

Fieldwork

(Any of the material included in the Crisis in Argentina website may be used freely, so long as it is accompanied by appropriate acknowledgement of its source)

Introduction and a Caveat

It has always been a generally accepted tenet of anthropological endeavour that the ethnographic encounter can never be subject to our firm control, and that consequently adapting to reality, discarding inappropriate pre-conceptions, and taking on board new research questions are more or less standard procedure during fieldwork. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, my encounter with the Argentinean social reality rapidly led to my having to revise both my thinking and my research project, as will hopefully become clear from the reports, transcriptions, research notes, and odds and ends that I present here.

At the same time, serendipity has also led to my having to revise my ambitions concerning this website. My original plan was to post regular reports on my research activities in Argentina as these unfolded, an anthropological correspondence "from the front", so to speak. As is painfully obvious, although I have managed to send in several series of photos to be put up on this website, it is fair to say at this juncture – mid-August – that my initial idea of a "real time" reporting on my fieldwork has not worked out. To a great extent this has been due to the fact that I have ended up somewhat ambitiously carrying out *two* case studies rather than one. As a result, I have found myself singularly lacking time to produce the promised reports or even simply transcribe my field notes, much less process my data.

Although my original idea may have proved somewhat impractical, I still think that it had value, and my failure to match my ambition need not undermine the logic that underpinned the original idea, however. Over the next few months, I will transcribe and post up my field notebooks, reproduce my agenda, list documents and books obtained, post up interview transcripts – once these have been vetted by those I interviewed – and in due course, post up the reports and articles that I will be writing based on the material I have gathered. Hopefully, these will permit an *ex post facto* reconstruction of how I went about doing my fieldwork and how an anthropological investigation actually occurs.

What follows, for now, are extracts from reports and correspondence sent back to friends and colleagues, chronologically ordered, as well as the transcript of the first interview that I recorded. Please bear in mind that inevitably these are preliminary, rough transcriptions which contain mistakes and mis-transcriptions, as usually occurs when interviews are transcribed by a third party and they have not been corrected. I hope to correct these as soon as possible, although it should be noted that I have left all misconceptions and misunderstandings uncorrected so that the evolution of my thinking may be followed, and that I will not be correcting these. I will add further material, some of which is detailed below, to the website as and when is possible, as well as contextualizing details for all the interviews.

[Dennis Rodgers](#)

Report No.1 - 15th May 2003

It began to become rather clear rather quickly following my arrival on 11 April that my initial idea of studying the middle class was probably going to be a non-starter. My idea of taking advantage of links I had with a couple of extended middle class families in order to carry out a kind of Lewisian "Children of Sanchez"-type study on the socio-political effects of the economic crisis for the Argentinean middle class was heavily dependent on these families being enthusiastic about the project, which perhaps not unnaturally, neither really was, as this would have basically have involved my nosing into rather intimate areas of family business (all the more so in the context of an economic crisis which is eroding this business ? a big form of symbolic shame). As a result, I had to drop that idea, as it was highly dependent on my having good access to at least one extended middle class family. Of course, I've been able to talk with a number of middle class individuals, but the whole idea was to have a whole

family as object of study rather than random individuals in order to provide a certain systemicity and methodological rigour to the investigation.

At the same time, these various conversations also underlined two basic issues which somewhat undermined this idea of conducting a study of the political consequences of the crisis of December 2001 and its aftermath for the middle class. Firstly, the middle class is extremely heterogeneous in Argentina, much more so than I had anticipated (I was not, of course, expecting a homogeneous middle class, but the Argentinean middle class does seem exceptionally divided). Part of this is due to the economic crisis, which has caused the middle class(es) to fragment, but it also reflects the fact that the concept of what constitutes the middle class has traditionally been associated with a huge gamut of socio-economic statuses over here.

