

PART 2

PROTEST, CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION AND DEMOCRATIZATION

INÉS M. POUSADELA *

PARTICIPATION VS. REPRESENTATION?

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSEMBLIES OF BUENOS AIRES, 2001-2003

INTRODUCTION

This work is based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted with present and former participants of the movement of political protest formed by the “popular” or “neighborhood” assemblies founded in Buenos Aires around the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002. Discourses produced in exceptional times tend to be profoundly revealing of ordinary, widely shared notions. Thus, the aim of this work consists in analyzing the discourse about political representation and deliberation that constituted the axis of the aforementioned experience, which took place in the midst of a deep crisis of representation. More specifically, it seeks to analyze the discourse of assembly members about the assemblies and their practices; about representation, delegation, participation, political parties, representative democracy and direct democracy in order to apprehend their underlying conceptions of representation, its paradoxes, its potential and its limits.

What kind of space for participation and deliberation were the assemblies? What stance did they take towards the institutions of political representation? Did they present themselves as a complement, a correction, or an alternative to their deficiencies

* Researcher at the Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales (IDAES), University of San Martín; Visiting Researcher at the Latin American Studies Center (LASC) at Georgetown University. The research resulting in this paper was possible thanks to a grant from the ASDI Program of the Latin American Council for the Social Sciences (CLACSO).

and failures? What were the reasons for their rapid decline; what remained from them in the deep layers of Argentine politics? These are some of the questions that we try to answer through the analysis of the discourse of present and former participants of the assemblies, the appearance and rapid multiplication of which we locate at the intersection of two distinct processes: on the one hand, the slow, generalized and long-term process of metamorphosis of representation, conducive from “party democracy” to “audience democracy”; on the other hand, the crisis of representation, an explosive phenomenon, limited in time and space, characterized by the very absence of recognition of the representative bond on the part of the represented.

This analysis is not based on a representative sample of the universe under study. The main reason for that is the absence of complete knowledge of that universe, which is the direct effect of the peculiar nature of the assembly movement. We are indeed dealing with a fluid movement of undefined limits, with highly fluctuating numbers of participants over time and with a “membership” that can only be estimated, at any given moment, within very wide margins of error. The available socioeconomic and demographic classifications of its participants are intuitive at best, based on prejudice at worst. Secondly, even if it had been possible to design a sample fitted to our object, it would have turned out to be too big for our modest means, given all the supposedly relevant variables. Our aim has thus been to compile a reasonable quantity of discourse from present and past members of the assemblies in order to analyze it in the context of all the information available from both primary and secondary sources. That is why we discarded the possibility of a sample and chose instead to look for as much diversity as possible among our interviewees; in other words, we opted for variety instead of statistical representation. Thirty-seven detailed interviews were held with twenty-one men and sixteen women, whose ages ranged from twenty-three to eighty-five (with the highest concentration between forty and fifty years old) and who belonged or had belonged to a wide variety of assemblies in the city of Buenos Aires and, secondarily, in its metropolitan area. Our interviewees diverge widely in occupational terms: university students, primary school teachers, merchants, artists and artisans, liberal professionals, public employees, unemployed and retired people, and even one person that defines himself as an “activist” are included. The group is also diverse where previous political experience is concerned: it includes people with no political experience who confess that they went through a sort of “second birth” as they got involved in a political mobilization for the first time in their lives; others that claim to always have had “political interests” but whose previous experience was limited to attending demonstrations, mostly related to human rights issues; others that were once “sympathizers” of some political party or were briefly members of one, most often left-leaning; others who used to have an intense participation in a (probably left-wing) political party or while at the university; others who label themselves “lifetime activists” and have indeed been members of different parties and organizations, but did not belong to any of them at the time of their entry into the assembly movement; and others that were politically active as of December,

2001, mostly in left leaning political parties. In contrast with the great majority of available research –case studies involving one or, more frequently, two assemblies in a comparative perspective–, we analyze the experience that took place in a set of assemblies as wide and diverse as possible, so as to achieve a characterization divorced from the peculiarities of any particular assembly and from the constellation of circumstances that originated and shaped each of them. Some of the assemblies mentioned no longer existed, while others were still active when the interviews took place. Twenty-two of our interviewees still participated in them at that time, whereas fifteen of them had already quit. Some of the latter had abandoned either because their assemblies had lost dynamism and were almost extinct, or because they had been let down for any reason (different aims, ruptures, attempts at cooptation and inefficacy, among others); others, finally, had stopped participating at the very moment when their assemblies disappeared.

The fact that our interviews were conducted in the year 2005 demands an additional explanation. The time gap between the facts and their narration presents both advantages and disadvantages. We have tried to capitalize on the benefits of a retrospective look at already concluded processes without being affected by the disadvantages related to the intervention of memory, such as the “distortions” that result from oblivion and from the “contamination” with information obtained later in time, as well as from the retrospective adaptation to knowledge not available at the time of the events. Where necessary, we have compared the information offered by the interviewees with data from other sources. However, at the center of our attention are the ideas held by our interviewees about political representation and their interpretations of the processes they went through rather than the empirical accuracy of their recollections.

In the next few pages we offer a reconstruction of the context of the crisis of representation of October-December, 2001, based on journalistic and official sources, academic material and testimonies from our interviewees. In the third section we deal with the emergence of the assembly movement, while in the last one we proceed to analyze the discourse of our assembly members on three big issues that are revealing of the existence of various visions of representation as well as of the depth of its crisis. We analyze the different interpretations of the battle cry of the protest of December, 2001, *Que se vayan todos* (“Everyone must leave”); their visions of the relationships between their assemblies and representative institutions; and, last but not least, their descriptions and interpretations of the deliberation and decision-making processes that took place within the assemblies, as well as of the eventual emergence within them of leaderships and instances of delegation.

REPRESENTATION IN CRISIS. FROM ELECTORAL OUTBURST TO STREET MOBILIZATION.

First it was the electoral outburst. It was no coincidence that dissatisfaction became apparent when the center-left UCR-Frepaso Alliance failed. Not only had the Alliance government inaugurated in 1999 turned out to be particularly inept

and lacking in imagination: it also was, from the prevailing point of view at the time, the only remaining chance after a Radical government (1983-1989) truncated by hyperinflation and a Peronist one (1989-1999) whose heritage was one of poverty, unemployment and corruption.

By the time of the 2001 legislative elections the failure of the Alliance was apparent on all fronts: not only where it had made little or no promise at all but also on issues that were at the core of its identity and the satisfaction of which depended mostly on political will rather than economic resources. Among them was the corruption issue, which had been placed by the Alliance at the center of its 1999 presidential campaign. Less than a year after their electoral triumph a scandal had exploded after the denunciation of alleged bribes received by senators in exchange for the passing of a bill introduced by the government. The lack of presidential willingness to investigate the facts then became apparent. As a result, the vice-president (also president of the Senate) resigned and thus broke the governing coalition at the end of 2000. The governmental attitude revealed to the public the existence of a “political class” in the strong sense of the word, that is, of “a caste that permanently recycles itself”, that involves “the whole political spectrum” (Male, 57, retailer, Asamblea Popular de Pompeya, with previous political experience), and that is at the base of a “system” that functions “unrelated to its specific function”. Politicians, especially those in the legislative branch, were thus perceived as representatives unable to represent since “they do not relate to us, to citizens’ opinions, and they do not comply with their basic purpose that is the common good. They form a closed circle aimed at the maintenance and the increase of their own power” (Female, 60, psychologist, Vecinos Indignados de Vicente López, without previous political experience). More than from the results of the judicial process, the relevance of the bribe scandal resulted from its verisimilitude for public opinion. In that sense, it was a moment of open visibility in which the gap became apparent between the idea of democracy as “government by the people” and its factual reality as “government by politicians”. Politicians that, in addition, were considered to be “all the same”: equally “corrupt”, “thieves” and “criminals”, according to the most frequent epithets. Only the opening of a window of opportunity was needed for the crisis to overtly explode.

That is what eventually happened when mid-term elections were held in October, 2001, barely twenty-four months after those 1999 elections characterized by mild optimism as Menem’s decade-long government drew to a close. How did the protest start? Explanations based on the sheer enumeration of damage are spectacular but ineffective. Numerous explanations indeed function on the assumption that an accumulation of “objective data” is sufficient as a cause for political and social mobilization. We nevertheless know –at least since Alexis de Tocqueville’s explanation for the eruption of revolution in France– that no “objective” information is enough without the intermediation of the imaginary and the construction of subjectivities. The abrupt fall of the national gross product,

the effects of successive adjustment policies that reached their peak in July in election year and the astronomic figures of unemployment and poverty reveal nothing by themselves. According to official data, in October, 2001 the unemployment rate was 18.3%, whereas underemployment reached 16.4%. Sixteen million of the thirty-six million inhabitants of the country were below the poverty line and more than five million had fallen below the line of extreme poverty. Now, why was the explosion to happen when unemployment hit, say, 20%? Why not earlier; why not later?

The key is to be found in the ways in which citizens process bare empirical data such as country-risk figures or unemployment and poverty rates. Throughout 2001 Argentina's country-risk mark had been constantly increasing. For some time the government tried to prevent the figure from surpassing the line that separated attraction of investment from capital flight. By the time the figure surpassed all limits, it had become a piece of basic information that any citizen apparently needed to know in order to leave their home every morning, as if it were the weather forecast –while only experts had known about its very existence only a few months earlier. The crisis was then perceived in the feeling that macro-level variables had direct and immediate effects on everybody's daily lives. The overwhelming sensation was that the news brought by the newspaper had the potential to overturn each individual's fate, which turned out to be in foreign, uncontrollable hands. As for unemployment and poverty data, what was at stake was the very self-image of Argentines, torn to pieces by the fact that there were hungry people in a country with a potential to feed the world. Television broadcasted images of starving children in the Northern provinces; Argentina started receiving donation shipments from the same European countries whose emigrants had populated its territory a century earlier; web sites started spreading among prosperous Europeans the idea of fostering an Argentine child so she could eat and attend school. It was then that Argentines suddenly realized that they were not as "European" as they had believed themselves to be: not only did Argentina belong indeed in Latin America, but it was also undergoing conditions that its middle class plainly identified with Africa. It was, in sum, the image that Argentines had of themselves and their future –which seemed to be suddenly cut off– which had changed. The collective state of mind had shifted from the euphoria of the nineties to plain self-denigration. This feeling was soon to have a vivid translation in the image of the hundreds who lined up at the doors of the Spanish and Italian Consulates to get a passport that was the promise of a fresh start in the land of their ancestors. The fact that many people left the country in precarious conditions was another translation of the reigning sensation that nowhere could things be worse.

Several months before the elections, the rejection that would become apparent in the polls –and later on in an extra-electoral and even an extra-institutional way– was in the air both in streets and in the virtual space of the web turned into a forum for citizen expression and communication. Dissatisfaction with the po-

litical offer abounded, as it was criticized for displaying the same old faces, the very senators suspected of receiving bribes in exchange for the passing of a law, the unknown people who occupied their congressional seats thanks to the widely criticized “blanket lists” (*listas sábana*) that nobody seemed to be really willing to get rid of; in sum, the same politicians that had long been participating, without partisan distinctions, in transactional activities resulting in the detour of large public funds and the distortion of their mission as representatives of the people. In that context, appeals by individual “common citizens” or by *ad hoc* citizen associations mushroomed to cast blank votes or to void the vote by using handmade fake ballots instead of the official ones –so as to “vote” for funny fictional characters or for respectable historical figures– or by placing in the envelope critical or insulting messages for politicians or any kind of object that could be used to express anger and dissatisfaction. Still others refused to sanction the reigning lack of options by abstaining: the so-called “Kilometer 501” group, for instance, planned to deceive the authorities by organizing collective excursions on election day to transport voters somewhere more than five hundred kilometers away from their voting places, therefore legally exempting them from their electoral duty.

The results of the election were attuned with this climate of opinion. Those who did not vote or cast some form of “negative” vote (void or blank) added up to more than 40% of all qualified voters, more than the added votes received by the two major political parties. Though it varied enormously from one district to another, abstention reached an unprecedented 24.58 % at a national level. Void and blank votes added up to 23.99 % of the votes cast for national representatives (13.23% and 10.76%, respectively). Those electoral behaviors –more accentuated within urban sectors and among those with a higher socioeconomic or educational level– were not an expression of apathy or lack of interest but they had –especially the former– an active and even “activist” character. The avalanche of void votes was indeed a novel occurrence. Blank votes had slowly but continuously increased since the restoration of democracy in 1983; a similar path had been followed by abstention, despite voting being compulsory. Until 2001, however, surveys showed that the main reasons for abstention were the lack of interest and time to sort out information rather than sheer rejection of politics due to its identification with corruption (Ferreira Rubio, 1998). That was still not a situation of crisis of representation, but the normal (though certainly precarious and volatile) state of affairs in the context of the new format of representation that had been established gradually since 1983 (Pousadela 2004, 2005). The transition from “party democracy” towards “audience democracy” –which we describe, following Bernard Manin (1992, 1998), as a “metamorphosis of representation”– implies indeed a series of transformations. Among them can be mentioned the personalization of political leaderships, the transformation of parties into de-ideologized electoral machines, the decline of the importance of party programs, the growing impact of the mass media –and of television in particular– as a scene where political events are produced, the consequent prevalence of image over the

debate of ideas, the decline of captive electorates and the fluctuation of the political preferences of voters, whose loyalties can no longer be taken for granted. It was this situation of apathetic normality that was shaken by the citizens' electoral behavior in October, 2001.

While electoral results and survey data in the previous twenty years had at all times adjusted to what was reasonable to expect in the context of audience democracy, the events that took place on October 14th, 2001 and in the following months took on a completely different shape. They constituted indeed a qualitatively different phenomenon: an authentic crisis of representation. From then on, the focus was redirected towards the relationship of representation and the mechanisms that seemed to make representatives "disloyal" from the very moment they became so; towards the "political class" rejected for its homogeneity, that turned political competition into a useless formality, as well as for its powerful corporate interests; and towards the search for alternatives to the conflictive relationship between representatives and represented.

