ARGENTINA’S RECUPERATED FACTORY MOVEMENT AND CITIZENSHIP: AN ARENDTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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When I asked Ricardo why he and some of his co-workers at Ghelco, a food processing factory with roughly 50 workers, had decided in May 2002, in the midst of Argentina’s worst debacle in its history, to restart production several months after the owner had terminated them and closed the plant, he replied:

If we had not done so, we would have been unemployed, and at our age (late 40’s to late 50’s) it would have been impossible to find another job [...]. Anyone who is jobless is treated like garbage; look at the Piqueteros [...] When we restarted the factory, I was able to regain my dignity (Personal Interviews – hereafter PI 8).¹

After pressing him several times to clarify the meaning of this last phrase, Ricardo responded:

Whenever I talk to the Piqueteros in my neighbourhood, they always tell me that they should have stayed put and recuperated their factory [...]. All of them are now receiving Planes from the government, but this makes them feel like shit, like real nobodies... They lost their place (in public life) the moment they abandoned their factory [...] (Merklen 2005).²

Many of the workers from the recuperated factory that I interviewed used strikingly similar terms rooted in civic recognition and political belonging to express their own understanding of citizenship, as well as to describe the plight of unemployed Piqueteros who had been expelled from public life and stripped of their ‘right to have rights’. All of them were as fearful of becoming unemployed as they were of losing their place in the world, of

¹ This essay includes information gathered from interviews with 22 factory workers and several businessmen; all of them were done between May and August 2007. I also interviewed Luis Caro, President of the MNER; Eduardo Murua, President of MNER; Diego Kravetz, city of Buenos Aires legislator for the factory movement; and Horacio Esber, City of Buenos Aires’ Public Defender’s Office.

² The Piquetero movement in 2000 began to block streets, demanding jobs and welfare relief, Planes de Jefas y Jefas, mentioned in the interview above, which are used by government officials during elections for clientelistic purposes.
being deprived of ‘worldliness’, to borrow Hannah Arendt’s elusive term (Arendt 1971; Calhoun 2003).

After the interview, I spent the remainder of the afternoon strolling through the neighborhood of Barracas, where Ghelco is located, along the southern edge of the city (Puccia 1968). Prior to the neoliberal debacle, Barracas had been one of the most economically vibrant areas in the entire country, populated by hundreds of small workshops and medium-sized factories which provided countless skilled workers from these neighborhoods with stable jobs, and their children with a sense of security and optimism knowing that they would someday follow in their parents’ footsteps. Alas, this was not to be. Barracas now displayed all the familiar signs of deindustrialization: abandoned warehouses surrounded by mounds of rubbish and shattered glass. As I walked along a blighted side-street not far from where Roberto was raised and which he had described somewhat nostalgically as a confident and staunchly Peronist working class community, I became keenly aware of the chasm that now separated the Barracas of his youth from the neoliberal wasteland that it had become. It also dawned on me that Roberto, along with the thousands of other workers in the recuperated factory movement, played a crucial role in displacing a property centered notion of citizenship for a civic conception rooted in social rights.  

My underlying concern in this essay is to understand how these factory workers in greater metropolitan area of Buenos Aires reconstituted their sense of citizenship in the wake of neoliberalism. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Argentine state, under pressure from the IMF and Washington Consensus, implemented a wide-ranging series of policies aimed at transforming the country into a market-centered society, accomplishing this far more thoroughly and in a shorter span of time than in any other South American country, including Chile. Despite the extremely adverse conditions they faced (lack of opportunity structures), Buenos Aires’ factory workers were somewhat successful, in the course of practicing ‘direct-participatory’ and ‘indirect-representative’ democracy, in generating legal, social, economic, political resources to enable them to regain their worldliness and to transform themselves into rights-bearing citizens (Urbaniti 2006: 759, italicized in original). Studying the factory movement from the

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3 For alternative interpretations of the factory movement see Fajn 2003, a study of ‘opportunity structures and collective action;’ and Rebon 2007, a study of the formation of ‘class consciousness and vanguard leadership.’

4 Urbaniti and other scholars of ‘mediated democracy’ are seeking to overcome the age-old dichotomy between ‘direct’ vs. ‘representative’ democracy. Participation and