constituted a clearly visible force in the public spaces of Buenos Aires during the crisis, the city's streets were also being pervaded by an enigmatic body of the urban marginalized: the *cartoneros*. Also known as *cirujas*, *cartoneros* are poor residents of the city or its periphery who traverse through neighborhood streets in the evening, after doormen have thrown out the day's garbage, to sort through curbside waste for scraps of cardboard, metal, plastic, glass, aluminum, or any other recyclable material with resale value. In Buenos Aires, this informal occupation has served largely as the city's only recourse for recycling, although more recently the government created a limited program of formal employment for *cartoneros* in which they receive salaries to sort through the curbside garbage of certain neighborhoods.[146]

In March 2001, less than three months after the catastrophes of December 19 and 20, *La Nación* shocked its middle and upper class readers with an article reporting that Trenes de Buenos Aires (TBA), a private company that ran the majority of the city's trains, had created a special train service for *cartoneros*. "Never in the history of the *porteño* railway has there been a service as 'premium' and 'exclusive' as this one," it stated. "Only *cartoneros* travel in this train, that is, those who rummage through everyone else's wastes every day to find something that they can sell in order to survive." [147] The train service ran twice every evening between the Carranza station in Palermo and the José León Suárez station in San Martín, offering *cartonero* passengers bimonthly and monthly tickets for 8.50 and 16 pesos, respectively. According to TBA officials,

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[145] In 2003 the Justicialistas won the presidency with the election of Néstor Kirchner; his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was elected in 2007. She was reelected in 2011.

[146] "Contratarían a los cartoneros para el reciclado de la basura," *Clarín*, 23 April 2002; "Un espacio que aún genera trabajo," *Página/12*, 26 May 2002.

[147] "Cartoneros que tienen su propio tren," *La Nación*, 3 March 2001.

the service was created after they had received considerable complaints from regular passengers inconvenienced by the "*cirujas* and their sacks" that were growing in numbers and consequently taking up considerable space on trains already packed with commuters. Dedicated to their investigation of the *cartonero* railway service, reporters from the newspaper decided to take the train themselves:

> Late, when the majority of residents no longer walked the streets, *La Nación* boarded the
> train. Laden with bags and with the sound of the constant jolting of the tracks as a
> backdrop, close to 160 families of informal trash workers returned to their homes. Many
> of the *cirujas* were accompanied by their small children and almost all shared the same
> final destination in the *villas* of Independencia or Cárcova in José León Suárez.
> Among them traveled Martín Rivas, 30 years old, with his wife and five children, who
> collect paper, tin and bottles for a living to resell them in the recycling market.
> "They pay us very little. On a good day we get eight pesos and it's just enough for us to
> eat. But, what can I say, I prefer to do this over not working at all," expressed Rivas,
> with a certain resignation in his voice.

The article not only informed *porteños* that they shared train services with the city's informal trash collectors, but also brought attention to the insurgence of *cartoneros* taking to the streets in the aftermath of the crisis, resorting to one of society's lowest means of survival.

The extensive commentary that the article provoked was followed by an editorial published two days later that condemned the city's "perverse habit" of "coexisting with dirtiness, with abandonment, with the sad practices that so many invalids take up."[148] Appropriately titled "*Cercados por la basura*" ("Surrounded by trash"), the editorial demanded answers from public authorities. Middle and upper class residents of the city's central neighborhoods were suddenly

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[148] *La Nación*, 5 March 2001.

faced with a visible "problem" that had long been invisible. The phenomenon of informal trash

collection in Buenos Aires can be traced back as far as the nineteenth century, when marginal

groups began to search through the open-air dumps on the city's margins for items of domestic

or resale value.[149] This practice persisted and progressively expanded into central

neighborhoods, until the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 enforced repressive measures to stop

it; an ordinance passed in 1977 prohibited the collection, resale, and transport of household

garbage found public streets.[150] The now illegal occupations of *cartoneros* and *cirujas* were

relinquished to the informal garbage pits in the city's margins, taking place on small and

relatively invisible scale, until the 1990s, when increasing unemployment and poverty forced

thousands of "new" *cartoneros* to take up informal trash collection in a phenomenon that

invaded the streets of Buenos Aires by nightfall.[151]