Two months after the electoral cataclysm the extra-electoral outburst occurred. The process sped up since the beginning of December, when it became apparent that the national government would be unable to honor the service for the national debt due at the end of the year. The refusal by the IMF to unblock a new loan to make sure that those payments could be made and that the minimal expenses of the State apparatus could be covered provoked a huge capital flight. On December 3rd a decree was enacted that drastically limited cash withdrawals from banks; in no time, this policy came to be popularly known as the financial "corralito", named after the play pens that will not allow babies to escape from adult surveillance. A month later the parity between the peso and the dollar on which the stability of the economy had been built a decade earlier was already history, and savings trapped in banks had undergone a brutal devaluation. Thousands of million dollars, mostly held by big business, had nevertheless fled abroad. At the same time, strikes of civil servants continued to spread across the provinces demanding unpaid wages, converging with the demonstrations staged by the movements of unemployed workers who had already been out in the streets for a long time making themselves visible through *piquetes* (pickets) and *cortes de rutas* (roadblocks). On December 12th the first *cacerolazo* (pot-banging) took place in the city of Buenos Aires, starring middle-class citizens in protest for the freezing of their bank accounts. The next day, there was a general strike summoned by the three union federations (the two CGT –official and dissident– and the CTA). In the same week a national consultation also took place organized by the *Frente Nacional contra la Pobreza* (National Front against Poverty), an alliance of the CTA and some center-left and left wing parties. Its results surpassed the organizers' most optimistic predictions, as three million people expressed their support for the proposal of a universal unemployment benefit. On the 14th riots and looting took place in two important cities, Rosario and Mendoza, gradually spreading to other districts and arriving in the Great Buenos Aires three days

later. In the latter, the climate of confusion was additionally fed by the provocative intervention of the *peronist* party machine. Two days later, on December 19th, the riots and clashes with the police in Great Buenos Aires caused the first deaths, some of them at the hands of retailers seeking to defend their businesses, many others as a result of police repression. In various places there were strikes and demonstrations, mostly by public employees, which targeted not just the federal government but also provincial and municipal ones, most of them under *peronist* rule. Particularly violent street combats took place in several districts. Many of our interviewees recall the feeling that the situation had “exploded”, which happened to make them “responsible” for what came after. The prevalent thought was –in the words of a former assembly member from Lanús– that “everything was over, we needed to do something” (Female, 26, with no previous political experience). On that same night President De la Rúa pronounced a televised speech in which he denounced the “enemies of order and of the Republic”, threatened with repression, declared the state of siege and summoned the opposition –much too late– for “national unity”.

Pot-banging began in Buenos Aires as the President was still reading his speech, which many of our interviewees describe as “pathetic” and “autistic”. Once the speech was over, demonstrators began to converge spontaneously, holding their pots and pans, towards Plaza de Mayo, in an open and explicit challenge to the state of siege that had just been established. This particular element is underlined by most people interviewed, who concede comparatively less importance to the freezing of bank accounts and to the existence of a conspiracy to overthrow De la Rúa as an explanation for the mobilization.

The state of siege is indeed identified by our assembly members as “the legal symbol of military dictatorships” and “a memory of past times”. Its implantation “had a decisive weight as a trigger for the people’s response” (Male, 50, left wing activist), itself a result of “so many years of activism by human rights organizations [that] have left an indelible mark on the brain, or in some place of the collective unconscious” (Female, 38, Foro Social de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, with political and partisan experience). In that sense, the challenge to the state of siege signals the “closing of a historical phase that began with the dictatorship”. It was precisely that challenge which made it possible to re-signify and recover the national symbols that had been captured by the military: thus, for example, explains an interviewee that “I don’t like to sing the Argentine anthem, and I believe that night I sang it, because it was a different context” (Male, 49, journalist, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, exiled during the dictatorship).

In any case, most of our interviewees agree that it was precisely when the state of siege was announced that the noise of pots and pans began. A few hours later, already in Plaza de Mayo, the demand that would become the hallmark of the political protest, still incomplete, was initially heard: *que se vayan* (“go away”). At one in the morning on December 20th the resignation of the Minister of Economy demanded by demonstrators turned into fact. Six hours later it was

the President himself who left the *Casa Rosada* aboard a helicopter after signing his own resignation. For the first time in history, a government born out of free elections had been overthrown not by a military coup but by popular rejection expressed in the streets. It was, according to an assembly member who describes the day as “feverish”, “an unprecedented situation, [because] it seemed that the people were overthrowing a President” (Male, 32, photographer, Asamblea Gastón Riva, with little prior political experience).

The bulk of the literature devoted to the analysis of the events describes them in epic terms, as a situation of rupture after which nothing would remain the same. Under the same light they are viewed by many of the protagonists. Although not all of our interviewees went out on the night of the 19th, those who did unanimously describe their nightly outing as a “wonderful” and “extraordinary” moment and the events of those days as the “culmination of a great social process”, a “moment of rupture” or “a hinge in Argentine history”. However, whereas some try to capture their sense by means of the classic vocabulary of class struggle or by analogy with other, better-known historical processes, many more emphasize the absolute novelty of the phenomenon.

Among the many novelties, the participation of people with no prior political experience is systematically mentioned by our interviewees, who describe the population as previously “asleep” as a result either of the repression that took place in the seventies, or of the benefits yielded by economic stability in the nineties. “It reminded me of the film *Awakenings*”, points out a former member of an assembly in Flores. “[There was] an absolute paralysis, inertia (...) and suddenly people went out to the streets... I don’t think they will do that again, not even if their football team wins the cup” (Female, 38, with political and partisan experience). Among those who “went out” for the first time was a member-to-be of the Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia that views himself as part of “the social class favored by *menemismo*” (thus, although he “saw that things were not too well”, he did not react before “because it didn’t affect me”). “What happened on December, 19th and 20th”, he says, “was that I lost my innocence” (Male, 36, business administrator).

Also original was the fact that the openly questioned logic of representation was temporarily supplanted by the “logic of expression” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002:15). Mobilization on December 19th is indeed described as an “outbreak” or an “explosion”, and the state of siege is recognized as the window of opportunity that allowed for the free channeling of tiredness, anguish, fear or fury, among the many feelings repeatedly mentioned. It was all about “going out and protesting and making a catharsis. Something that seemed very tragic suddenly turned into a carnival” (Female, 29, sociologist, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, self-described as “independent”). Another member of the same assembly adds that “there were thousands and thousands of people in the streets, defying the state of siege, not knowing very well why they were there (...) There was a sensation of ‘wanting more’, although nobody knew very well of what” (Male, 49, journalist, with political experience in the ‘70s and ‘80s).

Along with the mainly expressive character of the demonstration, its spontaneous, self-summoned and unexpected nature is also systematically underlined. “It was a chain almost without an origin”, writes Horacio González, a well-known sociologist. “Nobody could say ‘I initiated this’, and in the *Bar Británico*, a few days later, people discussed: ‘I saw you and I began’.” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002:48). A member of an assembly in Flores reflects in the same way: “I said: ‘Who was the first to bang?’ As in a football stadium, who starts singing the song? There is someone who is the first one. Perhaps one day a saucepan’s lid fell and thus it began”. So spontaneous were the *cacerolazos* that in those days “nobody knew when the next one would come”, stresses another assembly member (Male, 49, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with prior political experience).

The act of challenge that was the nocturnal excursion of December 19th was also the celebration of a surprise: its protagonists were gained by the feeling that they were living through an historical event; the feeling of being dragged by an unexpected collective process that, at the same time, turned them into actors. “I was surprised, overwhelmed, moved as I passed by the neighborhoods and saw people coming out to their balconies; it was a moment of communion”, explains a member of the Asamblea Gastón Riva who says that at that precise moment he had the “feeling that I was living a historical moment, that I was *making* a historical moment” (Male, 32, with little previous political experience). A former member of the Asamblea de Pedro Goyena y Puán frames it the following way:

It is very strange to be conscious on the very moment that you are living something historical. (...) We felt that finally something was going on (...) That effervescence, that idea that life had a meaning (...) There was also uncertainty. We tried to be alert and not miss anything (Male, 43, with no previous political experience)

The same individuals who, in their role as an audience, had spent long hours following the evolution of the events on television; the same ones that had gathered in front of their screens to watch the last public appearance of the president declaring the state of siege and that soon –still as spectators– had moved towards windows and balconies so as to listen and watch what was going on outside; those individuals became actors at the very moment when, not knowing exactly why –or maybe knowing that but not knowing if their own motivations were in agreement with those of the others– they rushed to their kitchens to get a pot, a frying pan or bucket to hit, still from their windows. Those individuals became part of the multitude when they saw their neighbors –people that, according to many interviewees, they had never talked to before– with their pans at their respective doors and joined them, first from their own doors, soon on the street corner, later at some emblematic intersection or in the neighborhood park, and somewhat later, perhaps, on the way to Plaza de Mayo, or to the president’s residence in Olivos, or to the home address of the resigned Minister of Economics. “People went like

this, almost individually... not in a collective movement”, remembers a former assembly member of Palermo Viejo (Male, 65, with no previous political experience). Alone, TV sets remained on with nobody to watch them for hours, even for the whole night. The clothes worn by demonstrators, the company of young children and babies in strollers who now moved in groups along the streets was another sign of the unplanned character of the departure. There were no political parties, and only the national flag was to be seen. Another member of the same assembly recalls that “there were more people than placards, and placards were behind people and not the other way round” (Male, 48, unemployed and student, with brief previous political experience). “People did not shout political slogans, it was not the usual stuff”, ratifies another assembly member, also from Palermo (Male, 49, with long previous political experience).

The people who participated that day –acknowledges a former member of the same assembly– were “disorganized people, neighbors who barely recognized each other” (Female, 44). Interviewees who identify themselves as “common citizens” accept more naturally the spontaneous character of the events; by contrast, those with a greater activist experience tend to express doubts about it. They certainly recognize they were surprised by the first *cacerolazo*; some even say they went to bed after listening to the presidential speech or that at the moment they were at some holiday toast or somewhere in the company of other activists, none of whom knew how to react. “Some of us were not sure whether we had to go downstairs and outside. The activists were more like puzzled”, remembers one of them. “We activists arrived after the people... that is, after the first people who came out with no previous organization”. But they state that later on the same night, activism began to “operate” providing some form of organization. Others, however, refuse to believe that such a demonstration could even be possible without some kind of political direction. Says one of our party activists: “I have some doubts, as a result of the way I see politics, that mobilizations on the 19th were just the effect of spontaneity. I find it difficult to convince myself that there was nobody with the political vision to summon the mobilization” (Male, 50). Those doubts become apparent in the hesitations of language; a member of an assembly of San Cristóbal, for example, talks about the arrival of the “columns” of demonstrators at the Plaza to rapidly correct herself: “no, it was not organized in columns, we just came like this, and people converged”.

During the days of the protest a temporary suspension of previous social identities took place (Giarraca, 2003). Our interviewees refer to it by means of the description of the events as a “celebration” or a “carnival”, a vortex in which “you were not aware of time or of where you were” (Male, 29, student, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no previous political experience). Thus, under one and the same motto a chain of equivalence among extremely diverse demands and reclamations was knit. Central among them were the repudiation against a model of economic growth based on exclusion and the rejection of an inefficient, ineffective and corrupt political system. The slogan “*que se vayan todos*” (“ev-

erybody must go away”) that was for the first time uttered in those days included whichever unanswered complaint was in need of the identification of a culprit.

In contrast to the happy climate of the 19th, on the 20th Plaza de Mayo turned into a battlefield and a stronghold that some people wanted to occupy and others wanted to clear. “The spontaneity and the family-thing of the 19th”, says a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores “changed on the 20th when there was already an action by groups minimally politicized, but politicized still. There were people on their own, guys in suits throwing floor tiles, inflamed. But the presence was very strong of politicized groups, with no party banners” (Male, 33, party activist). “You could see four or five [acquaintances], the Mothers [of Plaza de Mayo], their head scarves... But the activism you know, that of my generation was not there”, tells an assembly member of Parque Patricios. “The one that confronted the cops was clearly another activism (...) The left was there, but it was outside the mayhem. (...) The left did not confront [the police]. And I saw how other people did: the *motoqueros*, the nonpartisan *piquetero* organizations (...) It was basically a rebellion of the underclass youth. (...) It was a popular rebellion, but a rebellion without a leadership” (Male, 54, with activist experience in the ‘70s). An “unruly” violence occupied the center-stage. It was an intense violence whose precedents could not be found in the guerrilla actions of the 70’s but “in soccer stadiums and in the rock concerts that took place in neighborhoods” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002:63), and also –as is mentioned by several interviewees– in the *piquetero* struggles and in *puebladas* (popular uprisings) such as those of Santiago del Estero (1993), Cutral-Có, Plaza Huincul (1996) and Corrientes (1999), where the repertoire of collective action that was now re-shaped in Plaza de Mayo was originally compiled. The final count of the two-day experience in December, 2001 included 35 people dead, 439 wounded and 3273 under arrest.

Despite the efforts made by various left wing political parties to lead them, those events did not have an author –that is, they were not summoned, started, guided, directed or controlled by anyone. “The main party leaders [of the left] were like me, drinking *mate* at home as they heard the noises”, states an interviewee. However, as a result of the activation of the cleavage separating the “commoners” and the “political class” and as an effect of the subsequent division of the political space into two antagonistic fields, the events did indeed produce a subject. One of an unprecedented amplitude and an undefined character, as roughly a third of Buenos Aires’ inhabitants participated in the cacerolazos and/or in the assemblies that followed.