In many ways, Argentina is the middle class country par excellence, everybody thinks of themselves as middle class, aspires to be seen as middle class, sees the middle class as the "natural" social class, and considers it to be the country's backbone (everybody tells me that Argentina is built on the "clase media trabajadora", or "working middle class"). To a certain extent, this is definitely true; contrarily to other Latin American countries, the indigenous population of Argentina was never very populous and there never was a process of agrarian land reform in Argentina, meaning that there was little in the way of a rural underclass, while the cities were populated by immigrants from Europe, mostly skilled workers and small artisans, and there was widespread upward social mobility. Of course, there also existed - and still exists - a working class, and a very important one at that, but to a certain extent Argentina in the mid-20th century can be said to have gone through what in some ways is a similar process to Western Europe in the period 1950-1970, that is to say that there occurred a "middle classification" of the working class (with class being viewed here from a Weberian perspective of life chances).

Secondly, although it is clear that the crisis that began a year and a half ago has led to a sharp erosion of the middle class, this is in fact a process that has much older roots. In many ways it could be argued that Argentina has been in crisis for the past 70 years, but certainly inequality took off and society became increasingly polarised during the 1990s under Carlos Menem's neoliberal governance, and the crisis of December 2001 was more the culmination of an ongoing process rather than the beginning of a new one. At the same time, however, the politically most important and active strata of the middle class, the upper middle class, has been significantly less affected than the still important but politically less active middle and lower middle classes, which of course has critical repercussions for the central question of my initially proposed research. Furthermore, it became rather clear from my conversations with random middle class individuals that a lot of my putative interviews would have centred on how the middle class can no longer afford to go to Disneyland or how their maids now cost so much, etc., which I have to admit seemed rather tedious.

Having come to this conclusion, I decided to take a step back and conduct something of a mapping exercise of what could be loosely label "socio-political issues" in Argentina, as well as a mapping of the work being carried out on such issues within Argentinean academia. Ten days after arriving, I was able to attend a seminar organised by the Universidad General de San Martín on "Movimientos Sociales Emergentes en Argentina" ("Emerging Social Movements in Argentina"). It was highly interesting, basically an inter-disciplinary team presenting the first results of their year-long investigation of social movements, mainly focusing on popular neighbourhood assemblies ("asambleas populares" or "asambleas barriales") but also covering other movements such as organisations of the unemployed ("piqueteros"), occupied factories ("fabricas recuperadas"), barter clubs ("clubes de trueque"), savers' organisations ("organizaciones de ahorristas"), etc. Certainly, although the general tenor of the approaches being taken seemed to take their cue from the standard idealist notions of the late 1980s and early 1990s associated with the work of Touraine, Melucci, and Escobar, this seminar provided me with elements of a first overview of both issues and the kind of work being done on them, and as such was both stimulating and informative. I later had lunch with one of the coordinators of the project, Graciela di Marco, who has just sent me a draft of their report, and I also met up with the coordinator of another long-term investigation on occupied factories, Gabriel Fajn of the Centro Cultural de la Cooperaci a trade union-affiliated research and cultural centre.

Beyond epistemological questions about subjectivity and agency, the big question which emerged from this seminar was a preoccupation with whether a "New Argentina" had emerged from the events of 19/20 December 2001. All these "emerging social movements" were being conceived as signalling a fundamental change in the body politic in Argentina, but what also emerged from the seminar was that firstly, lumping these different social movements together isn't quite as straightforward as might seem. The piqueteros, for example, emerged in Argentina in 1996. The occupied factories, in 1998. Barter clubs also predate the 2001 crisis. Furthermore, these different types of social movements are also undergoing different trajectories. There seems to be a major demobilization process going on in relation to barter clubs and popular neighbourhood assemblies, for example. The former seems directly related to the government's introduction of a subsidy for heads of households (the "plan jefe y jefa de hogares"). The latter, nobody really seems to have an explanation for, although it seems to me that it is probably linked to the fact that many of these neighbourhood assemblies don't actually manage any concrete resources and are more talking shops than anything else (although the symbolic dimension is important, it is probably subordinate to the material dimension).

