Making autonomous geographies: Argentina’s popular uprising and the ‘Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados’ (Unemployed Workers Movement) ∗

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Abstract

This paper addresses the idea of autonomy—the desire for freedom, self-organisation and mutual aid. Through challenging economic neoliberalism, state repression, a powerful transnational elite, and the commodification of nature and resources, many communities, especially in the global south, are trying to manage their own affairs. Using the example of the Movement of Unemployed Workers (El Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados) in Argentina, I explore the idea of autonomous geographies and how they are made and remade at three overlapping levels—the territorial, through the emergence of networked autonomous neighbourhoods which are selectively open and closed to translocal links; the material, through the development of a solidarity economy where immediate needs are met and work is redefined; and the social, where collective action and daily practice helps constitute more collective, autonomous forms of social interactions. In their desire to manage connections with the outside world while at the same time inspire autonomous place projects elsewhere, the MTDs represent both a ‘militant localism’ and ‘militant pluriversalism’. Moreover, while such experiments in making and embedding ‘autonomous geographies’ face limits and have few widespread examples on which to draw, it is through constant questioning and collective struggle at the everyday level that autonomy is made real.

Keywords: Autonomous geographies; Argentina; Unemployment; Solidarity economy; Collectivism; Mutual aid; Anarchism; Revolution

1. Introduction

This paper is about autonomy, what might be summed up as a desire for freedom, self-organisation and mutual aid. The struggle for autonomy is not simply an abstract belief in a better future, more accurately it is an impulse fuelled by present and past hardships such as hunger, poverty and subjugation (Foran, 1997). The desire for autonomy, then, comes from a rejection of a political system tied to the needs of business and political elites, and an economic system that has cut people off from their lands, resources and livelihoods. The idea of autonomy is a hallmark of numerous social movements embracing direct action, ecological and social justice networks such as Earth First! Reclaim the Streets, and Dissent!, the Disobedients of Italy, People’s Global Action, indigenous struggles such as the Zapatistas in the Chiapas state of Mexico, the Landless Peasant Movement in Brazil and the unemployed workers in Argentina. For local resistance movements which stress their right to exist outside the neoliberal economic system (Escobar, 2001; Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1998; Routl-
edge, 2000), autonomy is a demand to be heard and recognised, it is a battle against ‘autonomy’ (Held, 1995: 163), repression and marginality.

The discussion that follows examines groups in Argentina who are pursuing projects of autonomy. This is a story which became most visible in December 2001, when Argentina’s economy went into free fall and several thousands of people were united under the banner ‘que se vayan todos’ (get rid of them all) to oust the incumbent President, De La Rua. But the story neither began nor ends there. The quest for autonomy in Argentina reflects long-standing struggles to break its dependent economic ties, to challenge political and military elites, and create practical responses to on-going problems such as unemployment, state repression and lack of food. However, popular autonomy is often undervalued in discussions about the Argentinian crisis of 2001. This is understandable, as one has to look and listen very closely to hear the on-going quiet revolution when the dust settles after the street battles.

Here, I focus on the struggle for autonomy by the Movement of Unemployed Workers (El Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados), MTD for short, a movement that emerged in response to the crisis conditions of the 1990s in Argentina but also has antecedents in Argentina’s history of immigration and anarcho-syndicalism. Their struggle is part of the piquetero movement that block roads to demand work, food and benefits in the wake of large-scale privatisations in the 1990s. While many piquetero groups have close links with large trade unions, political parties and the dominant Peronist political culture in Argentina, the MTDs represent a strand of more autonomous piquerismo, that desires a counter/anti-power rather than gaining the reigns of state power.

It is this new territorial anti-power of the MTDs, based upon dignity, meeting basic needs and social change that I focus on in this paper to explore the idea of ‘autonomous geographies’ and how they are made and remade at three overlapping levels—the territorial, the material and the social. First, the struggle of the MTDs is framed within the emergence of loosely networked autonomous neighbourhoods. These have been the basis for making an autonomous politics of place using direct action as a survival strategy in the face of widespread unemployment. Such place autonomy, rather than based upon an exclusionary localist politics (what has been called ‘militant particularism’), is complex, relational, pragmatic and selective, representing both an opening and closure to the outside world and perhaps a ‘militant pluriversalism’. Second, the MTDs have developed a solidarity economy where not just immediate needs are met, but work and social relations are redefined, and autonomous projects are built. Third, it is through this daily practice that autonomy is embedded in social relations. For the MTDs, at the heart of autonomy is collective identity and action. Through collective action such as road-blocks and community projects, they are creating social identities beyond the state, trade union, family and church which they believe can positively transform everyday life. Before these three hallmarks of autonomy are discussed, it is worth considering the concept of autonomy, and its legacy in Argentina, in some detail.

2. The desire for collective autonomy

The word autonomy comes from the Greek ‘autos-no-mos’, literally self-legislation, or creating one’s own laws. The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as ‘the right of self-government, of making its own laws and administering its own affairs’. Here a difference emerges with ‘heteronomy’, meaning government by an ‘other’ person or influence, rather than the ‘self’. Autonomy has many different hues. It marks out territory ranging from today’s highly individualised, global consumer-society based upon maximising personal happiness and freedom, often meaning material wealth, to a collective and utopian spirit which rejects individualism in favour of mutual aid, solidarity and collective experience.