After the president’s resignation, after the successive resignations of those who followed in the chain of succession and after two days of intense negotiations, the Legislative Assembly (that is, both chambers of Congress deliberating together in a special session) eventually appointed the Peronist governor of San Luis, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, as a substitute president with the mandate to rule until new elections were held on March, 3rd, 2002. A euphoric Rodríguez Saá was inaugurated on December 23rd and announced to the Legislative Assembly

the suspension of payments for the external debt and the country's subsequent fall into default (thus receiving the shameful applause of his congressional audience), the promise to create a million new jobs in a month, the maintenance of the peso-dollar parity along with the creation of a "national third currency" (therefore, a concealed devaluation), the end of the "*corralito*" that kept savings out of the reach of their proprietors, and the immediate initiation of the "productive revolution" that had been announced—but not undertaken—by President Menem in 1989. Once in his seat, the new president expressed his willingness—contrary to his mandate—to remain there until the end of the unfinished De la Rúa's term, that is, December 10th, 2003. Popular demonstrations resumed when it was announced, in open contradiction with the promises made the previous day, that the *corralito* was to be maintained, and when highly criticized former members of Menem's government were appointed to important posts. In that context, the peronist governors soon undermined the new president, who finally resigned on New Year's Eve. In the course of the protest against Rodríguez Saá the battle cry "*Que se vayan*" was transformed into the well-known, definite one "*Que se vayan todos*" ("Everybody must go"). In addition, a precision was added: "*Que no quede ni uno solo*" ("Not a single one should stay"). Indeed, neither union leaders nor judges were spared their share of public disbelief and rejection. What this *cacerolazo* made clear was how weak governments—and public figures in general—were once placed under the vigilant reflectors of an unusually alert citizenship that had already successfully *de facto* revoked their rulers' mandate and was ready to do it again if necessary.

On January 2nd, 2002 the Legislative Assembly appointed a new president: Eduardo Duhalde, former governor of the province of Buenos Aires, powerful leader of the *peronist* party machine in the district and, paradoxically, the same presidential candidate defeated in 1999 by Fernando De la Rúa, whose term he was now called to complete¹. At the time—recalls one of our interviewees—"a *cacerolazo* took place that was not so talked about in the media. It was a holiday, so it did not have as much of a repercussion, but I was near the Congress when the vote was going on and the noise of pots and pans was audible. It was a joke, to appoint him who came from the PJ (Partido Justicialista), from that mafia, he who had been with Menem and who had lost the election against De la Rúa" (Male, 29, sociologist, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no prior political experience).

In the process that led from De la Rúa's resignation to the relative stabilization of a substitute government around April, 2002 five presidents and six ministers of economy followed one another. During those months all kinds of conflicts took place: strikes and conflicts stemming from poverty, unemployment

1 Indeed, the Legislative Assembly entrusted Duhalde with the presidency until the end of 2003. Nevertheless, in June, 2002, after a police repression that caused the deaths of two young *piqueteros* in Avellaneda, Duhalde felt compelled to trim his mandate and called for an early election in April, 2003.

and hunger –pickets, roadblocks, food demands and lootings– converged with the protest of the impoverished and attacked middle-class who verified its veto power through the *cacerolazos* and, secondarily, through verbal and sometimes physical attacks against politicians –identified as the most prominent people responsible for the situation. Days were “so intense”; “presidents were replaced all the time”, remembers an interviewee. “With each change you went out to the Plaza; it was necessary to go there and exert pressure because the demand was for a Constituent Assembly” (Male, 43, artist and university professor, ex-Asamblea de Pedro Goyena y Puán, with no previous political experience).

THE ASSEMBLY MOVEMENT AS A RESPONSE TO AND A CATALYST OF THE CRISIS

The most novel and longest-lasting product of the events of December 19th and 20th, 2001 were the “popular” or “neighborhood” assemblies². Assemblies were the organizational by-product of the spontaneity of the insurrectional days and at their origin was the experience of power. Several assembly members indeed locate the origins of their own participation in that new feeling that “something could be done”:

It was not the seizure of power, nor the foundation of a party... I knew that I did not have a clear goal to reach; all I knew was that it was possible to participate in some way and generate a power that could change things. At that moment you felt you had a lot of power, because we had knocked two presidents down, we had another one in check, and also the Supreme Court (Male, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no previous political experience)

Power is here understood in Arendtian terms, as something that comes to exist when people meet through speech and action, that is to say, when people act out

2 Different assemblies adopted different denominations, in many cases after heated arguments about the profile that was to be given to them. As Rossi (2005) explains, the label of “neighbor assemblies” emphasizes the shift towards territorial organization by those that although no longer have a steady job able to produce solidarity and a feeling of belonging, still have a place of residence capable of creating new forms of solidarity. The term “popular assemblies”, on the other hand, underlines the re-articulation of “the people” as a subject. According to Rossi, the self definition of an assembly as “popular” is linked to an interpretation of December, 2001 as a context of crisis of the capitalist system or the neoliberal model and of representative democracy and “partidocracia”, and to an understanding of the slogan “*Que se vayan todos*” as the call for the creation of an alternative to those structures in crisis. By contrast, the self-named “neighborhood assemblies” tend to conceive the crisis as resulting from the persistent and excessive delegation of authority in a political system lacking effective mechanisms for accountability and citizen participation and control. Consequently, they interpret the “*Que se vayan todos*” in terms of the re-legitimization of political representation and the straightening of its mechanisms.

of common agreement. The assemblies –states a former member of one in Montserrat– appeared simply because “people met their neighbors, people joined others and said ‘we must do something’, because they had the feeling that on that day they had gone out and done something” (Female, 55). In fact, many assemblies were born in the same places and at the very moment when the self-summoned neighbors were taking part in the *cacerolazos*. A neighbor of Olivos explains:

Where do you have to go in order to shout at the president? To the presidential residence [in Olivos] (...) There people started saying ‘this is the assembly of Olivos, the assembly of Olivos’, and the same neighbors continued to meet once and again and that’s it...

Another interviewee recounts that the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Parque Avellaneda “started, the same as the others, being a spontaneous group of neighbors who met to go to the *cacerolazos* in Plaza de Mayo together. (...) After two weeks of going to the *cacerolazos* (...) the idea started to emerge, on the way back, that we should meet prior to the demonstrations, maybe an hour before, so as to plan. Thus, we first started being an assembly so as to discuss how we would go to the *cacerolazos*; and then other conversations started to arise” (Male, 41, with union experience). The perception that power resides in being together explicitly emerges in the discourse of an assembly member who explains that what was valuable in the first encounter was just “the commitment to meet again” (Male, 45, employee, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo).

In spite of emphasizing the “spontaneous” character of the mushrooming of the assemblies, many of our interviewees accept the fact that they were indeed summoned by somebody. What they underscore, instead, is that the summoning was done by “common neighbors” like themselves, often with little or no prior political experience, who simply took the initiative to write a poster or to print and distribute a flyer so as to originate something that would soon grow through the voluntary decision of each adherent, by its own impulse and without any directions or leaderships. According to many, spontaneity conferred a “genuine” character to a movement that is repeatedly characterized as “arisen from below” and at the back of political parties and leftist activists and organizations, who happened to be distracted, looking in a different direction. “Although I had political experience” –states a journalist– “I did not summon my assembly; four people with no experience did. (...) All my political experience notwithstanding, I could not see the phenomenon coming, while they, without any political experience, could and did take the initiative” (Male, 49, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo).

Also mentioned once and again is the fact that “people” were then available to respond to this kind of call: what was extraordinary was

not the fact that somebody summoned, but the fact that so many people responded. More important than the call itself was indeed the fact that the process was not controlled or directed by anybody. As is explained by two assembly members:

Assemblies were relatively spontaneous. It is just as with the chant in the football stadium: it is organized during the week. The thing is whether you are allowed to sing it, whether everybody wants to learn it and whether they sing it when you tell them... It is the same here. The assemblies were summoned. (...) [But] just try to summon an assembly with a couple of flyers and gather three hundred people out there in the street... (Male, 47, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, with political experience)

You found little signs, 'we neighbors will meet'. Evidently those signs had to come from somewhere. (...) [There were] organizers. However, this is just anecdotal. (...) What made the difference was the presence of neighbors who wanted to participate, who felt deceived, unrepresented (Female, 50, Asamblea de Álvarez Jonte y Artigas)

Other interviewees maintain that their assemblies were summoned by preexisting organizations: those are the cases of the Asamblea Popular de Liniers –whose foundations, says one of its members, were set a week before December 19th, when the retailers of the district staged a protest in Plaza de Mayo–; the assemblies of both Palermo Viejo and Congreso –which recognize their origins in the actions of a group of people who had been mobilized for more than a year outside the Congress in demand for an impeachment process against the Supreme Court–; and the Asamblea Gastón Riva in Caballito, summoned from a *Centro Cultural* (Cultural Center). A few interviewees state that their respective assemblies were “proposed” by some political party, such as the Partido Obrero, or by individual activists belonging to some organization. More numerous, however, are those who emphasize that the initiative –both in the case of “common neighbors” and of activists– took place as the result of the “demonstration effect” caused by other assemblies already in place. That is, they contend that the first assemblies were doubtless “spontaneous” in the referred sense of the term and that “others were later formed by parties, on the wave of the already existing ones. [But] there was already an objective process going on” (Male, 34, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, with prior political experience). Accounts such as the following are thus common enough:

[One day] I found an assembly on the corner of Castro Barros and Rivadavia. The road was blocked and there were twenty or thirty people shouting with a megaphone, and I stayed (...) I mentioned it to friends

and to the *compañeros* (fellow activists) in the neighborhood and two or three days later we saw the same thing going on in Cid Campeador. It was then that we decided to organize one in Flores. We put up a couple of posters summoning people to Plaza Aramburu (...) We thought that maybe somebody would show up, and we found out that we were two hundred. (...) We who had summoned introduced ourselves as neighbors and acted as chairpersons. (...) We used the same methodology that we had seen in other places (Male, 33, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, party activist)

Once the assemblies had been born, the *cacerolazos* could be replicated thanks to the organizational resources they had put into motion, but for that same reason they started to lose spontaneity, since it was increasingly the assemblies themselves who summoned and tried to coordinate them. As the *cacerolazos* that had preceded them, therefore, the assemblies were soon charged with two opposite accusations: on one hand, the motive that was supposed to be at the roots of their actions –that is, the rejection of the *corralito*– was denounced as despicable or spurious; on the other hand, they were denounced as left wing hideouts with shameful political motivations.

The unacceptable character of “material” and “bourgeois” motivations as springs for political action is internalized by most of the interviewees, who thus typically insist in denying the first accusation. As for the second one, it has to be said that although the assemblies were often propelled, maintained, colonized or manipulated by political organizations, the attempts at cooptation and manipulation tended to be fiercely resisted by those who –self-defined either as “non-political”, “nonpartisan”, “indifferent to ideologies” or believers in politics understood as a creative activity as opposed to its degradation in the hands of professional politicians and activists– were sincerely looking for a genuine form of self-organization and deliberation. The persistent presence within the assemblies of activists from left wing political parties and their tendency to manipulate debates and to introduce and advance their own agendas is also denounced by several assembly members as one of the main reasons for the drain of “neighbors” and the assemblies’ subsequent decline. A young member of the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo illustrates it the following way:

The neighbors were all here, we were about a hundred and twenty, [everything was] very nice until we started to notice who was speaking with the microphone, who shouted or who did not let others speak or tried to impose his own views. Coincidentally, they all belonged to certain parties. We started to talk about it and a whole reaction was set up to prevent cooptation from taking place. But that was a strategy that was

commonly used by leftist parties. Because the assemblies were a creative, spontaneous social attempt: no visionary from the avant-garde came here to say ‘this has to be done’. But once they existed they wanted to seize them. (...) Some [participants] admitted that they belonged to parties and others did not, but we uncovered them. [It was] a complicated thing to do (Female, 29, sociologist, with little prior political experience)

“Some of us were acquainted with those practices because we had also embraced them in the past”, states a member of the *Asamblea de Palermo Viejo* (Male, 49, with prior political and partisan experience, currently an anti-globalization activist). “We who had some experience with that” –recalls an assembly member from Flores– “were all day identifying them. They all came to the assemblies, and a feeling grew that still persists among the population: a rejection against the party model and structures. You could not mention that you belonged to a party” (Male, 47, with prior political and partisan experience). Explains another politically experienced assembly member of *Palermo Viejo*:

In the second or third meeting, a youth came who evidently had political experience and said ‘we must organize committees and begin to give ourselves some structure’. The majority did not want anything structured. (...) The mistake made by most leftist parties [was] not to understand that they were facing a novel phenomenon and that they were not the avant-garde but marched at the rearguard instead. (...) They bear a strong responsibility for the decline of the assemblies, because they introduced debates that people were not interested in, debates related to their own political characterization of the situation. Each leftist party tried to push the assembly towards their side, because there was a competition among left-wing parties to see who had more assemblies. They thought that [the assemblies] were soviets that needed to be led.

Praised by those who saw them as a superior evolutionary stage after the spontaneous *cacerolazos* and criticized by those who considered them as the cause for the loss of the vigor and the innocence of the spontaneous, the assemblies were undoubtedly one of the most novel practices grown amidst the heat of the representation crisis that had so violently erupted towards the end of 2001. The assembly movement contained an unusual revealing power of the nature of the crisis from which it had emerged as well as a potential for innovation beyond the dominant political practices. The assemblies were sites for the production both of discourse about a highly problematic representative bond and of political practices directed towards the search either of complements or of alternatives to the current practices of political representation. In other words, its proliferation around the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002 can be simultaneously understood as a symptom of the crisis of representation (and of the economic and social crisis as well) and –due to its nature as a producer of discourse and

practices related to representation— as a factor leading to the further denunciation and deliberate deepening of that crisis.