The insurgence of informal trash collection that accompanied Argentina's economic

downfall was unprecedented. In 2001, it was estimated that there were 25,000 people

participating in the illegal practice who supported some additional 100,000 family members; of

those 25,000, half were estimated to be "new" *cartoneros*.[152] What differentiated the "new"

cartoneros from those who engaged in the practice prior to the economic downturn of the

1990s—"*cirujas estructurales*"—was that a large proportion of the new collectors came from

middle and working classes. Suffering from recent unemployment and impoverishment, these

groups turned to *el cirujeo* as a means of survival, but unlike the *cirujas estructurales* who sorted

through the dumps on the city's margins, they were forced to search for trash in the streets of the

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[149] Mariano D. Perelman, "De la vida en la Quema al Trabajo en las calles. El ciruejo Ciudad de Buenos Aires," *Avá* 12 (March 2008), 120.
[150] Perelman, "De la vida," 128.
[151] Martín Boy and Mariano D. Perelman, "Cartoneros en Buenos Aires: nuevas modalidades de encuentro," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 72, no. 3 (July-Sept. 2010), 403.
[152] Jorge Iglesias, "Los nuevos cirujas que creó la pobreza," *La Nación*, 28 Oct. 2001.

urban center. Whereas the *cirujas estructurales* had remained invisible in the periphery, the new *cartoneros* were unable to hide their poverty in the public sphere and became vulnerable to the stigmatization that accompanied their invalid occupation.[153] Their backgrounds were diverse and among them were mechanics, factory workers, metallurgists, taxi drivers, and construction workers. What they shared in common were the bags and carts in which they collected thrown-out scraps that they hoped to sell in order to feed their families. Arriving in every central neighborhood by nightfall to sort through the tons of garbage that had been tossed onto curbs and sidewalks, they constituted a collective presence that silently transformed the streets of Buenos Aires into a material recourse of survival.

As the numbers of *cartoneros* grew, the *porteños* whose trash they collected found them increasingly difficult to ignore. This was especially true in areas like the downtown, where the busy thoroughfare and large quantities of businesses made for more profitable recollection. In certain parts of Microcentro, *La Nación* reported that "the daily scene is two or three *cirujas* on every block and trucks waiting on the corner."[154] Many of the city's blocks became routine sorting sites for some *cartoneros*, who returned to the same streets every night. Anthropologists Mariano Perelman and Martín Boy have noted the territorial patterns of *cartoneros* in their extensive ethnographic research:

> Moreover, another characteristic of the *cirujeo* practice is that it has developed in the most commercial neighborhoods and zones of the city (Palermo, Belgrano, Núñez, Barrio Norte, microcentro), and that it has come to depend on the waste materials of the formal economy… the neighborhoods with exclusive social and residential qualities are the most frequented by the *cirujas*. There they constantly coexist with other *cartoneros*, residents, doormen, people passing by, principally during the evening and nighttime when *porteños*

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[153] Boy and Perelman, "Cartoneros," 407.
[154] "El decálogo del buen cartonero," *La Nación*, 1 July 2001.

throw their trash out to the curbs. In this way the public space, the streets of the city,

become the place where distinct social sectors cross one another, collide, differ, fuse and

contrast: the skyscrapers or intelligent buildings characteristic of the city's center coexist

with those who are marginalized by the productive system. It is true that in the central

neighborhoods there exists little tolerance for poverty, or at least, its presence is

conflictive.[155]

In their nightly circulation through the central streets of Buenos Aires, the *cartoneros* posed an

unintentional threat to the residents who lived there. Their presence marked an invasion of the

environments of the middle and upper classes, whereby their neighborhoods became visual

landscapes of the poverty and misery that permeated inward from the city's margins. The

differences between the *cartoneros* sorting through the curbside heaps of garbage with their bare

hands and the well-dressed professionals who lived in the buildings behind them were starkly

visible, but the two groups found themselves co-inhabiting space nonetheless.