At one end of the spectrum, then, we see the ‘thunder-like freedom’ based upon free-floating individuals disconnected from everything (Castoriadis, 1991: 173; see also Stirner, 1915). Personal autonomy here often equates to highly individualised, egocentric, and often nihilistic and existential desires. Such Individual autonomy can quickly be linked to conservatism, and reveals much about modern-day consumer society and a concern with lifestyle fads. This individualism is used to privilege the unquestionable autonomy of consumers in the market place, and underpins the current hegemony of economic neoliberalism based upon the free movement of goods and capital. Hence, autonomy is re-

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1 Max Stirner (1915) in particular rejects meta ideas such as ‘Reason’ and ‘Progress’ in favour of an individual project devoted to realising the potential of the individual. Here, personal experience and fulfillment of the ego are placed above all else, especially the authoritarian institutions of society (Marshall, 1992; Sheehan, 2003). However, the ego plays a useful role in our personal development and relationship with the external world. Drawing upon Freud’s psycho-analytical work the ‘id’ is seen as the internal ‘other’ that is controlled by the ego so that a person can gain autonomy and freedom in the real world. Here, personal autonomy is the consciousness’s attempt at rule over the unconscious, or attempts by the reality of the ego to control the instincts of the id (Castoriadis, 1991: 102). However, the ego is never fully separate from the id’s pleasure-principle. The voice of the internal ‘other’ and desires from what Freud called the ‘cauldron’ of the id are never eliminated in the ego.
ducted to consumer choice, which is fulfilled through the money economy. What this neglects is that in the current global economy, personal autonomy and freedom for a rich minority equates to misery and hunger for the global majority.

At the other end of the spectrum, autonomy is a collective project. It is ‘an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity that comes through recognition that others desire and are capable of autonomy too’ (Notes from Nowhere, 2003: 110). If there are not others questioning institutions and the law in their society or community, then an individual cannot gain autonomy. As Castoriadis says: ‘I cannot be free alone’ (1991: 166). Hence, the desire for autonomy hinges upon both ‘freedom and connection’ (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). What this couplet suggests is that freedom is won by building connections and collective action. Such ideas of collectivism and mutuality were graphically represented by 19th century thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin (1878) who was at pains to point out that the dominant tendency in human relations was co-operation rather than competition. He went further to find numerous examples of the collective organisation of industry, agriculture and community life which would maximise the collective good (see Kropotkin, 1972). Such traditions have been kept alive to the present day through radical scholars such as Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, Murray Bookchin and Colin Ward in their ideas for self-regulating federations of communities, while 19th century radicals such as Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Michel Bakunin demonstrated the need for mutual respect between autonomous individuals who freely lived and traded within a federation of communities (see Marshall, 1992, Joll, 1979). As I discuss later, such ideas of collective self-organisation are the bedrock for praxis of the MTDs.

Collective autonomy simultaneously refuses and proposes, destroys and creates. Refusal is one of autonomy’s key weapons, and this ‘refusal is only a real weapon if it is collective’ (Notes from Nowhere, 2003: 109). Refusals come in many forms, but most begin with an outburst of frustration, a cry of ‘enough’ (see Holsway, 2002). What is refused is an ‘instituted social heteronomy’—the institutions, norms and laws from distant others—religion, the family, or the state—which limit autonomy (Castoriadis, 1991: 150). In the context of the Argentinian insurrection in 2001 we see the motif ‘que se vayan todos’ (get rid of them all) as a powerful act of refusal against these. At some point, such refusals also become acts of creation, always in flux through negotiation and dialogue between autonomous individuals and groups. Autonomy implies a different notion of the self, it is a radical imaginary, the urge to imagine an ‘other’ society. Autonomy, through its refusal, is anti-power: ‘Autonomy has no frontiers. It is a way of eluding the imperatives of production, the verticality of institutions, the traps of political representation, the virus of power’ (Lotinger and Marazzi, 1980: 8). In the world of anti-power, creative tools are desertion, exodus and nomadism (Hardt and Negri, 2001). Hence, we see groups turning their backs on political parties, trade unions, and instead drawing on their own resources in their communities. Castoriadis (1991: 163) describes autonomy through a germ metaphor: ‘As a germ, autonomy emerges when explicit and unlimited interrogation explodes on the scene’. He calls this a ‘moment of creation’ that ushers in a new type of society and individual and marks the beginning of a project in which questions are raised like: ‘which laws ought we have to make’, ‘is what I think true?’ (ibid., emphasis in origin). From here we arrive at a very different definition of democracy and politics:

Democracy’s birth, and that of politics, is not the reign of law or of right... but rather the emergence of the law and through the actual activity of the community (Castoriadis, 1991: 164).

This broad project of autonomy then, ‘is not only a political project, it is a project for existence’ (Lotinger and Marazzi, 1980). Autonomy proposes ways of living through extra-parliamentary means, which are embedded in the specific, the local, the collective (Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1998). It is the desire to allow differences to deepen at the base without trying to synthesise them from above (Lotinger and Marazzi, 1980: 8). Such ideas of collective counter-power and self-management usually come into conflict with those still keen to maintain power by organising, centralising and representing. It is these collective experiments that situates the MTDs in such conflicts between power and anti-power.

Collective and going education is key to collective autonomy. But this is education that connects with the lives, stories and struggles of ordinary people, not a history of elites and their desire for conquest, profit and power. Not a history of the rich few, but the many. It is where teachers become students and students become teachers (Friere, 1996). Growing this collective project of autonomy is about self-belief and realising that in many areas of our lives, we are already co-authors of the world. Hence, autonomy does not simply involve analysis but creating new tools and strategies for changing the world. Autonomy, then, is both our ‘means and our end’. It shapes how we live our lives as well as the future we desire (Notes from Nowhere, 2003: 106).