The assemblies were not as massive as the *cacerolazos* had been, because—unlike the latter— they demanded from their members time, patience, rhetorical abilities, organizational skills and/or interest in political debate. Participation in the *cacerolazos* was accessible to anyone: the only requisite was to have some reason for complaint and to go out with a pan to express it in a space that did not have nor could have had any hierarchy, as there would be in the assemblies as soon as “natural leaderships” began to emerge. However, less than three months after December 19th the number of assemblies had already surpassed a hundred in the city of Buenos Aires, with a similar number in the Great Buenos Aires. Between January and February, 2002 forty assemblies had also been founded in the province of Santa Fe, approximately ten in Córdoba and seven more in four other provinces. Still, the assembly movement is described by our interviewees as a “phenomenon of the capital city [of Buenos Aires]”. “We cannot say that it was a national process, because it was not so, but at the moment it did have national connotations because it was widely amplified and expanded from a political point of view” (Male, 47, retailer, Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with large political experience).

Despite its low quantitative incidence—retrospectively admitted by numerous interviewees, who speak of dozens or maybe a hundred members in neighborhoods with tens of thousands inhabitants— the prevailing feeling throughout the first weeks of assembly life was that “anything could happen”, that “any change was possible”. “It had a multiplying effect, people came, invited neighbors, printed flyers”, explains a former member of the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo (Female, 44, with no prior political experience). “You walked by the neighborhoods and found assemblies here and there”, recounts a former member of the Asamblea de Flores Sur. “It was impressive, everybody took part in an assembly, you went on the subway and you met the same people that you met at the *Interbarrial*, and it was quite a strange feeling, an effervescence” (Female, 38, with prior political and partisan experience). At the same time, however, many of those assembly members were already aware of the limits of the process as they found difficulties in mobilizing the people who were not yet mobilized:

What we saw as we walked [during demonstrations] is that people were on the balconies, they waved but remained there. There was no way to get them down to the street (...) There was a slogan those days that went: ‘Turn the TV off and come out’. One of the memories I have is of the buildings along Rivadavia Avenue with the windows open. The country [was] in flames and people [were] comfortably watching television. It is a terrible image; it made us angry and impotent when we saw that people did not react (Male, 43, Asamblea de Pedro Goyena y Puán, with no prior political experience)

As far as their composition, procedures and mechanisms (more or less horizontal, more or less pluralistic) were concerned, the assemblies were so different

from each other and internally heterogeneous as the concert of pans had been³. Their initiatives were varied and diverse as well, ranging from the publishing of newspapers and bulletins or the broadcasting of radio programs to the organization of “*escraches*” (graffiti protests) against politicians or the organization, coordination and participation in diverse forms of protest, and including the opening of soup kitchens, the organization of communitarian food purchases, the elaboration and distribution of all kinds of goods through local cooperatives aiming both at promoting self-sufficiency and autonomy and at preserving or creating jobs. Their mottos and demands were also as wide and diverse as the *cacerolazos*’ had been: general elections now, support for the *piquetero* movement (through the slogan “*piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola*” –“pickets and pans, the struggle is the same one”), participatory budgeting, the creation of mechanisms for decision-making by neighbors at the local level, the nationalization of the banking system, the re-nationalization of previously privatized utilities companies, the decision not to pay the external debt, the removal of Supreme Court Justices, the revocation of all mandates and the summoning of a National Constituent Assembly, the end of the “*corralito*”, various reclamations to local and provincial governments (ranging from the cession of physical space for meetings and activities to the yielding of food or medicine for distribution). Among them it was possible to identify concrete and immediate demands related to the social crisis; classic vindications of small leftist parties, such as the rejection of the obligations derived from the external debt; demands stemming from the negative re-interpretation of the structural reforms undertaken throughout the nineties; and, last but not least, many others that were the direct expression of the crisis of representation.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND THE ASSEMBLIES ACCORDING TO THEIR MEMBERS

The discourse produced by the assemblies on the issue of political representation also varied widely. It included reformist stances in demand of a renovation that could “clean” the representative system of its evils and allow it to function correctly, as well as radically contesting positions based on the idea that representative devices were inherently evil as they had been designed precisely with the aim of moving the people away from a power that was rightly theirs but that makes domination unstable when exercised.

In the next pages we try to elucidate what political representation meant for assembly members; how doomed they thought it was; what their demands were in relation to its unfulfilled promises; and what alternatives they perceived. Did they demand a “more representative” democracy? Or, on the contrary, did they want to turn democracy into a “more direct” one? In other words: how did assembly-

3 In the city of Buenos Aires, however, the assemblies’ socioeconomic profile was defined enough: they existed in greater quantities in middle- and upper middle-class districts such as Belgrano, Almagro, Palermo and Flores.

members reflect about their own assemblies? How did they understand the relationships they maintained with political parties and government institutions? Did they think of the assemblies as an alternative or as a supplement to other forms of mediation between society and the state? Did they accept the possibility of developing their activities within the framework of the existing representative institutions? Did they consider them as an additional and more effective form of “citizen control”? Did they perceive in them some echo of other well-known participatory experiences, such as the Brazilian participatory budgeting? Did they allow for any space for representation, or did they radically reject all forms of representation? Did they propose any specific practices at the neighborhood level that could make it possible to completely get rid of the distance between the rulers and the ruled?

QUE SE VAYAN TODOS

The motto “*Que se vayan todos*” (QSVT) first uttered on the rebellious final days of 2001 has ever since been subject to a great variety of journalistic, academic and political interpretations. Those interpretations are continuously framed and re-framed by assembly members, who thereby relate in quite different ways to the system of political representation.

A bulky set of interviewees maintains that the QSVT must be literally interpreted. Nevertheless, few of them state that the slogan simply demanded that “absolutely all of them” went away so as “to start anew right now” (Female, 36, ex-Asamblea de Flores Sur, with limited prior political experience). Instead, the vast majority gives some specification as for the content of the expression “all”, which usually translates as “all those who hold seats”, “the politicians of the system”, “the corrupt, treacherous politicians” or “the ones that have always ruled us”. Others take a little step further to state that “all” those that should go were “the members of the political corporation, the judges” or those who held positions in “the three branches of the system”. What the slogan demanded was –as an assembly member of Almagro puts it– that “not only the politicians who have always ruled us and still do” should leave, “but also the whole political class, supposedly representative of the citizenry, which means all political institutions, the Church, unions... the whole old way of doing politics based on clientelism, on the idea that ‘I give you this money, now vote for me’” (Male, 36, with no prior political experience). In that sense, the target was “old politics” and the reclamation was, as some make it explicit, of a “renovation of parties” (Female, 50, Asamblea de Álvarez Jonte y Artigas, with little prior political experience). This reclamation stretched to include, after the assemblies’ experience, also the parties of the left, even though the latter “do not feel that the message concerns them, they [behave] as if they had nothing to do with it” (Male, 65, ex-Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no prior political experience)⁴.

4 The left is the target of accusations of a different nature from those directed against the rest of the parties, blamed for colonizing the state apparatus with its cor-

Among those who interpret the slogan literally are those who no longer apprehend it in terms of a “renovation”—understood either as the replacement of the people in charge or as the substitution of the old criticized practices— but in terms of the replacement of the system of representation with “another democracy”, described by some as “direct”, by others as “participative” and still by others as “more representative” than the existing one. The refusal to interpret the slogan as a demand for a “mere exchange of faces” is in many cases explicit; thus, for example, a former member of the Asamblea de Lanús declares that QSVT meant “that all the rulers had to go away but also that nobody had to come to take their place (...) [Although] I cannot imagine what it would be like to be organized that way” (Female, 32, with brief prior political experience). In the words of an assembly member from Parque Avellaneda:

[QSVT] is a slogan-guideline for the construction of a popular force of a different type. In that sense it seems to us that the model of Mosconi is the most advanced in our country. It seems to us that there are other models to study, such as that of Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement, the Zapatistas, the Colombian guerrilla, the coca growers in the territories where they function as a real popular power (Male, 41, with union experience)

Generally speaking, this position involves the vision of assemblies as an alternative to representative democracy. In the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo—remembers one of its members “the phrase had been extended by saying ‘Everybody should go away, we’ll be in charge’” (Female, 65, with no prior political experience). The same extended phrase is cited by an assembly member from Pompeya, for whom it conveyed a clear message to politicians: “you cannot administer anything anymore”. “Politicians”, he explained, “are dreadful. In thirty

rupt, clientelistic practices. According to most of our interviewees, the left has sinned by default, due to its inability to take advantage of “historical opportunities”. Says, for example, a member of the Asamblea de Álvarez Jonte y Artigas that leftist parties “are responsible for the fact that nobody has gone away, for the fact that a popular force was not formed”, that is, “for the inexistence of a popular organization representing the population” (Female, 50, with brief prior political experience). “I do not have anything against the left, I also consider myself a leftist”, explains an assembly member of Pompeya, “[but] the left let go of a historical opportunity to create an alternative with the assembly movement” (Male, 57, with prior political experience). Consequently, the fact that they have not had power with which to do wrong does not exempt the left from its share of responsibility; on the contrary, it is held accountable for its very inability to build power. As one of our interviewees reminds us, we are talking about parties that obtain less than 1% of the vote, which means that “they do not have a very positive sense of [political] construction”. The same inability is apparent in their behavior within the assemblies, guided by the objective of recruiting a handful of new activists rather than of carrying on any tangible project (Male, 65, ex-Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no prior political experience).

years they have not found the solution. They prostituted the branches of the government, they led 50% of the people under the poverty line, and corruption is structural” (Male, 57, with prolonged prior political experience).

A second set of interviewees, equally numerous as the first one, attaches to the QSVT a metaphorical sense, that is, a figurative, non-literal meaning that eases the comprehension of the phenomenon in question. In the words of a former member of the *Asamblea de Montserrat*:

[QSVT was] a metaphor like that of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, ‘*Aparición con vida*’ (‘Reappearance with life’). That is, everybody knows that they are dead, but ‘Reappearance with life’ is the slogan, the strong line, and this ‘*Que se vayan todos*’ seems similar to me, because I personally cannot believe... Who has to go away? How? Why? Who stays? And who will come instead? (Female, 55, with prior political experience)

As a metaphor, two main characteristics are attributed to the slogan. On one hand, a great capacity of symbolizing weariness, disgust and rejection towards representatives, the representative system and even the “system” as a whole. It was, according to various present and former assembly participants, “a catharsis through refusal”, “a shout of protest and [a way] of setting a position”, “a cry of revolt”. It was “just an expression, a way of saying ‘we are fed up of this and we still do not know how to change it; we are simply fed up and we show it’”, says a member of the *Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores* (Male, 33, party activist). “It was very visceral”, confirms a former member of the *Asamblea del Botánico*. “There was no deeper analysis than that. It was a rebellion cry, like a rubber that you stretch to its maximum to see how much it bounces back. It did not stretch much because in fact they are all still here...” (Male, 48, unemployed, with limited prior political experience).

On the other hand, the slogan is characterized by its synthetic power and its inclusive potential. It was “a synthesis like those that fans make in soccer matches”, according to a member of an assembly of Flores who provides the following explanation:

[The phrase] was coined in the streets. ‘Everybody should go away’ means ‘That’s enough!’ It is a translation, it is not literal. It does not mean that we are going to go and kill the referee’s mother, no. (...) It was a simple phrase: it didn’t mean that all of them had to go, all, all, all, all the sons of a bitch who negotiate behind the backs of the people, who profit as much as they do, who live isolated, who work against the interests of the already damned, who don’t give a damn about anybody, who keep indebting the country (...) Some of us said ‘Let’s go further, let’s make the revolution’, [there were] others who wanted superficial reforms, but the ‘*Que se vayan todos*’ included us all (Male, 47, *Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores*, with political experience)

Some interviewees consider the amplitude of the slogan to be a positive trait as it allowed it to encompass diverse reclamations; they also contend that the phrase becomes

a “double-edged sword” when literally understood. Others, however, use the very same expression to refer to the dangers involved in a slogan so “vague” and “diffuse” so as to encompass everybody, and therefore ready to be “appropriated by the right”.

Our interviewees –both those who understand the phrase in some literal way and those who emphasize its metaphorical character– are also divided as to whether they think the slogan is still valid, if it ever was so. In fact, some of them claim that they never supported it or that they stopped doing so long ago, for one of many reasons: its irresponsible, insufficient, excessive or negative character, or the obvious inevitability of its failure. There are also some (few) who reject the first part of the phrase –the passivity of the idea that *they* should go away– when in fact, they say, it was necessary that *we* got rid of them all. Conversely, others (also in small numbers) oppose the idea that *everybody* should go away based on the argument that not all politicians are the same. “There were people [in Congress] who, from my point of view, had performed well (...) I [even] suspected that [the slogan] might have been invented by the right so as to create a situation in which everything was mixed, everything was put at the same level”, suggests a former assembly member from Caballito (Male, 43, with no prior political experience).

As for the “irresponsible” character of the slogan, it is affirmed with at least two different senses. On one hand, the expression is considered to be irresponsible in that “it locates responsibility outside us. [That way] nothing gets fixed. [It is as when we say] ‘I did not vote for him’, ‘I do not have anything to do with it’, ‘It has been like that for a long time’” (Female, 23, student, ex-Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with little prior political experience). The slogan is also denounced as a “whim”, a result of the temporary urgencies of “the same people [who now] go to the demonstrations [in demand for a “zero-tolerance” policy against crime] led by Blumberg” (who is systematically identified by the interviewees as “rightist”) (Female, 26, ex-Asamblea de Lanús, with no prior political experience). On the other hand, the phrase is considered to be a product of the “unconsciousness”, the “lack of thought” about the results of its eventual application. “You can’t tell everybody to go away because if you are governed then comes Mr. George W. [Bush] and tells you: ‘I will rule for you’”, says a former member of the Asamblea de Olivos (Female, 45, volunteer in a popular library, with political experience and party affiliation). However, the most common reference to the irresponsibility of the phrase –described as “ridiculous”, “childish”, “misadjusted”, “impulsive” and “meaningless” – appears in between interrogation marks: “If everybody goes away, who is going to come?” The question is frequently asked alongside the ascertainment of the assemblies’ failure at “occupying the space” of those who had to go, and/or of the failure of “the people” at organizing an alternative and rising up to the challenge that was the result of their own demands.