Piqueteros, on the other hand, have grown somewhat, possibly because most of them seem to be more or less integrating themselves within existing power relations, basically asking for a slice of the cake but not challenging the system as such (piqueteros tend to use the threat of violence rather than violence itself as their tool to extract subsidies from the state). There's even been some reports that piqueteros groups are beginning to offer themselves as voting blocs to local politicians in exchange for subsidies, very much entering the clientelistic politics of local-level Argentina... Occupied factories are an altogether different case, and there is increasing evidence that there is a concerted effort by both the state and the private sector to get rid of them. Recently the emblematic and symbolically powerful Brukman factory workers were violently evicted from their factory, and many other occupied factories are folding as businesses refuse to sell them raw material. I'm working on getting direct access to one of the eighty or so occupied factories here in Buenos Aires, which might provide a potential avenue for some shop-floor ethnography.

At the same time, I'm not sure that focusing on a single occupied factory is the way to go here. One thing which seems to me rather interesting and certainly doesn't seem to be under extensive consideration is the unfolding institutional development of the different social movements which have emerged here from a comparative perspective. Such a line of comparative investigation would bring up all sorts of questions about what is needed to maintain alternative institutions which emerge in contexts of crisis - defining the Argentinean crisis broadly - or more generally, the basis of durable institution building, the limits of spontaneity, voluntarism, etc. Certainly, this seems to me to definitely link in with the CSP's core concerns, no? At the same time, I'm not sure whether this isn't too broad or large a topic, certainly for four months' work.

As I continue to mull this over, I've been meeting with academics and professionals generally, often presenting them with my ideas. I've connected with people working on different aspects of social movements, politics, or economic issues in Argentina, and had some very fruitful exchanges. Unlike in the UK, there is a real sense of community here, and people are really open, willing to provide you with contacts, papers, drafts, work in progress, etc. It's quite a breath of fresh air! In addition to those mentioned above, I've also made contact with two political scientists at the Instituto Di Tella, Enrique Peruzzotti and Juan Carlos Torres, the Crisis Response Programme at the International Labour Organisation, CLACSO (the Latin American Council for Social Science Research - great documentation centre, kind of a key nerve point for social science research here), and IDES (the Institute for Social Studies, a highly respected outfit full of very good people). I also spent an afternoon at the Argentinean National Anthropology Institute, which had an interesting collection of audio-visual material on "piqueteros" and "clubes de trueque". Although I didn't get terribly much in the way of specific information on either from the material, it was very useful background and certainly a good introduction to the issue.

Most people seemed rather taken aback at the idea of looking at the institutional development of social movements, mainly because they tend to assume that they have become institutionalised. At IDES I had a very interesting meeting with Elizabeth Jelin, a sociologist whose work I've long admired - she's worked in a variety of fields, most importantly on social movements, on gender, on poverty, on human

rights, and on social memory - who took a different view. When I mentioned my idea of looking at the modes of institutionalisation or non-institutionalisation of social movements, she agreed that it was one of the issues that was generally not being focused on properly, but wondered whether there was enough temporal distance to do this. A good point, I guess. Anyway, there is somebody at IDES who is thinking of looking at just that called Alejandro Grimson, whom Elizabeth is going to connect me with. She'll also connect me with somebody called Gabriel Kessler, whom I'm quite excited to meet because he's written some of the in my opinion best stuff on gangs and violence in Argentina that I know, although he's now focused on politics and institutional change, and so she thought might be a useful person to talk to. It may yet lead me in a totally different direction...

Otherwise, I've collected already quite a lot of books, articles, papers, as well as newspaper cuttings. I've also been doing a little bit of "real" fieldwork. I have to say that I really don't feel like I'm doing proper fieldwork right now, and I'm not sure to what extent I will be during this trip to Argentina. I'm not properly immersed in a context in the same way I was in Nicaragua, and I'm plagued with doubts as to my abilities to do good research just on the basis of interviewing people and not participant observation. Intellectually, I of course realise that participant observation is not the only research method, but in my guts, right now, I feel as if I'm not doing anything! I suppose that it's partly to do with the fact that I still haven't got a clear idea of what I'm studying in detail, but still, it's a bit of an uncomfortable feeling. Once an anthropologist, always an anthropologist, I guess. It's certainly made me determined that I want to do some more "proper" ethnography in the next place I decide to move on to after Argentina (of course, I'm not really going to be moving on from Argentina any more than I have moved on from Nicaragua, it's more a question of adding to the palate, I suppose).