Anarchist thought underpins much autonomous thinking and practice, and is a tradition as varied as autonomy. Anarchy comes from the Greek ‘anarchos’ meaning ‘absence of government’, and together with autonomy (meaning self-government), provide a power-
ful vision for a new social order. Anarchist thought ranges across mutualism, individualism, nihilism, anarcho-syndicalism, anarchist communism and pacifist anarchism (Bookchin, 1996; Cook and Peper, 1990; Rooum, 1992). Thus, it contains various tensions between, for example, the more materialist thinking of Marx, the libertarian ideals of anarchist thinkers such as Michel Bakunin and Joseph Proudhon, the pacifist ideals of Leo Tolstoy, the individualism of Max Stirner, and more playful and creative elements of the Situationists. Key to anarchism is a desire for a new social order based upon libertarian and utopian ideals, a rejection of power and hierarchy, a desire for social and political self-governance, decentralised and voluntary forms of organising, a commitment to direct action rather than policy reform, and mutual aid and solidarity (Kropotkin, 1921; 2002). It is not about seizing power, but undermining the powerful. How this happens is clearly up to each group to determine in their own context. Importantly, anarchy is not an absence of order or government, but rather the rejection of a government that demands obedience. It suggests self-imposed limitations and responsibilities to others where free individuals accept both the necessity of laws but also the possibility of questioning them (Castoriadis, 1991: 173). It is the tension that Castoriadis highlights between individuals ‘loving freedom and accepting responsibility’ (1991: 174).

Self-governing communities have long been a key part of the struggle for autonomy, based on a desire for the collective control of space embedded in self-sufficiency and mutual aid. For example, with a backdrop of land enclosures and the civil war, Gerard Winstanley’s Diggers established an agrarian, proto-anarchist community at St George’s Hill in 1649 while the Ranters turned social conventions and the morality of England on their heads. In spite of its ultimate failure, the Paris Commune in 1871 provided much inspiration for countless libertarian movements. Others include agrarian anarchist communies as a reaction to the industrial revolution, the (ultimately unsuccessful) resistance against central Soviet power by the Kronstadt sailors and Nestor Makhno’s armies; the anarchist inspired militias ‘grupos de afinidad’ during the Spanish Civil war of 1936-39, Free Derry in 1970s Northern Ireland, the Zapatista autonomous municipalities in the Chiapas state of Mexico, Ghandi’s ideas of ‘Swadeshi’ self-reliant villages, the Free State of Christiania in the centre of Denmark’s capital, Copenhagen, the post-war squatting movement in the UK, and the free parties emerging after 1989.

Marx’s work as a ‘weapon in the hands of the workers’ that furthers rather than contains revolution (Cleaver, 1979: 3). Autonomous Marxists explicitly reject the formation of political parties and the taking of state power, emphasising instead the need for the autonomy of workers struggles. The Italian autonomous left in the late 1960s and early 1970s played a key role in developing such ideas, especially that the working classes were no longer seen as defenceless victims fighting defensive battles (Cleaver, 1979). The ‘refusal of work’ was a central theme in this movement, a refusal to accept the logic of competition and profit (Vernon, 1983; Lotinger and Marazzi, 1980). Here, it was not just the factory that is being critiqued, but the whole idea of the ‘social factory’—the alienation felt in the home, community and at work (Solidarity Federation, 1995). Most recently, alter/anti-capitalist groups have developed creative threads of autonomy, through their eschewal of hierarchy in favour of direct action and decentralism and network forms of organising using affinity groups, delegates and spokecouncils (Castells, 1996; Notes from Nowhere, 2003).

3. Anarchism and autonomy in Argentina

These threads of autonomy and anarchia can be traced in Argentina’s past. The country’s history of immigration, and the specifically of its economy in the late 19th century are important precursors for contemporary autonomous movements. Industrial activity in Argentina was, during its early economic development, relatively small-scale...
Anarchists, including the Italian Errico Malatesta who resided in the country between 1885 and 1889, were vital in spreading anarchist ideas amongst the Italian immigrants, and followers of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin played a key role in working class organising which left a stamp on Argentinian society well into the 20th century (Joll, 1979: 159). The movement was further fuelled by legendary figures such as Simón Radowitzky, an 18 year-old anarchist Russian immigrant who blew up the chief of police, Colonel Falcón, after brutal police repression during the May Day demonstrations in 1909 (Bayer, 2002). Publications such as the celebrated La Protesta (The Protest) which is still in circulation, La Anarquía (Anarchy) and La Lucha Obrera (The Workers Struggle) were also key to spreading ideas.

The heyday of anarchist influence and worker militancy came in the first years of the 20th century (Nouzilles and Montaldo, 2003). The strong presence of both smaller, independent anarcho-syndicalists, and larger, mass socialist unions (such as the Argentine Workers Federation) flavoured Argentina with many creative tensions between non-hierarchical and more ‘mass’ ways of organising. In particular, anarchist groups were marginalised by the socialists as they entered into agreements with the government (Munck, 1987: 48). However, the widespread repression in a general strike in 1910, along with the growing organisation of the capitalist class and reformist parties such as the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), the emergence of a systematic division of labour and socialist trade unions wishing to make deals with the government, signalled the end of non-aligned, anarchist hegemony in the working movement (Munck, 1987; Rock, 2002).