The phrase is denounced either for its excessive (and, therefore, impossible) character or for its insufficiency. “Nobody went away”, states a member of the Asamblea Gastón Riva. “These all-or-nothing positions are all the same, and it ends up this way. We wanted everything and we got nothing” (Male, 32, with

little prior political experience). Those who consider the slogan to be insufficient, on the other hand, are mostly party activists and assembly members with a vast prior political and partisan experience who criticize the alleged reformist stance of the vast majority of the mobilized citizenry:

[The slogan] said ‘all politicians should go away’, but it did not say [that] the parliamentary system is an indirect system of delegation of politics and that as long as you vote for somebody who is not revocable and can do whatever he wants in between elections, it is a great political renunciation. (...) The assembly wanted everybody to go away but it did not want to change the system (Male, 47, member of the Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with experience in activism)

The insufficiency of the slogan is also linked to its “exclusively negative” character. Consequently, the lack of a “positive” alternative is pointed out as a problem by many assembly members—mostly party activists—who claim to have tried to solve it by organizing groups parallel to the assemblies whose aim was to allow for “strategic political discussion”.

In any case, the majority of our interviewees consider that as for its practical effects, the slogan was a failure. “Nothing changed”, “nobody went away”, “little changed so nothing fundamental was changed” are some of the expressions typically used. A few people, however, affirm that assemblies were instrumental in changing the vision of previously passive citizens and in creating a sort of state of alert, as well as greater sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of the government elected in 2003. The latter is indeed recognized by many as having picked up through words and deeds the heritage left by the demands originally put forward by *caceroleros* and *asambleístas*.

ASSEMBLIES AND REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS

The relationship with the local government

A minority of our interviewees emphatically affirm that their assemblies maintained no relationship with the *Centro de Gestión y Participación* (CGP)⁵ in the neighborhood because they wanted to remain faithful to the QSVT, thus rejecting all relationship with the government, political parties and institutions in general. A member of an assembly of Flores recalls:

5 These Centers for Administration and Participation are decentralized administrative units of the city government of Buenos Aires where neighbors can process paperwork, have access to social, cultural or educational services, make denunciations about violated rights or make reclamations related to public services and utilities companies. The CGPs are announced on the local government’s web page as “a channel for neighbors’ participation through different mechanisms that promote collective agency and the concerted search for solutions” and as “a tool for the effective control of the administration” (<http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areadecentralization>).

We were all quite radicalized. There was a committee for institutional relations that was stigmatized as the ‘right wing’ of the assembly. First thing they wanted to do was to enter into a relationship with the CGP, the Church and the police. Can you imagine, at that time... The police had been repressing us for a month, the CGP did not even exist for us, the government was an empty shell and the Church was not considered to be a progressive institution open to dialogue (Male, 34, with brief prior political experience)

In contrast, many others declare that their assemblies went through severe internal conflict about whether to accept or reject anything offered by the CGP; about whether to make requests, or demands, or even to “just go and seize” whatever resources were considered to belong to “the people” by their own right –such as a place to meet. Still more numerous are those who categorically maintain that their assemblies had some kind of relationship with the CGP or with the city government (and, to a lesser extent, with other institutions). Those relations were, according to the majority, “unavoidable”, of a utilitarian nature and based on “permanent demand”. From this perspective, the CGP was a mere source from which diverse resources could be “obtained” or, better still, “taken”; a place where requests or demands could be directed and that could be repudiated or even attacked if demands were not appropriately met. This sort of relationship is frequently (though not always) defined as “conflictive”⁶. Only a handful of interviewees describe a relationship that was “friendly” or “adult” due to a certain ideological affinity, to “governmental good will”, to the recognition by the assembly of some virtue in certain official policies, or to mutual respect. The obtaining of resources (physical space, food to distribute or to feed the soup kitchen, social plans, housing subsidies, etc.) or of favorable decisions such as the recognition and legalization of assemblies’ activities are consequently understood mainly as the effect of the “struggle” led by the assemblies and of their “pressures” on a government depicted either as in need of “cleaning its public image” or as “scared” by social convulsion. A member of the Asamblea de Parque Avellaneda recounts:

We had a meeting with people from the department of food policies. [It was] the first time that we had contact with government officials. At that time people in the city government were scared, and whenever they felt threatened by the possibility of a demonstration they just

6 In some cases the relationship with the government and parties was even seen as “dangerous” for at least two reasons. Firstly, this relationship caused -according to several interviewees- “bossy tendencies” in some assemblies and resulted in the co-optation of assembly members by parties and governmental structures. Secondly, the availability of resources coming from the government faced many assemblies with a dilemma that produced severe internal conflicts. Should they receive and distribute, let’s say, food supplies? In case they did, would they be able to do it in such a way that did not contradict their convictions opposed to clientelism and “old politics”?

threw [food] boxes to you out of the window. (...) So thirteen assemblies went to see them and we told them that we had soup kitchens and many social services, that we needed food and [asked them whether they preferred to have a good or a bad relationship with us]. So we got periodical deliveries of food, and later we demanded premises to work in (Male, 41, with union experience)

Besides the relationship of permanent demand already described, other interviewees refer to a more stable involvement within the framework of certain governmental initiatives –particularly the so-called “participatory budgeting” and the Bill of Communes. Again, two approaches can be identified, one more sincerely involved with the process and another one of a more instrumental nature. Most of our interviewees identify with the latter. Among assembly members who responded to the abovementioned government initiatives, the vast majority recognizes that they did it in full knowledge that they were “a big farce” or a “mockery of participative democracy”. They did so, then, as a means of accumulating power or achieving other aims unrelated to the process itself. “We want to rule”, says a member of the Asamblea de San Telmo. In order to achieve it “we took advantage of all resources available, even the most despicable ones. Such as participatory budgeting” (Male, 51). The usefulness of which resides, according to a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, in that “it is an institutional device that gives us the chance to talk to the people in the neighborhood” (Male, 34, with political experience). According to a member of its homonym of Parque Avellaneda, its usefulness was located in it being a sort of echo chamber that allowed for unrelated reclamations to be expressed and heard (Male, 41, with union experience).

Few interviewees give some credit to the government’s initiatives and find them a real possibility for the democratization of the political system. An assembly member of Castro Barros and Rivadavia, for instance, says he regularly worked “jointly with the Committee for Decentralization of the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires” based on the idea that it was possible to introduce “more direct mechanisms of democratic participation [because] to go and vote once every two years is useless” (Male, 36, with no prior political experience). In the same vein, a member of the Espacio Asambleario de Parque Patricios explains that “the City of Buenos Aires has the most progressive Constitution in the country, where participative democracy is mentioned” (Male, 54, with wide political experience); that is the reason why it was worth the trouble of taking part in the process in order to see how much could be obtained from it. The outcome is, nevertheless, most often negatively evaluated:

[The de-centralization of the city government through communes] ended up being codified at the time of the assemblies' decline, [so] what was left of [it] is very limited: it grants the neighbor very little influence on decisions. He is consulted, but he does not decide. (...) Those are the participation mechanisms recommended by the World Bank, which seek to involve people but keep decisions within the centers of power. People are involved so they believe they participate and decide while in fact there is manipulation (Male, 47, member of the Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with prior political experience)

Assemblies tend to be considered as an alternative to the local government by those who take the greatest distance from it, and particularly by those among them who have more political experience and belong to assemblies that identify themselves as "popular" rather than "neighbors". For this subgroup of interviewees assemblies were a sort of "counter power" or "double power". On one hand, they underline that in the midst of the crisis the assemblies took upon themselves a series of functions that were in fact the government's job. On the other hand, they mention the fact that many neighbors would resort to the assemblies as if they really were the government. Some conclude that it is precisely the experience thus gained that helped their assemblies build governmental capabilities:

[The education and health committees] started studying the law in order to change it (...) They tried to get involved with the problems of life, with the real problems that all neighbors had. There were potential elements of a double power. There is a power that is institutional, the one of the state; and there is another power of a popular type that is built from below (Male, 47, Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with prior political experience)

We were a counter power at the time. There were people who came to us and raised issues as if we were a government office (...) They did not go to the CGP, they came to us in order to ask for things that were obviously processed in the CGP (Female, 38, ex-Asamblea de Flores Sur, with prior political experience)

[Lists the varied activities developed by his assembly] That is, we must get ready for one day (...) to be able to administer the government. [So we need] to learn how things are done. And believe me, we are at present in a situation, I don't know if to administer the city, but to handle a commune for sure" (Male, 57, Asamblea Popular de Pompeya, with prior political experience)

The fact that neighbors resorted to the assemblies to find solutions to their problems, however, is not necessarily interpreted as a sign that assemblies were treated as if they were "the neighborhood's govern-

ment”, as one interviewee puts it. In fact, other interviewees interpret that occurrence as a sign that assemblies were a kind of “neighbors’ union”, a “different point of reference” who acted on behalf of neighbors and was recognized as such by the local CGP (Male, 54, Asamblea de Parque Patricios, with political experience).

The need for the State

Above the intention of occupying the state apparatus, eliminating it and/or replacing it a demand predominates among our interviewees that the State fulfill its due functions. In fact, strictly anarchist interpretations of the QSVT are almost if not completely absent; instead, there are numerous indications of the importance that is attributed to the State. Some even admit that it might not be so desirable after all that everybody goes away. That is the case of the former member of the Asamblea de Pedro Goyena y Puán who remembers that on December 20th, 2001, he was scared when “seeing those people break the door and enter the Congress building (...) It gave me the idea that everybody had left (...) There was governmental chaos and nobody was in charge of keeping the situation under control (Male, 43, with no prior political experience).

The need for a State capable of encompassing and regulating the social realm is raised in the first place through a stark contrast with the limitations found by the assemblies:

We think that there must be a State that establishes a law (...) Self-employment and other similar programs [undertaken by assemblies] are nonsense if not accompanied by an integral policy by the State (Male, 41, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Parque Avellaneda, with union experience)

We are not against the State; we want a State that is for us, which is a different thing. (...) The State must be present in people’s lives; it must come back from its retreat. As citizens we demand the presence of a State that is there to make regulations, that is really in charge of public affairs (Female, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo)

From this perspective, assemblies are seen as *ad hoc* solutions found by neighbors in a context of “neglect and the desertion by the State, in hospitals, in schools” (Female, 50, Asamblea de Álvarez Jonte y Artigas, with brief political experience).

The need for the State is additionally recognized, after the assemblies’ experience, as a result of the discovery that “voluntarism has limits”, as an assembly member puts it. Particularly noteworthy is the newly acquired recognition of the need for professional politicians, that is, for individuals whose main occupation is related to public affairs,

which is not within constant reach for “common citizens”. Typically, our interviewees start describing the routine of an average assembly member during the peak months of the movement as “very demanding”, “tiring” and “exhausting”, since when adding up plenary sessions, committee meetings, mobilizations and all other activities, “you were there all week long”. “Normal” tasks and relationships –work, home, study, family and friends prior to those made in the assembly– were temporarily neglected; “you lived for the assembly”, they claim. “It is necessary to be there twenty-four hours a day and people also need to live their lives”, explains an activist from Pompeya (Male, 57, with prior political experience). “We are not wage-earning politicians. Going to these meetings or doing solidarity work implies effort and time for people who have scores of other things to do” (Female, 50, Asamblea de Álvarez Jonte y Artigas, with brief prior political experience).

The problem of time further intensified as assembly members started to undertake demanding tasks of the kind that is usually left in the hands of politicians, such as the preparation of bills. Thus, for example, a member of the Asamblea del Botánico remembers that when he started to get involved in the project to reform the city’s Code of Misdemeanours (*Código Contravencional*) he “was almost completely devoted to the assembly” (Male, 48, unemployed, with some previous political experience). “You needed to be an almost full-time activist”, an assembly member from Flores recalls. “The dynamics is obviously tiring and it can be sustained by a very small group of comrades (*compañeros*). (...) The present assembly is the product, say, in 80 or 90%, of the Committee of the Unemployed, because it was the most dynamic committee, the one that did more things” (Male, 34, with prior political experience). Many interviewees indeed confirm that they could only keep that pace while their vacations lasted or as long as they were unemployed. As the above quoted assembly member explains, “we were all day involved in politics in the *Plaza* because we didn’t have a job”.

Assembly members were not activists to begin with; in fact, it was precisely its proclamation as a movement of the “common citizens” which conferred its peculiar character to the assembly movement. The distinction between an assembly member and an activist is thus underlined by our interviewees:

An assembly member is a person who works, studies, goes home and fixes things, and who once a week joins a group of people he feels affinity with in order to talk until midnight about what he would like to do in the future and to plan. Then on Saturday, he organizes an activity when he can or wants. (...) Each one enlists to work on an issue and pushes it forward. It does not mean that he must abandon everything else. There are people who take this as an activism; I am not an activist. I see it

as a space for participation, not for activism. Activism gives you a framework, a structure, a hierarchy... (Male, 48, unemployed and student, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with brief prior political experience)

A great proportion of the assembly members who did not turn into activists deserted after a relatively brief time. The already enormous difficulties to keep up with the process were further intensified by the fast ebb tide of the initial wave of enthusiasm, by the distance that became apparent between expectations and reality, and by the rapid transformation of the political context from which the assemblies had arisen.