Anyway, in terms of more or less "proper" fieldwork, there have been two things. Firstly, I've been looking into the local government bureaucracy, pursuing the perspective of government institutions on social movements, and more specifically of the autonomous municipality of Buenos Aires. Certainly, within the city this frequently is the main channel of contact between the state and social movements. A friend of a friend who works in the social secretariat of the City of Buenos Aires has really been facilitating my investigation tremendously, sending me documents, as well as inviting me to a meeting that was held on Monday to establish networking channels between community organisations and the municipality, in order to better distribute resources and information (interesting, but more a preparatory meeting for a proper meeting of all community organisations in Buenos Aires and relevant local government departments to be held in June, which I'll surely go to). I also have an interview on Thursday with the head of the food subsidy department, Marcelo Clingo, which in some ways is the major point of intersection between many of the social movements and the municipal authorities as by far the most significant, although the government of Buenos Aires is also now moving into participatory budgeting - my contact is trying to set up an interview for me with the person in charge of this - and so this might supersede it soon.

I also spent last Saturday in La Matanza, a poor neighbourhood of Greater Buenos Aires, talking with a group of piqueteros, or organisation of the unemployed (the MTD - Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados - La Matanza). That was very interesting - they're one of the few piqueteros groups to refuse government subsidies - most groups are in fact organised around obtaining government subsidies by cutting off roads and then negotiating with the authorities to lift their roadblocks in exchange of a given number of subsidies - because they "didn't want to be co-opted into the Peronist clientelistic web". Generally, this was a highly reflexive group. The leader, Toty Flores, came across as a very astute and intelligent guy, and his wife, Soledad, is a trained social psychologist. They're obviously quite used to having academics come and talk to them - they've in fact got reciprocal arrangements set up with students from the University of Buenos Aires social work department and the sociology department whom they facilitate the constitution of a case study of their group in exchange for classes on social work or sociological theory! Indeed, on hearing that I'd worked on Nicaragua, they asked me whether I wouldn't give them a lecture on the trajectory of the revolution in Nicaragua, in order to "learn from their mistakes"! I'll be giving that next Saturday.

I visited a cultural centre they'd set up, where they have a self-sustaining, not-for-profit bakery, a sewing workshop, and a design workshop. Although they don't accept any government subsidies, they're happy to accept external subsidies, most recently from the Swiss. They are in the process of

thinking about turning themselves into a cooperative, and are looking for somebody to do an institutional study of their group and its potential to be a cooperative. I'm rather thinking that I'll propose my services, if they want, as this could possibly lead to something interesting, study-wise.

Other than that, I've still got a bunch of unexplored contacts, which I'm getting onto slowly but surely. But as you'll probably have gathered, I'm still not quite sure where I'm going, although there's no shortage of interesting developments. The elections have been rather interesting to follow. I spent much of election day prowling around Buenos Aires, even walking right into voting office, and I have to say that the atmosphere wasn't terribly impressive - resigned rather than apathetic. Menem polled 24.4%, Kirchner (another peronist, but supposedly more to the centre-left side of the party, although he implemented a rather extreme neoliberal programme in the Patagonian province where he is governor) came second with 22%, then Lopez Murphy - right wing economist who supposedly makes the Chicago boys look like bleeding heart liberals on social issues, ex-member of the Radical party of whom De La Rúa, the President who fell prematurely in 2001, was also a member - with 16.4% followed by Carrio - a left-wing, anti-corruption, crusader turned religious mystic who is also an ex-member of the Radical party - with 14.2%, and then Rodriguez Saa, another peronist but more a local caudillo from the Mendoza region with 14.1%.