Autonomous, militant organising of this type was not seen again on this scale in Argentina for most of the 20th century due to growing economic prosperity and social reforms introduced by the UCR in the 1920s, a succession of repressive military governments which peppered the country’s history from 1931, and the leadership of General Juan Peron from the mid 1940s who, through a process of top-down unionisation, successfully manipulated the working-class movement into a popular, mass non-class nationalist movement (Munck, 1987: 250). The myth of the ‘descamisados’ (the shirtless ones) championing their saviour Peron during the mass mobilisations of 1945 has left an almost overwhelming mark on Argentinian labour history which has obscured many of its more autonomous threads. The subsequent growth of large unionist unions from the 1950s like the Central of Argentinian Workers (CTA) and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) have been effective in managing and dissipating strikes and workplace struggles to the present day (Petras, 2002a: 3).

Nevertheless, anarchist-led worker militancy has continued sporadically since its heyday at the beginning of the last century. The Semana Trágica (Tragic Week) in January 1919, a year in which the number of strikes peaked in Argentine history, saw bloody battles between striking workers and the government and the military, mainly in Buenos Aires. Fuelled by a new wave of radicalism after the Russian revolution, a general strike was organised by FORA with its 20,000 strong membership. However, police repression left over 1000 dead, 4000 injured and 55,000 in prison (Munck, 1987; Marshall, 1992: 505). More recently, spurred on by the events of 1968, popular uprisings such as the ‘Cordobazo’ in May 1969 saw students and car and metal workers clash bloodily with the military government in Cordoba (Munck, 1987), while armed guerrilla groups such as...
the Montoneros emerged to challenge military rule in the 1970s. However, such uprisings met bloody responses from a string of violent military governments, especially during La Guerra Sucia (the dirty war) of 1976–83 when three military juntas effectively quelled all social movement and labour organising, leaving 30,000 officially ‘disappeared’ (Feitlowitz, 1998). However, increasing repression and economic incompetence from the military governments, most notably three digit inflation, combined to create a return of strikes and protests towards the end of the period of military rule. The return to democratic rule in 1983 saw social movements renew their struggle albeit with different orientations. In particular, the dirty war led to the emergence of a new political space for well organised human rights groups, epitomised by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Moreover, ‘money terrorism’ (Dinerstein, 2002) from external debts, stringent IMF loan conditions and high inflation during the presidency of Alfonsin (1983–89) marked the return of a strong labour movement who demanded greater national control of the economy. As discussed below, more militant labour and union politics gathered pace during the Menem period of the 1990s, who focused their energies on new devastations wrought by neoliberal reforms (Dinerstein, 2001).

4. Interlude December 2001: Economic meltdown and the Argentinazo

The current wave of autonomous organising amongst the unemployed is rooted in a reaction against the oppressive patron-client politics of the large Peronist trade unions and the neoliberal project which gained full momentum under Carlos Menem between 1989 and 1999. Through strict adherence to the ‘Washington Consensus’, Argentina experienced rapid free-market ‘shock therapy’ involving fiscal austerity, privatisation and market liberalisation (Stiglitz, 2002). Menem oversaw the dismantling of the country’s vast public sector and maintained the convertibility of the peso with the dollar at a rate of one to one. These economic reforms were aimed at financial ‘stability’, but in fact only brought instability through casualised labour, poverty and massive privatisation-led unemployment (Dinerstein, 2001, 2003a). Debts reached unprecedented levels of $150B by 2002 and due to liberalisation in the financial sector, money continued to leak out of the country rather than service debts. The Argentine bourgeoisie, for example, moved $130B out of Argentina (Petras, 2002b: 4). This movement of money combined with conditions on loans from the International Monetary Fund and a zero-deficit plan based on reducing public wages and pensions, imposed further deflationary adjustments and resulted in public spending cuts, lack of food and unpaid wages. By 2001, the country defaulted on their debt payments, 50%, nearly 20 million people, lived in extreme poverty and over six million people, or 45% of the working population were unemployed or sub employed (Kohan, 2002: 2). Strikes, road blocks and looting became daily occurrences. The politics of hunger and misery were showing their full effect.

These events came to a head in December 2001 when Cavallo, the economic minister, ushered in the ‘carreralito’ which limited bank withdrawals to $250 a week in an attempt to stem the outflow of money. All saving and checking accounts were frozen which destroyed the savings of pensioners and five million middle-class Argentines. President De la Rua called a State of Emergency in the evening of the 19th of December in response to growing lootings and road blocks and the thousands who had gathered outside the presidential palace to denounce him. Few were going to accept a slide back into the repressive days of military rule, and 100,000 took to the streets of Buenos Aires. De la Rua resigned at 8 pm the next day but only after bitter street battles in the capital had left 35 dead, 439 injured and 3200 arrested (Kohan, 2002: 40).

From this popular uprising, the Argentinazo, emerged a broad and creative repertoire of popular tactics to challenge economic neoliberalism and political corruption (see North and Huber, 2005; Gordon and Chatterton, 2004). In particular, there was a potent conjunction of middle-class outrage towards economic ruin and political corruption and longer term working class labour organising. 7