The recognition of the need for professional politicians and public officials was also strengthened by the assemblies' failures, considered as such by a vast majority of our interviewees –the few exceptions coming from the members of assemblies that had survived thanks to their exceptional dynamism and productivity, but that were also depicted by members of other assemblies as “partisan”, “piqueteras” or “state-like” organizations. “Assemblies were not effective at anything”, says in a lapidary tone a former member of the Asamblea del Botánico (Male, 48, with limited prior political experience). Most of the decisions made were simply not implemented. “Today something is decided and when we meet next we have not done it and if we have, then others come and talk about it all over and say that it was badly done. (...) There is great stagnation and many reiterations”, a former member of the Asamblea Popular de Olivos (Male, 60, with previous political experience) tells us, “[The] things that were done were then lost, dissolved. Everything was so relaxed”, agrees a former assembly member of Lanús (Female, 26, with no previous political experience). The explanation typically provided to account for these difficulties is based on the idea that no organization functions when its members only do what they want, because they want to and when they want to. References to the “lax organization”, the straightforward “disorganization” of the assemblies and their character as “non-organizations” are indeed frequently repeated. The “committees” or “sub-areas” that the assemblies were typically divided into are described as “affinity groups” where each one worked “on what he/she likes”. Thus, “you do absolutely what you feel like. And if there is something you don't like, you don't do it”, explains a former assembly member from Núñez (Male, 54, with prior political experience).

Many interviewees link the decline and extinction of a great part of the assemblies to their difficulties to *get things done*. Conversely, there are many who state that the assemblies that still exist are those that have been able to build something valuable in their immediate context and keep it going over time: indeed, they survive around a Cul-

tural Center, a soup kitchen or any other tangible achievement that is “what allowed us to still find a meaning in keeping meeting” (Male, 32, Asamblea Gastón Riva, with limited previous political experience).

The stance towards the 2003 presidential elections

The re-arranging of the political scene and the occurrence of presidential elections less than a year and a half after the outburst of political protest posed a difficult challenge for the assemblies. According to most interviewees, assemblies did not establish an “official” position towards the election, that is, no guidelines to be followed by their members, but instead they granted them –according to the most frequent expression– “freedom of action”. A couple of interviewees say that in their respective assemblies the issue “was almost not discussed” because it was not considered to be important; however, many more remember having taken part in numerous “chats”, “discussions” and “debates” aimed at clarifying what was at stake and what the different alternatives meant so that each individual could find his own way. The following description is thus typical:

We talked a lot about the elections, basically out of anguish. At a certain point we organized discussions about current events and we exchanged information and views, we reflected together. It was a very anguishing situation: after all that had happened, after the crisis and everything, we did not have anybody to vote for... (...) The idea was not that the assembly was going to do this or that... We talked about blank voting and we set out to technically analyze [its effects], a question of strategy (Female, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with limited prior political experience)

Few assemblies called for some specific stance or action towards the elections, such as abstention or casting blank or void votes. More numerous were those that chose to proclaim the validity of the QSVT, though not bothering to make it clear what that was supposed to mean in practical terms. Thus, for example, a member of the Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia remembers that although “it did not set a position about whether to go and vote” and it decided “that each one had to do what he wanted”, his assembly “issued a ticket with the slogan ‘*Que se vayan todos*’. Most of us went to vote with that ticket and we distributed it in the neighborhood” (Male, 36, with no previous political experience). The Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores also kept the slogan, an attitude that one of its members describes as “an elegant detour that helped avoid internal conflicts. The assembly stood straight with the ancient assembly slogan, and those who voted did just what they wanted” (Male, 33, party activist).

On April 27th, 2003, 80.5% of all qualified voters in the country went to the polls. 97.28% of them cast a positive vote: void votes plummeted to 1.73%, and blank votes fell to 0.99%. In the city of Buenos Aires percentages were even lower: 1.42% and 0.6%, respectively. The presidential candidate of the largely unknown *Confederación para que se vayan todos* obtained 0.67% of the vote at a national level (0.85% in the capital city, and 1% in the province of Buenos Aires). 91% of the positive vote was split among five candidates: three of *peronist* affiliation but with divergent ideological orientations (former president Carlos Menem, with 24.45%; Néstor Kirchner, with 22.24%, and the one-week president Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, with 14.11%) and two former radicals, one located in the center-right –Ricardo López Murphy, with 16.37%– and another one placed in the center-left of the political spectrum –Elisa Carrió, with 14.05% of the vote. The runoff election that would have decided the competition in favor of one of the two front-runners, Menem and Kirchner, never took place because the former quit once it was clear that he would suffer a massive, humiliating defeat. Thus Kirchner was proclaimed the winner with a magnitude of support that –it was then commonly thought– would eventually cause him severe governability problems. Shortly after his inauguration, however, he surprised the public with a set of unexpected initiatives that were welcomed by the majority and gained him the support of a vast “virtual electorate” who assured that they would have voted for him had they known. The context of representation crisis had radically changed; thus, the very soil in which the assemblies were rooted had been transformed. Born out of a mood that their members now perceived as “capricious” and “superficial”, with no lasting effects on political culture, the assemblies were no longer the citizenry’s thermometer.

“The same people who had participated in De la Rúa’s overthrow now went out to vote”, accuses a politically experienced member of the Asamblea Popular de Liniers (Male, 47). The same accusation applies to most of our interviewees. Indeed, few voided their vote, and although some time before the election the majority seemed inclined towards blank vote (or towards an hypothetical vote for Luis Zamora, whose party, *Autodeterminación y Libertad –Self-Determination and Freedom–* was not running), as the date of the election neared they “dispersed among blank vote, vote for the left, vote for Kirchner or Carrió...” (Female, 31, Multisectorial de San Cristóbal, activist). Two explanations are given to account for that change. First of all, casting a blank vote was viewed as equal to “washing one’s hands of the problem”. Secondly, explains a former member of the Asamblea del Botánico, the experience with municipal politics had produced the certainty that politicians were not all the same after all:

People who [initially] thought that everything was the same [eventually] agreed that if we hadn't had those people [from Izquierda Unida] in the Legislature, we would not have been able to do that work (Male, 48, with limited prior political experience)

Divisions aggravated soon after Néstor Kirchner's inauguration. Several surviving assemblies, already slimmer, were put under pressure, suffered divisions or disintegrated as a result of the disagreements between the critical and the expectant, often settled with exit by the latter. Even two years later, an activist from the Multisectorial de San Cristóbal acknowledges that in her assembly it is still not advisable to discuss Kirchner's government, "because we like each other a lot and we do not want to kill each other" (Female, 31). Indeed, many of our interviewees point to the expectations generated by the new government as one of the causes of the assemblies' decline. In particular, they underline that the new president "adopted the discourse or certain part of the discourse and the reclamations expressed in 2001" (Male, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo). Which is disqualified as "double standards" (Male, 47, Asamblea Popular de Liniers) by those who distrust the president's intentions and believe that "there is no difference" between him and his predecessors or electoral competitors, because they all executed or would have executed "a mandate assigned by the dominant classes, that is, the restoration of governability [and] of state power, the fastening of exploitation and subordination" (Male, 54, Espacio Asambleario de Parque Patricios). Others recognize that, although Kirchner is not the same as, say, Carlos Menem, "from the point of view of our interests there is no difference" –while they do see a difference at the municipal level where assemblies operate, which is the reason why many supported the president's candidate for mayor against his right-wing challenger. Last but not least, there is a third group of interviewees who value the new government's human rights policies, its stance towards the Supreme Court and its alleged severity against corruption. However, the policies that are approved by our interviewees tend to be perceived as the result of the actions undertaken by the citizenry in 2001 and by the assemblies in the months that followed:

It is stupid to believe that [Kirchner] is the same (...) He has had gestures and signals that the previous governments did not. What I doubt is that his signals, slogans or policies are really expressed out of conviction. I believe that the process started in 2001 deeply marked the governments that followed, Kirchner's in this case. It seems to me that the specter of what happened to the previous government determined, maybe not a program, but at least a minimum set of measures, or of discourse, to be embraced (Male, 33 Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, party activist)

DELIBERATION AND DECISION-MAKING

Deliberation and horizontality

Discussion, reflection and deliberation are usually at the center of the definitions of “assembly” given by our interviewees:

An assembly is a big interrogation. It is a questioning of many things (...) A little bit of free association (Male, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no prior political experience)

[The assembly] is a space of discussion and action, of discussion as action (Male, 32, Asamblea Gastón Riva, with limited prior political experience)

[The assembly had] an attitude of participation, [search, and reflection about what could be done (...)] What was new was the fact that we met to talk about politics, that we tried to change certain things but without knowing too well where we were leading. Meeting in order to discuss without a clear horizon. Discussing politics without having the ordinary goals that any political organization has: obtaining positions, reaching power (Female, 26, ex-Asamblea de Lanús, with no prior political experience)

The difference between assemblies and political parties is systematically identified as based on the nature of the deliberation process that takes place in the former but not in the latter:

In a party you always have prior agreements, it is not a place where you go and discuss. You basically know which its political stance and its theoretical assumptions are. That did not happen in the assembly (Female, 26, ex-Asamblea de Lanús, with no prior political experience)

[There was] brainstorming. Nobody came and said ‘this has to be done’. As I had experience with activism in a political party where there was always a political head who said what was to be done, I very much liked the fact that [in the assembly] everything arose from below starting with the question ‘what shall we do?’ instead of ‘we have to do this because the political leadership says so’ (Male, 49, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with vast prior political experience)

If deliberation and decision-making on the basis of deliberation can take place within the assemblies it is precisely because there is no “political line” already established by a “leadership”, nor a “political head” over the plenary with decision and veto power. Only in such a situation can an exchange of arguments be a genuine one, because only then may its participants allow themselves to be compelled by the force of the best argument rather than by the titles flaunted by those

who formulate them. In other words, deliberation requires horizontality, which our interviewees systematically oppose to the “vertical structure” of political parties. Horizontality, in turn, requires equality or, rather, a political equality built within the framework of the assembly –a “homogenization of places”, as somebody puts it. In the words of three former assembly-members:

[Within the assembly] all have the same voice and the same force. Documents are produced that were studied by everybody. It is possible to achieve a situation where nobody believes to be more than anybody else (...) There were people with money, but within the assembly we were all equal (Female, ex-Asamblea de Olivos, with political experience and party affiliation)

Hierarchies had no weight, we all discussed as equals. It was fine to get rid of the idea that because he has a degree, the scientist is the one who knows. There was no social division in that sense (Female, 26, ex-Asamblea de Lanús, with no previous political experience)

We are used to the fact that decisions are always made by somebody else. In any place where you are, you delegate or somebody represents you, there are always authorities and hierarchic levels. (...) [The assembly] is a complete utopia. I do not know anything about politics, nothing at all, and I am here talking to this guy who has been an activist for thirty years and in order to decide whether to go to a demonstration what I think is as valid as what he thinks (Female, 32, ex-Asamblea de Lanús Centro, with brief prior political and partisan experience)

What resulted from equality among the diverse was the possibility “to build your own thought on the basis of different thoughts” (Female, 44, ex-Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, without prior political experience) –or, as a current member of the same assembly puts it:

You listen to what the other thinks and you modify what you are thinking. I ask for the floor, I am on the list of speakers and while the moment for me to speak approaches, I keep changing, adding things to what I originally thought, sometimes up to the point of completely transforming what I was thinking because I happened to listen to a reasoning which seemed good to me, or because somebody else saw things that I had not even thought about before. That is what I like and what impresses me most about the assembly: this collective construction of what is being thought (Male, 29, with no prior political experience)

Assemblies are therefore ideally thought of as a space where politics is no longer monopolized by experts but recovered by and for citizens. According to a member of the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, participants in assembly debates

are “people” or “citizens”, not “specialists”; if that were not the case, “a citizen would be like the dentist’s patient, who cannot say anything; the only thing he can do is keep his mouth open and abstain from complaining if it hurts” (Male, 48, with prior political and partisan experience).

Assembly discussions encompassed subjects as diverse as imaginable, at the most varied levels of abstraction and generality. “From growing vegetables in a communitarian garden to the Socialist Revolution, supporting Iraq’s or Afghanistan’s struggle... It was very eclectic, very strange” (Male, 36, Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia, with no previous political experience). Debate took place about “the country’s problems, the problems of the economy, health and education policies, the situation of the political regime” (Male, 47, Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with long prior political activism), as well as about how to undertake a certain task or how to express solidarity with the neighborhood’s *cartoneros*⁷, or about attendance to the following mobilization or to the *Asamblea Interbarrial*, or on the content of a flyer to be printed so as to let neighbors know about an activity organized or a stance taken by the assembly.

The level of abstraction of debates was itself turned into a subject for discussion within assemblies, as well as into the object of accusations and misunderstandings among them. Indeed, some assemblies were regularly criticized for their alleged “elitist”, “theorizing” and “pseudo-intellectual” tendencies. Whereas some assemblies devoted most time to the discussion of “everyday issues”, “problems of the neighborhood” and “real needs”, explains a member of the Asamblea Popular de Pompeya, others “discussed the law of gravitation” (Male, 57, with long prior political experience). The accusation is denied by some members of the criticized assemblies, whereas others acknowledge that the “high intellectual level” of their assemblies, where “very interesting and rich debates took place” (in contrast to those “with a shallower composition and a much simpler language”) eventually produced tensions, splits and desertions. This effect attributed to “professional knowledge” is in other cases equally blamed on the prevalence of “activist knowledge”.

Similar discussions took place about the level at which activities were to be undertaken, that is, about whether “to work within the neighborhood or at a more general level” (nevertheless, in many cases the solution was found in the organization of committees where “each one could work on what he wanted”). The debate about the scope to be conferred to assemblies’ actions was frequently shaped as a confrontation between “common neighbors” and “revolutionary activists”. Thus, for example, when the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre from Parque Avellaneda discussed the position to adopt in response to the decline of the *cacerolazos*, “the orthodox leftist sectors [that] considered that the situation was ripe for an attack against central power strongly opposed any kind of work at the local level” (Male, 41, with union experience).

7 The term is applied to the unemployed who make a living from collecting cardboard and paper from trash bags in the streets and selling them to recycling companies.

