‘Disorganisation’ as Social Movement Tactic: Reappropriating Politics during the Crisis of Neoliberal Capitalism
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Introduction

The first national uprising to challenge the doctrine of neoliberalism erupted at the turn of the twenty-first century in Argentina, a country which the IMF had celebrated as its star pupil in 1996. Four presidents and two governments fell in the space of two weeks. The state unpegged the peso from the dollar, resulting in the largest debt default of any country in history. On 19 December 2001, thousands of people marched into the city centre from the barricades they had erected in their neighbourhoods across the town. Banging pots and pans, they protested at the President’s declaration of martial law earlier that evening, itself a response to looting that had been spreading for several days across different provinces.

Unprecedented levels of unemployment since the early 1990s had developed, in the second half of the decade, into movements of unemployed, the piqueteros, who blocked the highways until their demands were met. From 1999 onwards, workers threatened with the same fate occupied factories facing bankruptcy and seized the means of production to restart work without the bosses. Neighbourhood-assemblies sprung up across Buenos Aires hoping to replace corrupt and inept politicians with collective self-government.

1. Thanks for the helpful suggestions by the editors of this volume, especially Laurence Cox.
These events responded to the economic crisis brought about by unfettered neoliberalism and the state’s suicidal 1991 commitment to dollar-peso parity, a quick fix for brutal hyperinflation. The combination of traumatic experiences inflicted by past military régimes and these kinds of draconian economic measures – with full IMF approval – all but destroyed the local manufacturing sector and employment market, as the country opened its floodgates to unregulated foreign capital, leading to a financial and institutional breakdown in 2001. The wealthy, forewarned, moved their money out of the country in police-escorted vanloads. Workers and the middle classes were denied access to their savings and had their daily cash withdrawals from banks severely restricted in this ‘Corralito’ measure.

The 2001 uprising ended the hopelessness of three decades of working-class defeats. It is a historic example of the ability of the working class to spontaneously self-mobilise. This assertion, however, differs from the autonomist celebration of anti-power and spontaneity as a strategy for building an alternative society. Such efforts to make historical events fit with particular political frameworks miss the fierce internal debates, the search for viable strategy and tactics, and the complexities of what has happened since the peak of the uprising. They fail to see that social movements in Argentina developed the notion of ‘disorganisation’ as an organisational tactic to confront the power of highly organised repressive state institutions. Critical in-depth analyses are essential, if movements elsewhere are to learn from the real challenges of the Argentinian experience.

This paper explores some social movement experiments during the ‘Argentinazo’, so that contemporary working-class struggles can learn from them. It is informed by my doctoral fieldwork, conducted between 2003 and 2005 in Buenos Aires and in Mosconi, in the northern province of Salta. My research focused on social movements such as the local neighbourhood assembly and the high profile workers’ cooperative Chilavert in Pompeya, one of the oldest working class neighbourhoods in the capital Buenos Aires; and on the UTD (Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados), an important and combative movement of the unemployed in General E. Mosconi, a working-class town created by the former state-owned oil company YPF. The comparison enabled an exploration of the uneven and heterogeneous nature of popular responses to the unfolding crisis.

Social and political science reaffirms that human beings cannot help but organise, both for resistance and the social reproduction of life. My own experiences during the collapse of the East German régime in 1989 showed me how quickly the political tide of popular outcry against repression can turn into favourable conditions for organised right-wing resurgence. This convinced me of the necessity of organised resistance in the battle for ideas and interpretation.