7 The carcerolazo, for example, takes its name from carcerola, or pot, and involves the Latin American wide tradition of banging pots in public to create a huge noise, along with singing and chanting. This method was used on several occasions during the popular uprising, especially outside the home of politicians. Carcerolazos are so effective as many different social groups participate, often for a variety of reasons. Piquetes, road blocks, are also one of the key features and are used widely across Latin America as a tool by the unemployed to make their demands by disrupting the circulation of people and goods. While the piqueteros are some of the most defiant industrial workers, the pickets usually attract wide community support. In the light of countless bankruptcies, factory occupations have also become widespread, with hundreds of re-occupied factories, the most famous including Zanon and Brukman, restarting production using participatory techniques, adding on community facilities, and forming solidarity networks throughout Argentina. A further feature are escrachas (literally to mark), which are mass community events against those responsible for war crimes. These marches, organised by the Mesa de Escrache in which the group HIJOS (Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silence) play a key role, usually involve a march to the home of an ex-military leader responsible for murder or torture, and a prolonged campaign against him to make his day to day life difficult. Finally, popular assemblies and barter networks have become a feature of countless neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires and other cities (Dinerstein, 2003b, Pearson, 2003). While they are often populated by more middle-class groups, they are developing a critical anti-politics, and models for collective local politics and decision making based around the idea of ‘que se vayan todos’ (get rid of them all) which brings together many different social groups (Dinerstein, 2003b). Often squatting derelict buildings, they organise a range of community activities and workshops, and supporting many of the other groups discussed above.
The political space opened up by this wide-ranging popular uprising has led to a broad and often tense debate, much of which is based around the validity of traditional leftist and more autonomous ways of organising. Traditional left groups embedded in orthodox Marxist–Leninism, for example, remained committed to ‘vertical’ structures, fixed agendas and established party leaders. They largely saw the upsurge in political activity as too diffuse and lacking leadership, and hence credibility, and instead focused on infiltration of the popular groups like the neighbourhood assemblies, party building, and curbing autonomous actions. Through this process, many ordinary people suspicious of party politicians and turned off by endless political debates were driven away, while those trying to pursue less hierarchical ways of organising were marginalized.

Nevertheless, a process of reinventing politics has been initiated, and horizontal methods of organising, using consensus decision-making, small affinity groups, and spokescouncils have taken hold. Roundtable events, called ‘mesas’ or ‘rondas’, were adopted as ways of discussing issues, where everyone has an equal say and chairpersons are replaced by voluntary facilitators. Amongst several groups, committees have been replaced by networks bringing together groups who share common beliefs. What this suggests is a desire to do politics differently, to get rid of the legacy of corrupt bosses, politicians and military leaders, to help yourself, and each other to organise horizontally, without leaders and with respect, dignity and purpose. As Dinnerstein comments (2003), it is an anti-politics which has opened up spaces for new meanings to be invented. Many anarchist, syndicalist and libertarian parties played a role in this process, but even these groups made limited headway due to the widespread mistrust of structures within popular organisations. Here, we might glimpse what Hardt and Negri (2001, 60–62) call the ‘multitude’, a radical counter-power of plural, creative subjectivities. Clearly, such experiments face real limits and have recently suffered from apathy, recuperation and repression.

5. El Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados: ‘For work, dignity and social change’

The Unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina is essentially a militant, mass and barrio-based movement of unemployed workers (Petras, 2002b: 1) that emerged to provide services, make food and shelter, sell locally made products, educate themselves, and organise collectively against the state and capital. They are part of a new wave of social movements in Latin America, one that is centred in urban areas (Petras, 2003a). This current wave questions many current post-Marxist understandings of popular uprisings, challenging the ‘end of class’ thesis based upon an ‘atomized impotent urban poor’ incapable of effective resistance (ibid: 2) and the declining power of the labour movement due to workplace fragmentation. Unlike rural peasants whose struggles are often diffused over extensive, remote areas, these marginal urban groups have become strategic actors as their direct actions such as blocking roads can interfere directly with circuits of capital accumulation (Petras, 2002b: 11). The origins and power bases of the MTDs are the poorer, industrial neighbourhoods within Greater Buenos Aires, such as Quilmes, Varela, Solano and La Matanza, and the poorer provinces of Argentina such as Rio Negro (see Fig. 1).

The MTDs are part the piquetero movement. Piqueteros (picketers) are groups of unemployed workers who are defined through tactics of blocking roads and emerge from Argentina’s long tradition of autonomous working-class organising. The modern day piquetero movement is part of a complex network of global economic and political restructuring grounded in the deepening of neoliberal economics, the mobility of

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8 Barrio means neighbourhood in Castilian.
transnational capital, corporate mergers, financial and currency speculations and privatisation. It is part of the continued exploitation of labour that is used by the country's elite to compensate for the real limits Argentina faces from its weak resource base, fragility in the face of world crises, and its dependent position in the international economic pecking order (Harman, 2002).

In Argentina, the recent catalyst for the growth of piqueterismo was the privatisations of the 1990s that delivered many communities dependent on traditional industries such as oil, steel and mining a death sentence (Petras, 2002a). In particular, it was in the wake of the mass unemployment in the once prosperous oil producing regions on the remote fringes like General Mosconi in Salta and Cutral-Co in Neuquén that the piquetero movement was born (Zibechi, 2003; Dinerstein, 2001). In such places, people faced a new reality—the focus of struggle had shifted from the factory to the street. Denied the 'strike' as an organising tool and with no workplace left in which to demonstrate, unemployed workers have organised themselves to block roads in order to present a series of demands which include the release of jailed militants, a withdrawal of police, food parcels, state-funded jobs, living wages, unemployment benefits, and public infrastructure investments. The road block (piquete) becomes an effective weapon in their praxis because, as Petras points out (2002a: 4), ‘it halts both production input and output. Like a debilitating strike, it hampers the elite from accumulating profits. It slows foreign exchange, cutting into taxes that enable the government to service its debt’. Such road blocks have become a regular feature of Argentina since 1996, a year which saw 140. By 2002, there were nearly 2000 (Kohan, 2002: 32).