Assembly meetings are usually described as “chaotic”. “It was almost impossible to fix an agenda, not to talk about following it”, states a former member of the Asamblea de Núñez (Male, 54, with previous political experience). It is frequently underscored by activists turned into assembly members as well as by assembly members turned into activists that in those conditions it was impossible to run a true “political discussion”⁸:

[After practical issues were addressed] there was no time left for discussion. There were so many activities that it was soon midnight, 1 a.m. and nothing had been discussed. So another space was created where it would be possible to discuss a little more. We were few, just the activists and some neighbors (...) [Since then] the plenary assembly started to be very organized and expeditious (Male, 33, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, party activist)

Thus, it was not long before “official” opportunities for political discussion were confined to special events –typically, all-day weekend activities organized around the presentation and discussion of some specific subject– and to specialized committees (“committee for political analysis”, “discussion workshop”, “debate group”) aimed at “synthesizing” and “raising issues” that were to be later introduced into the plenary assembly. This notwithstanding, substantial debates continued to take place in assemblies all the time, usually triggered by practical issues. “Everything in the assembly led to political discussion”, states a member of the Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia. “From setting up a soup kitchen to whether or not to distribute food packets” (Male, 36, with no prior political experience). According to an activist from Flores, heated discussions about the legitimacy of private property took place there when the possibility was considered of seizing an unoccupied estate as the cold weather made it impossible to continue meeting outdoors. In other assemblies, social issues and policies, governmental handouts and social rights were thoroughly discussed each time problems arose related to the organization of the assembly’s solidarity undertakings. Last but not least, as a result of its unprecedented character assemblies displayed still another noteworthy trait: that of hosting a score of self-reflective practices, including constant discussion about what an assembly was and should be and what their horizontal practices were about.

Vote or Consensus

A widely discussed issue was that of the decision-making procedures that were more compatible with –and more conducive to– horizontality. Two of them are mentioned

8 At the same time it was considered to be unadvisable to introduce deep political discussions in plenary meetings, as they would probably chase away those who considered themselves to be “plain neighbors”, interested in “getting things done” but reluctant to “discuss politics”.

by equally numerous groups of interviewees as the form adopted by decision-making in their own assemblies: the holding of a vote and the search for consensus.

Whereas some people assume that decision by majority vote is the “natural” decision-making process due to its “obviously” democratic character, others say that their assemblies only embraced it at the beginning and just for quantitative reasons, or as a last resource when consensus was impossible to reach due either to special circumstances, or to the peculiarity of the issue under discussion, but that it was abandoned as soon as assemblies shrank due to desertions or when splits increased their homogeneity⁹. It is for the very same reasons that some interviewees state that while the search for consensus was the usual practice within committees, decisions in plenary meetings were made by means of a vote by show of hands. Others, however, express their preference for consensus on the claim that its effects were less divisive, and out of the conviction that “more people will follow a decision made by the whole” (Male, 36, Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia, with no previous political experience).

Both those that vindicate voting and those who prefer consensus (frequently identified with harmony, especially by those with little political experience) do it out of the conviction that the procedure of their choice is the most “horizontal” and “democratic” one. At the same time, criticisms directed both to voting and to consensus (and especially to the latter, often described as “more original” and “more difficult” to practice) are centered on two issues: their democratic deficiencies and their operational limitations. “I am not going to tell you that [consensus] is *that* democratic (...) People who disagreed on something left”, says a member of the Multisectorial de San Cristóbal (Female, 31 years, party activist). “Those who are used to activism do not find any trouble in debating [in search for consensus]. But there are other neighbors who are not used to it”, points out a former member of the Asamblea de Olivos (Male, 60, with political experience and party affiliation), implicitly maintaining that regarding voting, by contrast, everybody stands on an equal footing. In any case, both discussion in the search for consensus and voting as a way of settling a discussion are admittedly subject to manipulation and “*aparatadas*” –that is, to the intervention of party activists able to distort them and twist them in their favor:

9 Quantity and heterogeneity were usually celebrated but at this point they tend to be recognized as highly problematic. “At the beginning it was completely crazy. Eighty thousand proposals were thrown and then they were voted by show of hands. Anybody who happened to be around joined and raised their hand, it was meaningless”, confesses a former member of the Asamblea del Botánico. “It took soooooo long until each committee submitted all its weekly activities for voting that they ended up being voted by ten people”, recalls another one from Flores Sur. “It was a never-ending story. Sometimes it was half past one in the morning and we were in the park since eight (...) Then the cold weather started and we had to set limits to horizontality and be more expedite”, agrees a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores. The vast majority therefore agree on that “it was possible to work better when there were less people”, as an assembly member from Almagro puts it.

At the outset everything was subject to vote because activists from political parties are very used to voting; it is a way to impose their views (Male, 49, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with previous political experience)

[The search for consensus] can be useful to soften difficult situations. But there are moments when I prefer a vote. Because in the search for consensus you can get to constantly introduce your views (Male, 48, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with previous partisan experience)

Very heated discussions [took place] that ended up with a vote that did not settle the question (...) Losing an election was not easily accepted so the losers manipulated the whole thing in order to twist it from within. There was a certain resistance to accepting the decision of the majority (Male, 47, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, with previous political and union experience)

At voting time, when everything was almost over, discussion erupted. (...) There were three stages: first, proposals; later, debate of proposals, and nobody discussed. And when voting time arrived... blah blah blah. We who had no experience were a ping-pong ball. There were the MST (Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores) and the PO (Partido Obrero). And the discussion was the ball, which bounced back and forth... You felt like you had arrived at the cinema to watch a film that had already started. Those were really old debates and you didn't get a thing (Female, 26, ex-Asamblea de Lanús, with no prior political experience)

Along with the deficiencies of both mechanisms in terms of democratic quality, also the quality of the resulting decisions is put into question. The consensual practice is the preferred target for the second type of criticisms. Whereas some consider as an unavoidable side effect the fact that proposals on which agreement cannot be reached are left aside so as to avoid conflict, others take it as a severe structural problem located at the root of assemblies' lack of agility and efficacy. The latter is the stance taken by several interviewees who repeatedly point out that through consensus "very few" or "too obvious" things could be decided—things such as going out and protest against the presence in the neighborhood of a former dictatorship's public official or to attend a demonstration on the anniversary of the 1976 military coup. But decisions reached through consensus on more controversial issues were "liquified"; that is the reason why a vote was resorted to "when the issue deserved it". "The search for consensus", explains a former member of the Asamblea de Núñez, "is like a polishing process that goes on until the thing is totally blunt and does not cut anymore". In addition, it is "not very operational": "there is maybe one person in disagreement and you spend five hours braining yourself to approach positions with whatever the guy thinks" (Male, 54, with previous political experience). Several interviewees also add the

inconvenience that decisions thus made do not leave anybody happy, so they do not prompt enough commitment at the time of implementation.

The most radical criticism against the assembly format, though, is that which contests both decision-making mechanisms on the basis of the ascertainment of a link between emergency, decision and leadership. In the words of a former assembly member from Olivios:

You cannot live in a permanent state of assembly. (...) Some decisions have to be urgently made, there must be some representation, a small committee to make urgent decisions. Horizontality is fine, but there are decisions that have to be made by somebody. (...) In an emergency you cannot summon a general assembly (Male, 60, with partisan experience)

The arising of leaderships

Horizontality was not just a practice but also an aim that was “almost obsessively” pursued. “Everything was democratically decided”, explains an interviewee. “Each time it was also decided how a certain issue was to be decided” (Male, 50, activist). For many present and past assembly members, however, horizontality was not a full fact but mostly a regulatory ideal, a horizon that kept moving away. Consequently, many insist that, although there were no “titles” or “hierarchies” in the assemblies, there were indeed “people with different interests”, with different “histories”, “careers”, “training” or “personalities”, all of which established clear differences among them. These were not expressed in terms of the right to speak (which was in principle accessible to all), but in terms of the extent to which each one’s words were taken into account. “Proposals”, states a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, “had a different weight according to who said them” (Male, 34, with previous political experience).

Few consider that the sprouting of this kind of differences could have been avoided; the majority considers it instead as a natural process as they acknowledge the presence of “natural hierarchies”, “spontaneous leaderships” and “natural-born leaders”. “All processes yield leaders”, says a politically experienced member of the Asamblea Popular de Liniers. “Who is the one who says ‘let’s do this’? There are always leaders, natural commanders” (Male, 47).

Since what is at stake is the differential of attention given to the word of some above that of others within a space characterized, above all, by the production of discourse, it is only natural that those who are considered to be “points of reference” are in the first place those who “know how to speak”, have “rhetorical abilities”, show “a high cultural level” or bring in some useful knowledge on a relevant field.

Those who fit that description were usually professionals and intellectuals who “could easily occupy all the space with their ideas”; in other assemblies, however, the role was played by people with a “history of activism” or “party experience” thanks to which “they knew how to handle situations” (Male, 48, ex-Asamblea del Botánico, with previous political experience). In either case, the effect caused disappointment with the alleged pedagogical virtues of debate:

[At the beginning we thought] ‘fine, we have people who did not finish elementary school and who join because they want security, they want their children to be able to safely go through the park, and at the same time we have a psychologist, an economist, people with previous political participation. Our discussions are going to oscillate and we are going to grow up together. The lady who is worried that their children can walk through the park is going to learn from the other one, and the latter is going to learn from her’. I thought that was going to yield a change. But no, the neighbor simply left (...) People who came as plain neighbors, without much of an intellect, had to give way to those who knew, because those who knew were the visionaries (Female, 55, ex-Asamblea de Monserrat, with previous political experience)

Leaderships were built not just on the abovementioned resources, all of which existed prior to and independently from the assembly experience. They were also fed by other resources accumulated on the spot. Thus, for example, the authority recognized to the “old guard”, that is to say, to “the comrades who formed the assembly, who worked for its construction” (Male, 34, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, with previous political experience) and to “those who are always there to organize” (Male, 57, Asamblea Popular de Pompeya, with vast political experience), individuals who “after two or three years have become activists” (Male, 33, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, party activist). Indeed, many interviewees establish a link between leadership and the burden of responsibility. “We changed towards a more organic structure based on degrees of responsibility”, explains our assembly member. “It is not the same when a comrade speaks who works there all day and becomes a point of reference, than when somebody else speaks”, ratifies an activist from the Multisectorial de San Cristóbal (Female, 31).

For many of our interviewees, the sprouting of leaderships with some decision power amounts to the definite loss of horizontality. According to others, however, horizontality is able to survive, albeit under a modified form. The latter provide at least three arguments to support their position. First of all, the fact that leaderships arose spontaneously and leaders were not appointed nor had a position to which to cling or from which to behave as “official representatives”

continued to establish a great difference between assemblies and established political institutions. In the former, but not in the latter, compliance was voluntary and leaderships needed to be constantly subject to plebiscite, so to speak. “There were natural leaderships”, recognizes a member of the Asamblea de Castro Barros y Rivadavia, “but not a leader that had to be obeyed” (Male, 36, without previous political experience). Secondly, as the existence of leaders was often severely questioned, ways were found to limit its effects by means of devices such as rotation, the separation of functions by areas, and the collective exercise of responsibilities. In the third place, our interviewees remind us that only “operational decisions” and “execution” were carried out vertically and by small groups. “Fundamental decisions”, by contrast, kept coming from plenary meetings. That is, even though horizontality was not “complete” and equality was no longer “absolute”, there still existed a place where “everybody, from the one with the biggest responsibilities to the one who participates less” could discuss on an equal footing. “Management requires different degrees of responsibility but even so the assembly spirit remains and decisions are made by everybody” (Male, 33, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, party activist). Once this point reached, nevertheless, the appreciation for the previously cherished principle of horizontality had declined from the perspective of assembly activists, now a majority in the thinned assemblies that still remained:

[At the beginning] everybody was worth a vote; [it was] too horizontal, too democratic because people who actively participated were worth the same as those who just came and listened once a week (Male, 34, Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, with previous political experience)

Participation in the Assembly of assemblies: Representatives or delegates?

In mid-January, 2002 the assemblies recently formed in Buenos Aires started to meet each Sunday in Parque Centenario so as to share and coordinate their various activities. Although at the beginning for many people it embodied a “utopia” and a “dream turned into reality”, the *Interbarrial* was soon the stage for severe and even violent disagreements on the ideas of deliberation, representation and the links between them.

The “manipulation” and “maneuvers” staged by leftist political parties in the *Interbarrial* have been widely and largely criticized. What interests us here is the charge that true deliberation was absent from it due to partisan interferences. Several interviewees tell that parties “came with their party programs and discussed them

with others who had another party program. (...) And unfortunately what happened was what usually happens in trade union assemblies: the vote took place at the last minute, when three quarters [of the participants] had already left" (Female, 49, ex-Asamblea de Parque Chacabuco, with previous political experience). "You went there as an independent assembly member and you quickly found out that there were prior alignments, which was not supposed to be the rule of the game" (Male, 54, ex-Asamblea de Núñez, with previous political experience).

Party behavior is also held responsible for the excessive distance that soon became apparent between discussions and reality. On one hand, "discussions in Parque Centenario had nothing to do with what was discussed in the assembly", points out a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores (Male, 34, with previous political experience); on the other hand, "lots of politics was discussed that was completely unrelated to social processes. (...) Twenty-two mobilizations were voted for a single week. Twenty-two! And nobody attended", explains a member of the Asamblea de San Telmo (Male, 51). According to several interviewees, the problem was that leftist parties "arrived with their handbooks" and "interpreted what was happening on the basis of them" (Male, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no prior political experience). Therefore the circulation of slogans such as "All power to the assemblies", exposed by a former member of the same assembly as an example of the tendency "to bring categories and experiences from other places" (Female, 23, with limited prior political experience).