Of course, city residents did not outwardly denounce the *cartoneros* for their dirtiness

and poverty, or for their simply being present in the public streets outside their homes. However

they did find certain aspects about the *cartoneros* that they could justifiably complain about.

First, they drew attention to the potential health risks that could be caused by the recycling

process itself, which included the unsanitary state of the city's streets and the accumulation of

potentially infectious trash piles. The consequences of the *cartoneros*' sorting were reported in a

March 2001 article from *La Nación*:

They have no idea what recycling actually is, but they practice it every day, without rest.

Although often unaware the potential costs, they carry out this type of work without

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[155] Boy and Perelman, "Cartoneros," 407.

taking necessary precautions, such as generating small illegal waste piles and, consequently, sources of infection…

Although a large percentage of these wastes will be reintroduced in the industry for the creation of new products, the majority of what is accumulated will be left abandoned in the improvised terrain of sorting.

Thus, while far from many of their intentions, the activity also generates a problematic cycle.[156]

Characteristic of many initial reactions to the insurgence of *cartoneros* in the aftermath of the crisis, the article seems to imply that the problems of the "recycling" system stemmed from the individuals who sorted for recyclable items (i.e. *cartoneros*). Yet nowhere in the article were the doormen who threw out the garbage, or the residents who generated it, mentioned.

Another aspect of the *cirujeo* seen as problematic was the fact that many *cartoneros* were accompanied by their children, raising a concern for child labor. The issue was presented in a July 2002 article in *La Nación*:

In addition to the filthiness, the *cirujeo* entails the problem of child labor. Entire families come to go through the garbage and find "something useful"… [When a reporter recently took the train for *cirujas*] more than 300 families, among which were many children, got on.

"I don't have anyone to leave them with," explained Alejandra Machado, 33 years old, who boarded the train accompanied by her six children. Until two years ago, she worked as a seamstress. "But that ended and now we all have to go out to put together 300 pesos for the month," she said.

The concern over the labor of minors, in unsanitary conditions and in many cases in place of going to school, reached the Minister of Labor. The National Commission for the

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[156] "Son altos los costos del 'reciclado,'" *La Nación*, 3 March 2001.

Eradication of Child Labor…made arrangements with the Municipality of San Martín to

create a nighttime childcare service that will open its doors in August so that children will

not have to accompany their parents to sort trash.[157]

An array of publications deplored the unthinkable act of forcing a child to sort through the

garbage piles in the streets. Reports and editorials investigating the lives of *cartonero* families

surfaced frequently in other popular newspapers like *Clarín* and *Página/12* during this period,

illustrating the misery and impoverishment in the *villas* and poor neighborhoods just outside the

city's limit.

By 2003, criticism of the *cirujeo* practices reached a rather perplexing point when animal

rights activists began condemning *cartoneros* for their alleged maltreatment of horses. In March,

the Association for the Defense of Animal Rights (ADDA) and the Argentine Foundation for

Animal Welfare (FABA) obtained city approval to set up a Treatment Center for horses in

Parque de la Ciudad near the Bajo Flores neighborhood. Outfitted with a special trailer to rescue

sick or abused animals from anywhere in the city, the center served as an emergency veterinary

clinic, an adoption register, and a sanctuary for retired horses. Led by the Vice Chancellor's

wife, volunteers worked closely with city police, who reported any maltreatment of horses or

their illegal use (under city codes, the use of "non-motorized labor"—including humans and

horses—was forbidden). During the first 25 days it was open, the center accommodated over 50

animals.[158] *Página/12* interviewed Martha Gutiérrez, one of the center's founders, who detailed

the center's treatment procedures for the horses:

"Every one of them receives a meticulous examination for infectious anemia," said

Martha. After that exam, the women have the diagnosis. As would a court, they draw up

a sentence that either allows the horse to leave or doesn't. If the animal has problems,

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[157] "El cirujeo."