Numerous divisions exist within the piquetero movement reflecting differences of history, tactics and ideology, much of which can be summed up by a power/counter-power dichotomy and the extent of connections with the state, unions and political parties. In opposition to those which have links with the state, the MTDs are part of the more autonomous piqueterismo. As discussed below, rather than attempting to use state power to build a political project or disciplining capital, they are committed to a new territorial counter or anti-power, based upon dignity, meeting basic needs and social change (Dinerstein, 2003a).

The MTDs have developed a strong repertoire of counter-hegemonic discourses through their slogan ‘work, dignity and social change’, that combines three inter-connected demands. As unemployed people, work is the foremost demand, but this is qualified by the second two. Dignity, perhaps the most important of all MTDs’ demands, is also a key leitmotif for struggle across Latin America. It invokes the legitimate use of struggle and force in demands for food and work. Being able to work in a meaningful way and feed oneself becomes a source of individual and collective dignity. As Andres (2003) from MTD Solano commented: ‘We are against and we fight whichever system of domination exists, call it what you call it, it has to do with dignity. We...

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9 The worst affected were the large industrial cities of Córdoba and Rosario and the deindustrial neighbourhoods of Greater Buenos Aires like La Matanza, and the poor, provincial regions on the country’s fringes such as Neuquén and Jujuy. One the largest traumas was experienced in Argentina’s state monopolised oil industry, YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Argentinos), when it was privatised in 1991. When this struggling and inefficient oil giant moved to the private hands of Spain’s Repsol there followed widespread closures, mainly due to pressures from US shareholders. Many communities dependent on the oil industry were devastated overnight. Prior to privatisation over 51,000 people worked in the oil industry, the number now is around 5000 (Petras, 2002b).
For the MTDs, there are a number of organisational prerequisites to achieving these demands the most prominent of which are autonomy, grassroots democracy and popular power (Zibechi, 2003). While the second is embedded in the principle of horizontal organising and delegating power to the local level, and the third emerges from reconstituting social relations through ideas of equality, justice and popular education, it is autonomy that is the guiding principle. Rather than a fixed belief, autonomy is constituted through daily acts: ‘What we understand by autonomy is the capacity that, as a people, we have to organise and lead ourselves... Autonomy is, above all, action, realised in daily life and struggle. For this reason, the pillars that support it, more than grand definitions, are found in future reflections, when we discover our work in the MTD’ (MTD Anibal Veron, 2003a). For the MTDs, autonomy is also rooted in a deep-seated mistrust of existing power:

6. Beyond militant particularism. Redefining an autonomous politics of place

MTDs, as a radical form of autonomous neighbourhood politics, are survival strategies to the multiple crises faced in each neighbourhood. As Petras (2003b) reminds us, the ‘organising principle of the struggle has been hunger’. Such a politics of necessity underpins collective self-organisation. One member of MTD Solano further reflected: ‘Here in Solano, the movement emerged from the concrete necessities of the neighbourhood. I think there was not a starting recipe, but that with time we made one, and in the way we organised ourselves, things emerged’ (quoted in Situaciones, 2001). Horizontal and decentralised organising in each neighbourhood is the hallmark of the MTDs. While most work is done through informal leaders and activists, decision-making is filtered up from each locality to an assembly at the centre where the principle decisions are taken. In each neighbourhood there are several work groups that choose delegates to form a local table. From this table, two delegates are chosen to represent the neighbourhood at the General Assembly. It is this model which fosters horizontal participation and eschews permanent leaders. Andres, from MTD Solano explained how this works in practice:

One of the forms in which we implemented horizontality, apart from getting rid of the post of secretary was to create work areas, so within the movement several areas exist—health, administration, press, relations with organisations and visits, finance—which is the work area which looks at the spending of the movement through a common fund. They do not control it, more oversee it. There is another work area, planning, which establishes what to do with regard to the needs put forward by the members. In each place there are assemblies where the activities of the movement are discussed, they discuss who will enter each work group. These assemblies lead to a general meeting of the areas with delegates from each group who bring plans, worries, doubts and conflicts that arise in each group. The delegates then take back information to their area to rediscuss the issues and finally come back to a general meeting to make final decisions. This fortifies and consolidates the participation of the compañeros in decision-making, maybe it does not go deep enough into some subjects. Where there is deeper discussion is in the training workshops in which compañeros use popular education techniques (Andres, 2003).

Localised decision-making has become an almost unquestionable dogma. For example, piqueteros will only negotiate at road blocks rather than in formal meetings at trade union or company offices in urban centres, so all can participate and brokering deals with individuals can be avoided. Some piquetero groups have realised that their strength comes from their local autonomy and have resisted moves towards centralisation and national organizing. Piqueteros from one town, General Mosconi, for instance, did not send delegates to the two national meetings (Petras, 2002a: 5), while MTD Solano withdrew from the national MTD coordinating group, Anibal Veron, stating that it was restricting their autonomy (MTD Solano, 2003). As Petras (2002b: 7) points out ‘the strength of the movement however, continues mostly at the local level, based on neighbourhood ties, mutual trust, and concrete demands’.

So how do we understand the militant territorial politics of the MTDs? Raymond Williams (1989) term ‘militant particularism’ (see also Harvey, 2001) is useful here which suggests that all local struggles have their origins in particular places, through particular people and at particular times. As a response to the place-bound crises
of privatisation-led unemployment of the 1990s, there is much about the MTDs that reflects such a localist politics. Clearly, there are conservative tendencies in these local politics, especially when struggles seek to preserve static and exclusionary notions of community, or what Castree (2004) calls a ‘geographical apartheid’, rather than calling into question broader social and economic issues.