Interferences of parties were real, and parties were indeed responsible for the scandalous ending of the *Interbarrial* meetings. Nevertheless, their behavior was contingent. How different would things have been if those interferences had not taken place? This question is implicitly addressed by those who criticize the very existence of an "assembly of assemblies", a structure of second degree in which each assembly participates by means of the appointment of representatives or delegates¹⁰. "It was agreed on sending a representative. (...) Then we had five people voting on something and expecting compliance with it", says a former member of the Asamblea de Flores Sur (Female, 36, with limited prior political experience). "This relapse on representa-

10 Dictionary definitions for both terms are similar and include reciprocal references; at the same time, both terms are often used interchangeably by our interviewees. However, the description that they provide for the task entrusted to their "representatives" or "delegates" in the *Interbarrial* fits the concept of delegation as it has been shaped by political theory. In that sense, unlike representatives within the framework of representative systems, delegates are bound by an imperative mandate, are instantly removable and perform for brief and rotating terms.

tion put into question everything we were looking for in the assemblies”, explains a member of the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo. That is the reason why representatives were mostly conceived of as delegates. In the first place, they were subject to precise instructions (“in writing, [because] there was so much distrust”, recalls a politically experienced assembly member from Liniers). “It had been decided that they should carry a mandate and had to vote on what each assembly had already discussed” (Male, 29, Asamblea de Palermo Viejo, with no previous political experience). Delegates’ functions were consequently limited to conveying the positions of their respective assemblies.

Secondly, delegate rotation is often emphasized. Every week “it was voted on who would represent the assembly and what they had to say. They rotated”, explains a member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores (Male, 33, party activist). Rotation is here understood as a mechanism to avoid specialization; as a former assembly member from Lanús Centro puts it, it was “a form of [avoiding that] people were type-cast according to the duties they perform” and of preventing the concentration of power that results from “always doing the same things and monopolizing certain roles” (Female, 32, with brief prior political experience)¹¹. Finally, the revocability of delegates is also mentioned. “For example”, recalls the above-quoted member of the Asamblea 20 de Diciembre de Flores, “one of them said some things that had not been voted on nor discussed, and he could not go any longer” (Male, 33, party activist).

However, things were not as easy in practice. Most assemblies (those that were not under the dominion of activists from some party) proclaimed themselves “sovereign” and insisted that delegates should stick to the limited functions already described. But that “was not what parties wanted, because they mobilized their apparatus on Sunday, they raised their hands and that was it”, explains an assembly member from Palermo Viejo, a “common neighbor” with no previous political experience (Male, 29). “The PO wanted an assembly subordinated to the decisions made in Parque Centenario while the vast majority of us thought it was a sovereign assembly” (Male, 54, Espacio Asambleario de Parque Patricios, with previous political experience).

The underlying conflict ran deeper than what is made apparent in the obvious attempts by leftist parties to “take control” of the assembly movement by conferring a certain direction and a precise content to its actions. Indeed, if the *Interbarrial* had functioned according to

11 This element is also questioned by some activists for whom their “total lack of structure” is what prevented the assemblies to replace citizenship participation when the general level of activity began to decline.

its own principles –that is to say, if its activities had not undergone the stress caused by party activism– the problem would have presented itself in terms of the possibilities for deliberation in a system of delegation based on imperative mandate. Numerous interviewees state that deliberation in Parque Centenario was hindered by the presence of activists who came with their slogans and their decisions made somewhere else and tried to impose them on the rest. Nevertheless, if that had not happened and the *Interbarrial* had remained faithful to the concept of representation as delegation, it would have nevertheless been unable to become a space for deliberation but, at the most, a space for the exchange of experiences and for the presentation of proposals for coordination that would have to be sent to the assemblies in the neighborhoods and come back with an affirmative or negative vote a week later. In other words, a representative can only deliberate freely if he is allowed to change his mind when feeling compelled by an argument better than his own, which cannot happen (simply because the rules prohibit it) where representatives are subject to precise instructions from their principals.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to what is usually expected, the crisis of representation –typically linked to decades of governmental low performance and/or bad behavior– did not lead in our case to a rise in authoritarian preferences among the citizenry but to a surge of deeply democratic impulses, based on the understanding –as quoted by one of our interviewees– that “the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy”. Indeed, most of our interviewees either celebrate the existence of elections as a necessary condition for democracy, or they simply take it for granted. Most, if not all of them, moreover, explicitly state that elections are by no means sufficient as far as the quality of democracy is concerned. Thus, the process described as well as its participants’ state of mind need to be apprehended in relation to the issue of the *quality* of democracy rather than to that of its *consolidation*. In other words, the question that is once and again put forward is not whether or for how long democracy will last in Argentina, but what kind of democracy is the one that we already have and whether we like it and intend to keep it that way or, instead, prefer to change it for the better.

As has been shown, all possible attitudes towards the system of representation are present among assembly members, not necessarily under the form of consistent alternatives, and in various combinations. Among them can be mentioned the rejection of the separation between the represented and their representatives; the rejection of the existing representative bond or of the “political class” as shaped

within the framework of a “delegative democracy”; and the rehabilitation of the imperative mandate and therefore of direct democracy. While according to some interviewees the QSVT translated into the reclamation of the end of representation and the establishment of a system of direct and/or participative democracy, according to others the realization of the slogan encompassed the revocation of all representatives’ terms and the call for general elections so as to achieve a total renovation of the “political class”; last but not least, a third group rejected the literal understanding of the motto (or accepted it as such only when applied in a restricted way, such as in the demand for the resignation of all Supreme Court Justices) but happily embraced its potential for the inclusion of the most diverse reclamations under an umbrella of creative provocation.

Consequently, the role and meaning of the assemblies are also interpreted in various ways. Some think of them as “an instrument for a direct, non-delegative democracy”. “Direct democracy”, in turn, is sometimes differentiated from “participative democracy” in that the former would require a much greater involvement of the citizenry in the decision-making process. Thus, several interviewees refer to “direct democracy” as the main aim to achieve while they cling to “participative democracy” as a second-best alternative in case the preferable one was not achievable. In other cases, “participative” and “direct” democracy are used as interchangeable expressions that refer to the same object –the practice of direct democracy– which some people consider now to be “possible” due to the existence of “the technology to know what people want”, at least at the local level.

For some assembly members, assemblies embodied a “political alternative”, either “to administer or to control the administration”. In the former sense, in particular, the experience tends to be considered as a failure. Others, on the contrary, maintain that “the assemblies did not need to be an alternative political direction because they never intended to (...) Because they were born as something different, as a place for rebellion and for a democratic practice of a different nature” (Male, 54, Espacio Asambleario de Parque Patricios, with previous political experience). In any case, even those who apprehend them in those terms feel sorry that those impulses and practices could not be institutionalized and thus kept alive.

From another perspective, assemblies are not understood as encompassing an alternative, full-blown system but just as a mechanism capable of functioning within the existing representative democracies with the aim of making them “more participative”. This possibility, however, is not equally valued by everybody: for some it is a second-best option while others see it as the optimum to reach. Among the

latter, a former member of the Asamblea de Palermo Viejo concludes that “participation and representation are two different things. (...) One does not need to eliminate the other and together they amount to democracy” (Female, 23 years, with little prior political experience).

Besides the diversity of explanations provided to account for the decline –or, according to some, the failure– of the assembly movement, most (if not all) our interviewees believe that the causes that originally fueled it still remain in place. Many of them, however, no longer see those causes in the original terms. The “political class”, for example, continues indeed to be the main target; nevertheless, it sometimes receives some credit, or at least a suspension of disbelief, since many assembly members (present or past) have deposited mild expectations on the new government, despite it having been born out of one of the two big partners in the so-called “*partidocracia*”. Equally numerous are the interviewees who complain instead that citizens (including many assembly members, and especially former ones) have diligently returned to the polls to re-legitimate a system that no doubt still functions perversely. The most ideology-driven activists go on to state that the assembly movement failed because it was not radical enough, as it did not thoroughly reject “the republican and representative regime, so when the government says ‘go vote again’, people just go and vote again. (...) The change was not so deep, that is why [the establishment] backed down a little to later institutionalize the process, giving it an electoral solution” (Male, 47, Asamblea Popular de Liniers, with long prior political activism).

As for the impact of the assembly experience, the overwhelming majority of our present and past assembly members initially declare to notice “little” or “no” substantial change in Argentina, in Buenos Aires or even in their neighborhoods. Most interviewees with absolutely no previous political experience say that the fact of getting involved in an experience with “participative” “deliberative”, “direct” or “non-delegative” democracy (according to their different expressions) has instead changed *them*, shifting their views and their lives as a whole. By contrast, those with a long history of activism see their assembly phase as “just one more experience” –innovative and interesting, no doubt, but in no way a “point of no return” or a “loss of innocence”. Both groups, however, end up agreeing that at least two things did change in Argentine politics after all. Firstly, they claim that despite the subsequent process of “political normalization”, the experience of insurrection and popular self-organization remains in a state of latency to be activated as soon as “the next crisis” strikes. Secondly, they state that although “nobody went away”, the threat embodied in the presence of a vigilant citizenry now aware of the limits of representa-

tive democracy has set stricter limits to power abuse. That is precisely what, according to some of them, accounts for the relatively “progressive” characteristics of the “normalizing” Kirchner administration, which –they claim– felt compelled to incorporate, at least through lip service, many of the reclamations put forward by mobilized citizens.

The assembly experience also resulted in the reformulation of many participants’ prior expectations, not just in terms of the utopian character of certain hopes that grew in the context of December, 2001, but also where certain aspects of representative systems are concerned. More precisely, the experience allowed for the evaluation of representative democracy under a new light. Take, for example, the specialization and professionalization of administrative functions and the roles performed by political parties within a competitive democracy. Each and all of them are now revalued in contrast to the “inefficiency” displayed by the assemblies. Even politics as a professionalized and remunerated activity has been revalued by some interviewees who disclose the fact that they could only devote themselves completely to their assemblies during the several months that they spent unemployed, and for the simple reason that they had enough accumulated resources so as to be able to survive without a job. This intuition is reinforced through the analysis of the effects of the fast decline of citizen mobilization and the transformation of assemblies into redoubts of activists –either activists turned into assembly members or assembly members turned into activists. It is at this point when some of our interviewees get to glimpse an unexpected alternative to representative democracy. What if the alternative to a democracy in the hands of professional politicians who are, after all, elected by the citizenry through free and clean elections, happened to be not a heavenly direct democracy but, in a context of low popular participation, the constitution of a self-selected group of leaders formed by those who have the time, resources, charisma or interest to devote full-time to politics? Professional politicians would no longer score so low if compared to such an aristocracy, free of the constraints of any institutionalized accountability mechanism. A conclusion follows: given the available options, the most valuable aspiration to pursue might be, after all, that of a functioning representative democracy in which professional politicians and public officials are kept on a leash by an informed citizenry capable and willing to exert on them all their available powers of monitoring and control.

Was such a citizenry produced or expanded by the assembly experience or, more broadly speaking, by the participatory upsurge of 2001? It is apparent that the assemblies’ experience was disappointing in many ways, as most of their former members easily admit

it. Disillusionment is not only related to the assemblies' actual, concrete and tangible results in terms of the goods and services delivered and the policies enacted –which are usually considered negligible– but also to the limited satisfaction brought by the participatory experience itself, related in turn to the stark contrast between the huge expectations it fostered and the modest outcomes it produced. It is important to keep in mind that the experience we examined involved mostly middle-class citizens, at least as far as their cultural standpoint was concerned. Thus, the democratizing potential of the experience turned out to be not just a welcome but quite unexpected by-product of practices undertaken with other purposes in mind but, instead, an aim located at the very core of the actors' understanding of their own actions. For good or for bad, our political actors happened to be theoretically informed –though sometimes also a little confused out of too much theory delivered in too simplified a package. Indeed, debates on how to make the experience more “horizontal” and “participatory” –and, thus, more “democratic”– (and on how to spill those effects onto its surroundings, eventually reaching the whole society and political institutions alike) took place “almost obsessively” in most assemblies, as some put it. It must also be acknowledged that the assembly experience took place in the context of a huge, total crisis that produced a very peculiar collective state of mind that, by definition, could not endure long. What was left of it when the participatory effervescence subdued and the deliberative frenzy receded? A few assemblies certainly remained, but they survived through adaptation and mutation into clientelistic machines, not quite different from the local branches of traditional parties. As for the assemblies that disappeared, the question is: did they leave anything behind?

It can be claimed that they did. Besides the appraisal by several individuals of what came to be the “experience of a lifetime”, having turned them into more assertive, stronger, self-confident persons, what they left behind were certain criteria of what “democratic” is supposed to mean that –though eventually acknowledged not to be fully applicable to “normal” politics and regular political institutions– were nevertheless thought to be useful to judge their performance. In that sense, the result was the production of a more critical citizenry, that for a couple of years kept the government strictly in check. For some time indeed, the rebellious experience stayed fresh in the minds of politicians, who were truly concerned and even afraid of it happening again. In January, 2002, the Secretary-General of the Presidency for the Duhalde administration, Aníbal Fernández, publicly stated that the government needed to respond to popular demands

such as those put forward by the *cacerolazos* because if it failed to do so “the people will kick us out” (*La Nación*, 12/01/02). In April, 2003, Néstor Kirchner was elected in the first electoral round with roughly 23% of the vote, and went on to build his basis of support through the constitution of a “virtual electorate” –that is, by following the dictates of public opinion. Some “progressive”, even “politically correct” decisions were rapidly enacted. Until mid-term congressional elections were held in 2005, alleged attempts at “political reform” (a collection of disparate changes in political practices that, if enacted, would supposedly turn representative democracy into either a more representative, a more responsive, a more accountable or a more direct one) continued to make headlines. Halfway into his term, though, President Kirchner succeeded in turning his virtual electorate into an actual one, therefore completing the process of reconstruction of presidential authority as well as his own basis of support. Normalcy had successfully been restored, substitute goods were being delivered; soon after, political reform eventually waned into oblivion.

How critical, how active, how assertive and how much to fear a citizenry is then to be found in present Argentina? In a country that seems to regard crises as a privileged tool for political change, that still remains to be seen.

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