[158] "A los caballos ya no los dejan trabajar, pero sí ser adoptados," *Página/12*, 25 March 2003.

sores, a disease, they do not return it. The *cartonero* can cry, beg, stamp his feet, but the animal comes first: "Because we can't forget," Martha clarified, "that, in a way, the horse gave birth to our homeland."[159]

Although the use of horse-drawn carts was already a legal offense in the city, worthy of a fine between 120 and 180 pesos, horses had never before been confiscated from their owners. With the establishment of the Treatment Center, however, horses suspected of maltreatment could be sequestered until the center had confirmed that they were in good health and that their owners would not subject them to abuse or hard labor in the future.

Cartoneros whose horses had been confiscated did not find the new policies just. "I don't use my horse for races or for playing polo: I use my little horse to make a living," said one *cartonero* who crossed paths with a patrol squad while making his rounds through the city. Another verified what had been happening: "They're taking all our horses away from us."[160] The preoccupation with the welfare of horses, especially when their "well-being" was valued over that of their marginalized and impoverished owners, illustrates the extent to which the social fabric of Buenos Aires had been fragmented. The idea that some *porteños* sympathized with animals, which they quickly assumed to be maltreated when they carried a cart full of trash, over human beings brings the vast socioeconomic differences between individuals of different urban sectors into focus. The *cartoneros* and the members of the Argentine Foundation for Animal Welfare lived in completely different versions of Buenos Aires.

Similarly, *porteños* who complained of the filth and infection left behind by the *cirujeo* and deplored the participation of children in those practices illuminate the wide distances between groups on polar ends of the social spectrum. While admirable concerns, the dangers

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[159] "*Porque no nos tenemos que olvidar de que, de alguna manera, el caballito hizo nuestra Patria.*" As quoted in "A los caballos."
[160] "A los caballos."

and risks they perceived were untranslatable to the realities of those on the brink of survival. After living among a group of *cartoneros* as part of an research investigation in 1999, sociologist Daniela Soldano asked herself a seemingly impossible question: "How does one talk of sanitary hazard with people who live, literally, in a garbage dump? …The answers [to the questions we asked] told us of another possible definition for the word 'risk.'"[161] Although the investigation's coordinators instructed Soldano's team to ask individuals in the community about their perceptions of danger, the precautions they took in their daily work, and measures they took to prevent the spread of disease, the researchers quickly realized questions were far less relevant to community members, whose problems didn't stem from living amongst garbage but from their daily recourses of survival. Danger was attributed not from "dangerous" objects but from the constant threat of police during trash collection; it was the chance that another *ciruja* would steal their cart or horse; it was the problem that items to recollect in the streets were growing scarce.

The unfaltering wave of *cartoneros* that entered the Capital Federal each night was an invasion by an alien "other," a group whose obscured identity didn't fit into any preexisting individual or social category.[162] They were perceived by their habits—sorting trash bare-handedly, circulating the streets with their children, driving horse-drawn carts—and by the enigmatic traces they left behind—decomposing waste piles, slashed garbage bags, an occasional horse who died of exhaustion and old age. Their diverse identities were shrouded by the *cartonero*'s stigmatized routine, full of suspicion, humiliation, and dishonor, especially for those who had never imagined themselves in such a dire situation.[163] Even more significantly, their presence generated a paradoxical tension between the visible and invisible faces of urban

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[161] Daniela Soldano, "Proximidades y distancias. El investigador en el borde peligroso de las cosas" as reproduced in Sergio Chejfec, "Sísifo en Buenos Aires," *Punto de vista* 72 (April 2002), 27.

[162] Chejfec, "Sísifo"; Boy and Perelman, "Cartoneros."

[163] Boy and Perelman, "Cartoneros," 414.

poverty. Scouring over the filth the *cirujeo* left behind in central neighborhoods, middle and

upper class residents were confronted with the unsightliness of poverty and urban formlessness

at their front doors. Although some picked their battles with horse welfare, infectious diseases,

or child labor, *porteños* faced a reality in which they were positioned irresolutely between

distance from, and proximity to, the consequences of vast social inequalities.