The harsh realities of neoliberal economies as experienced by unemployed groups are strong justifications for such place-bound, often exclusionary, militancy. The control of space is fundamental to minimise further losses under the current economic system. Such control by the MTDs is set in a context of the shock therapy of the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Stiglitz, 2001) and its associated programme of structural adjustment, and economic blocks such as the US-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) which, underpinned through military strength, only show signs of intensifying poverty for millions of Latin Americans. Where most resources and land have been privatised, control of what little space remains is often one of the last hopes. Many groups have been so marginalized, then, that there are clear moral grounds for protecting their own interests at the expense of ‘distant others’. In other words, Esco bar (2001: 149) has called this ‘defensive localization’.

However, rather than falling into an exclusionary and parochial politics, the MTDs are developing a place politics based upon collective autonomy, which has at its core inter-barrial, as well as intra-barrial, responsibilities. In this sense, an initial crisis-led local politics has avoided tendencies to exclusivist claims on place or identity. Castree’s (2004: 137) comments that place projects are ‘messy’ are useful here and instead what has emerged is a local autonomy that while idealist is also complex, relational, pragmatic and selective. While emerging from a particular crisis situation, the MTDs are linked to broader struggles between capital and labour across time and space. It is relational through its embeddedness in the waves of immigrants, especially Italians, who arrived in Argentina from the 1880s, and the presence of anarchists and syndicalists that allowed mutual and autonomist working practices to flourish amongst impoverished communities. Moreover, it is pragmatic as the MTDs acknowledge the limitations to their place-based projects of autonomy, especially from external influences, but nonetheless remain committed to their vision of locally embedded social change.

It is also a selective place-based struggle, representing both an opening and closure to the outside world. The MTDs are aware of both the pitfalls of translocal links (privatisation, withdrawal and outsourcing of capital and employment, clientalist politics relations, hierarchies amongst church, union and other community leaders) and their benefits (networking, solidarity, financial aid, learning, skills sharing, protection) and attempt to manage these links and flows the best they can, and importantly on their terms by establishing filters, which restrict certain flows whilst permitting others. It is also about establishing protocols for networks which connect localities with the outside world what will be shared, who by, who has access, and on what basis? As Castree (2004: 158) comments, limited ‘place autarchies’ is a way in which groups can gain some control over the degree and kind of interaction with outside groups. So there is selective engagement with the outside world, through the strategic use of, for example, the internet, media and international solidarity, to defend place projects. Inter-place solidarity is sought with those, wherever they may be, willing to promote and defend dignity, solidarity and autonomy, and disengagement is the response to those who are not.

An unresolved tension facing such place-based politics is how to abstract the potency of such local struggles to a more generalisable level. For David Harvey, a central tension is how to transform militant particularism ‘into something more substantial on the global stage’ (2001: 175) which can act as a model for the benefit of all society. Here we encounter the tricky issue of the universal and the particular—or what is good for one local struggle is good for everyone. There is a sense that if place-based struggles cannot say something about the wider world they are ineffective. Thus he contends that struggles should transcend place and arrive at a more global politics (ibid: 193). For Harvey (2001: 175) it is a ‘question of loyalties’ suggesting that at some point we have to think beyond our place to the needs of distant others.

Esteva and Suri Prakash (1998) provide a strong antidote to such an outlook by rejecting the ‘dangerous arrogance’ of ‘global thinking’. They assert that claiming to ‘know’ such a complex world is a dangerous illusion, and the intellectual counterpart of the global neoliberal economy. By aping the priorities and practices of a tiny political and business elite, it is global, not local, action that is parochial (ibid: 27). A desire to universalise local struggles then takes us dangerously close to ideas of a world society or global citizenry. Usefully, Esteva and Suri Prakash (1998: 33) suggest that local struggles need allies to create effective opposition in taking on their particular enemy, but such solidarity does not need ‘global thinking’. Strength is gained through a reaffirmation of what we know about our localities, a rejection of the ‘global project’, its discourses, institutions and local agents, and the moral principle that people ought not do to other places what they would not tolerate in their own place. In rejecting a one-world universalism, Esteva and Suri Prakash (1998) propose a pluriverse. Hence we arrive at the idea of ‘one no but many yeses’ (Kingsnorth, 2002) that does not demand a global consciousness.
Harvey (2001: 197) is perhaps correct in insisting that grassroots mediating institutions are needed so that multiple militant particularisms are brought into constructive relations with each other and local political practices such as autonomy can spread. Mediating institutions have emerged including the Coordinator of Popular Autonomous Organisations (COPA) in Argentina, Via Campesina and Peoples Global Action (PGA). However, it is not essential that groups adopt a universal sense of priorities or actions or a common counter-hegemonic discourse. At the core of its autonomous place politics, the MTDs reject the tendency to universalise, impose or control, but instead invite others to liberate themselves, experiment with autonomy, reflect upon it and adapt according to their circumstances. Essentially, unlike previous experiments with state communism, autonomy does not propose a ‘one size fits all’ solution, but each attenuated to local circumstances. Universal discourses like dignity, work and social change are used, but what these mean in practice is left to each neighbourhood. 

The MTDs, then, represent both a ‘militant particularism’ in their desperate defence of locality from unemployment and hunger, but also a ‘militant universalism’ in their commitment to the spread of freely associated and mutually supportive radical autonomous projects and social relations. In the light of Esteva and Suri Prakash’s (1998) comments, perhaps their vision is also understood as a ‘militant pluriversalism’.