The runoff, which was due on 18 May, was more or less pitting a back to the 1990s programme of neoliberalism (Menem) vs. a back to the 1960s programme of import substitution (Kirchner). But to a large extent the runoff was less about policies - people here are rather cynical about politicians sticking to policies - but the individuals involved, and the depth of hatred for Menem is such that he was being given as well-beaten in all the opinion polls, being predicted between 20 and 30 percent of the vote, compared to 50-70 percent for Kirchner. Menem decided to formally withdraw from the race today [15 May], nominally on the grounds of a Peronist party machination to favour Kirchner, but mainly in order to make Kirchner - who is the present president Duhalde's appointee, and Duhalde is Menem's arch-enemy - a lame duck president? he would assume the presidency having formally received less votes than Menem... There's obviously a lot of backroom negotiations going on between different factions of the Peronist party, mainly in order to determine who controls different party apparatus and clientelistic networks.

So, politics here is interesting, although at the local level, social movements notwithstanding, things seem rather dismal. In many ways, all the new, "alternative" forms are highly sectarian with a very limited projection - no true social imaginary, in other words. The left, in particular, seems very much stuck in a rut, lacking new ideas and new leaders. Changing this is obviously going to take time, as the left here seems to be stuck in the worst of the 1960s/70s sectarianism: trots vs. stalinists vs. maoists vs. marxist-leninists vs. anarchists vs. anarcho-syndicalists... the list is endless! There is a social-democratic party which is trying to constitute itself into a PT-like party but they have (a) no Lula, and (b) the Peronists already straddle some of their putative territory making it difficult...

Anyway, I'm beginning to get completely off topic, here, so I think I'll stop here for now. In a nutshell, I'm basically looking around in the hope of striking gold one of these days by coming across a great fieldwork opportunity and to then seize it with enthusiasm. I'm slowly getting the feel that I'm beginning to get a sense for Argentina, and so hopefully it won't be too long before I really get start!

Report No.2 - 14th July 2003

(Any of the material included in the Crisis in Argentina website may be used freely, so long as it is accompanied by appropriate acknowledgement of its source)

Workwise, things are going brilliantly with regards to fieldwork and absolutely disastrously with regards to everything else I'm supposed to be doing that's hanging over me from since before arriving here? But let me concentrate on the former? As you know, I've completely moved away from what I was initially going to be looking at. In a nutshell, what I've ended up researching are local socio-political responses to the crisis, through the development of two specific case studies.

The first is of the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de La Matanza (a partido, or slum, of Gran Buenos Aires, to the West of the City of Buenos Aires), a piquetero group which has organised itself as an autonomous cooperative. This is a rather fascinating group, which historically was one of the first groups to be organised in Gran Buenos Aires, used to be very hardline and have a lot of mobilisatory power (they regularly turned out more than 3,000 people at marches and roadblocks). In 1999, however, the MTD La Matanza became the first and so far only piqueteros group to reject state subsidies - piquetero groups are basically organised around obtaining subsidies from the state - and therefore lost a lot of its mobilisatory power, to the extent that nowadays it has difficulty mobilising more than 50 people.

Although the group lost its mobilisatory clout, it gained a lot of symbolic clout, however, partly through its unusual action, but also because of the range of successful activities it has developed and is developing as a cooperative. These include setting up an economically viable "social" bakery ("social" because its first aim is to provide reasonably-priced bread for the local community rather than maximizing profits), establishing a successful editing and publishing house (the cooperative has published two books, one on its participation in the first Social Forum in Porto Alegre and the other on its journey from dependency to autonomy), setting up a scholarship programme aimed at school dropouts through which they are trained for certain basic occupations such as carpentry or car mechanics, for example, organising a personnel exchange programme with the MST in Brazil (sic!), and the establishment of a primary school with a popular education curriculum. What we have, then, is a rather diverse attempt "from below" to open up a space for participation and an alternative form of socio-political organisation in the wider context of the crisis in Argentina.

My other case study is of the participatory budgeting process being promoted by the City of Buenos Aires municipal authorities, which I'm exploring in two specific neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, Almagro/Balvanera (Once) and Barrio Norte, but first and foremost institutionally, through an analysis of the municipal government bureaucracy putting it in place. This is also totally fascinating, and is a relatively new process. In many ways, "participatory budgeting" is a bit of a misnomer here, as what it really is, is more participatory planning". It basically involves the devolution of authority for municipal action from the city authorities to local neighbourhood inhabitants, which are organised by the City's decentralization department in order to discuss priorities for action in their locality, vote on them, and then these are tackled - if judged acceptable... - in order of priority by the municipal authorities under the supervision of a council of locally elected neighbourhood representatives.