If the social and territorial transformations of the crisis had any invisibility, it was the

product of a process of acculturation that made their widespread degradations indistinguishable

from the events and habits of everyday life.[164] Yet those degradations unquestionably altered the

urban sphere and contributed to the continued fragmentation of its terrain and social fabric. On

the one hand, the *cacerolazo* and *asamblea* movements united diverse social sectors in rejecting

the political authorities that had failed to adequately represent them; they granted civic agency

for reconquering of lost spaces like Plaza de Mayo, where citizens reinstated their right the

public sphere. On the other, the silent invasion of the *cartonero* "other" made the divergent

qualities of the city's diverse socioeconomic sectors all the more contrasted. In the aftermath of

the crisis, once the ringing noise of pots and pans had faded and after the streets had been turned

over by the nocturnal sorting of the *cirujas*, a fragmented Buenos Aires awaited its uncertain

destiny.

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[164] Chejfec, "Sísifo," 26.

Conclusion

El miedo era la matriz de los lugares, lo que hacía que hubiera lugares y que uno pudiera moverse por ellos.

Fear was the matrix of places, what made it possible for there to be places and for one to go about within them.

– Cesár Aira, *La Villa*[165]

The crisis of 2001 and 2002 served as the point of rupture that shattered Argentina's neo-liberal dream of the 1990s. It demonstrated the fragility of its political and economic institutions and the social antagonisms that had been steadily mounting throughout the decade: the neo-liberal hegemonic order, never fully consolidated, that promised prosperity and modernity, had ruptured. In its wake, the city was left with the aftermath of political and economic collapse, social chaos, and a vastly changed urban terrain. Buenos Aires was left formless. Half of its population fell below the poverty line, and half more still suffered from such dire impoverishment they could not feed themselves. Dozens had been killed in demonstrations, and unquantifiable more in the lootings, crimes, and general aftermath. Citizens were completely disenchanted with the political and economic institutions that had not only failed to adequately represent them, but had failed to avert the most catastrophic crisis in Argentine history.

What does this tumultuous era mean for Buenos Aires? It represents an important collection of transformations that can be investigated through not only political and economic theory, but also through the productions, reproductions, and destructions of its complex urban landscape. Upon first glance, it might seem that the rise of a hegemonic neo-liberal order

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[165] Cesár Aira, *La Villa*, Buenos Aires: Emecé (2001), 31.

dominated the 1990s, during which foreign and domestic investments and real estate developments sought to turn Buenos Aires into the global, modern city that some thought it ought to be. Meanwhile, professionals of the upper and middle classes sought their own privatized lifestyles in the gated communities of the periphery, where green spaces collided with the walls, guard towers, and alarm systems of neighborhoods that paradoxically sought to enclose themselves in the open countryside they called ideal. The Puerto Madero project, the *shoppings*, and the *barrios cerrados* that characterized the metropolitan region during this period had the effect of fragmenting its terrain, forming isolated enclaves that gave rise to a discontinuous social fabric.

When the economy began to show signs of weakness in the second half of the decade, these fragmentations grew, as did crime and unemployment. The sound of *cacerolazos* became a symbol of the popular insurrections, crowds of citizens who united in their rejection of an incompetent government and re-appropriated the public spaces that had been lost for the use of civic action. This moment of cohesion was short-lived, however, and the fragmented reality of the urban terrain was made evident by the tense coexistence of central residents and the *cartonero* "other," through which the divisions of the city's urban fabric were unequivocally pronounced. In some ways, the aftermath of the crisis serves as a point of departure, a void that might give way to a radical, future alteration of the city and the social agents and political institutions that transform it. Most of all, the crisis illustrates the arrival of an identity that the exclusive, private enclaves of the 1990s rejected but simultaneously reasserted by dissociating themselves from the stark differences of their surroundings, verifying the persevering existence of the "other," Buenos Aires' "Latin American" component, which grips the urban landscape with an undeniable, silent presence.

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