Although the process is relatively new and has a number of teething and fundamental problems it really does seem to be generating a certain sense of local autonomy. So, what we have is the opening of a space for alternative political organization "from above". At the same time, there's a whole layer of socio-political considerations that make it doubly interesting to study. From the perspective of the state, although participatory budgeting was mentioned as an institutional goal in the 1997 constitution of the newly formed autonomous city of Buenos Aires, it remained ignored until early 2002, when it became the focal point of the City of Buenos Aires authority's response to the events of December 2001, which they interpreted as reflecting a certain lack of representation and channels for citizen participation, and so reacted by attempting to open a space for more participation (at the same time, it's also become clear that it's only a particular sector of the ruling coalition which is pushing this process, and there has been a rather interesting power struggle, which is ongoing as we go into city-wide elections at the end of next month...!). At the same time, this process overlay on a variety of existing social forms which emerged from both December 2001 and the broader crisis, and it's interesting to see how these have integrated and used the process for different means.

Anyway, I'm still discovering everything, but basically I'm finding that the juxtaposition of what are arguably different socio-political responses to the crisis here, one from "above" and the other from "below", is leading to all sorts of interesting questions and comparisons, about the nature of the state, the limits of both top-down and bottom-up organization, the importance of politics, the way in which both organizations and institutions emerge, are negotiated, and change over time, the institutionalisation of organizational practices, and more! All highly interesting stuff, and a big change from my previous work on Nicaragua, of course, even if I'm finding that I am rather missing it and feeling a little guilty about doing fieldwork on new themes in a new place? Nevertheless, overall I'm

very happy, even if I'm absolutely exhausted, as I seem to spend my time running from one interview to the next, or one event to the next, which since the MTD is in La Matanza and the participatory budgeting process all over the City of Buenos Aires, has meant a lot of running about!

Report No.3 - 19th August 2003

(Any of the material included in the Crisis in Argentina website may be used freely, so long as it is accompanied by appropriate acknowledgement of its source)

Well, I'm now rapidly approaching the last stretch of research and everything is of course hectic as I attempt to pull things together, pack in more interviews, clear up loose ends, etc. But generally, it's going very well indeed, I really think that I've pretty much nailed down a couple of rather good case studies that can be juxtaposed with one another nicely, one of the participatory budgeting process which was initiated in the City of Buenos Aires last year, and the other of the Movimiento the Trabajadores Desocupados de La Matanza piquetero group.

In the end, the participatory budgeting initiative case study is probably the more developed, mainly because I had a much larger pool of people to talk to, but I've got what I think is some excellent material on the MTD La Matanza, too, with excellent in depth life histories of all the major figures. Overall, I have some 40 hours' worth of taped interviews - and I anticipate at least another 10 hours' worth of taped interviews to go - and have filled three field notebooks, as well as gathered a wealth of documentation and photos.

It's actually been a big and pleasant change to study phenomena that are more inspiring than gang violence and social breakdown, even if perversely I rather miss the themes. Although the organised unemployed don't really constitute a viable form of social organisation for the future - but damn does one get carried away with the utopianism of it all...! - I've especially been highly impressed by the city of Buenos Aires' participatory budgeting initiative. It's much less bureaucratic than Porto Alegre's, less obsessed with achieving numerical targets, concerned just as much about the process as the results... And all this despite being most definitely the result of city-level politicking and caught in the midst of neighbourhood-level politicking!

And it's really a growing process in this part of the world? Did you realise that now that Buenos Aires has taken up participatory budgeting over 50 million people in this part of Latin America are living within cities practising the process? In addition to Buenos Aires, there is Porto Alegre, of course, but also Rio, Sao Paulo, Montevideo, Rosario, Resistencia, Ciudad Cuarto, and La Plata... It's changing urban governance in all these cities in a number of rather significant ways, according to what I could tell by attending a seminar where representatives from the major cities presented the advances of their respective processes... And in many of these places, it's absolutely crisis-driven? at least certainly in Argentina and Uruguay!