7. The solidarity economy

The broad critique of the MTDs emerges through practical experience. Autonomous spaces are woven together through lived alternatives. Road blocks, for example, are more than an event demanding work and an end to hunger, they provoke a new relationship between work and social life. As one piquetero from the Neuquén province stated:

You have to construct a new society every day: at the picket, at the march, at the union, in the family, with your friends, with music, with dance, with culture. For these reasons, the picket is more than where it happens. It’s a culture. Pickets lack baths and water, but there is happiness of the shared struggle, there’s plenty of soup for everyone, there’s solidarity, there’s a different society (quoted in Kohan, 2002: 68).

Work may have been the demand that enabled autonomous groups to mobilise, but from there, a much broader critique of ‘the work system’ has developed. Many people in Argentina today look to the MTDs as an example of organising community work and relations beyond the money economy. As Andres from MTD Solano commented:

Unemployment is something that has motivated us to organise, the objective is to one day have a more dignified life, we won’t find real work within the capitalist system, we have to create our own sources of work, without oppression or domination. Everything that comes from the system is because it suits the system, Kirchner [Argentina’s president since 2003] is one more from within the system and up to now he hasn’t done anything to improve the situation for those within the autonomous movements. For us governments are those we are struggling against (Andres, 2003).

The strength of the MTDs has been in their commitment to disengagement with the formal economy and the creation of a local, independent economía solidaridad (the solidarity economy) oriented to meeting community needs while reducing dependency on the state and exposure to the market. Central here are small collective spaces that foster face to face interactions. Paradoxically, unemployed groups have used central government benefits to establish such co-operative ventures. Hence, a key struggle here has been not just the right to government unemployment benefits, but also the right to distribute them. The MTDs, along with many other piquetero groups, have managed to wrestle control of the distribution of unemployment funds from Peronist and trade union leaders and collectivise them creating proyectos productivos, or production projects. This has been a key step allowing the MTDs to transform their identity from “clients” of the Peronist state to that of organised and independent unemployed workers (Délamata, 2003: 3). By the middle of 2002, the MTDs of Animal Verón distributed 9000 unemployment benefits per month to its 15,000 members (Figs. 2 and 3).

At one MTD in San Telmo in central Buenos Aires, members explained to me how each person was part of one or more community and productive workgroups. The list of groups was pinned to the walls showing a focus on income generation but also a ‘basic needs’ economy:
Underpinning the solidarity economy are spaces such as the cobbler shop, bakery, tool shop, metal workshop, orchard, block-making workshop and clothes shop. Developing several of these simultaneously, many larger MTDs function as quasi-liberated zones, providing everything from food, to health and water purification (Petras, 2002a: 4). In General Mosconi for example, the town is ruled de facto by the local unemployed committee, as the local municipal officials have been pushed aside (Petras, 2002b: 6). In essence, the autonomous workers movement is attempting to reorganise the culture of work to make it meaningful, collective and linked to local needs. Andres recounted how they developed this solidarity economy:

we put ourselves forward with the principles of autonomy, horizontality, direct democracy and struggle. We decided to use the unemployment benefits as a means rather than an end and started to develop workshops and mini ventures where we could eventually self-sustain ourselves, a concept which we are still discussing within the movement—an organisation of work without exploitation and where everyone would be the owner of their tools. Today there are bakeries and community gardens which aim at self-sufficiency and think about the dignity of feeding ourselves without genetically modified food. To make healthy food and the protein our bodies need. The garden workshops happen in almost every neighbourhood, there is also a more ambitious project in an abandoned factory we have that was given to us by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. There we want to develop an organic garden and a farm to breed rabbits and chickens (Andres, 2003).

This reworking of community activity, towards a more collective, needs-oriented economy, is the basis of reworking social identities. Here, we can see the many fruitful links between such experiments in Argentina and the Italian workerist movement of the 1970s, who recognised that the struggle breached the factory into the social factory of the neighbourhood.

8. Recreating the collective, autonomous self

We are brought up with two big lies: one is to do with religion, when you die you’re going to be ok. The other, when we have a revolution everyone is going to be happy. We don’t have to wait until the revolution to be happy to start to construct a new person. We start to construct the new person today. From our political vision, autonomy can’t exist if it’s not collective. And this collective autonomy implies responsibilities, for everyone and between everyone. Responsibility to construct, to promise, to respect your friends to love each other every day (quoted in Kohan, 2002: 30).

These words from one MTD member highlights their commitment to a politics based upon the creation of autonomous individuals who share in collective responsibilities. As Martinez (2002) comments: ‘It’s about recovering the collectivity. One of the greatest harms that capitalism has done to us is the degradation of values of solidarity and community’. Paradoxically, one of the key influences in shaping new forms of sociality within the poor areas where the MTDs emerged was the church community rather than traditional left groups, who used liberation theology and popular edu-
cation to empower the unemployed, especially in relation to land squatting in the 1980s (Zibechi, 2003).

The idea of ‘exodus’ to the promised (collective, anti-capitalist) land, is a central part of this political awakening.

The vecino, the neighbour, has become a key metaphor for this spirit of collectivity. It reclaims a discourse of localness that is under-represented in dominant stories of the city, a discourse that is embedded in solidarity and an ethics of mutual aid. Members of MTD San Telmo reflected how decision-making was negotiated collectively at weekly meetings and membership entailed numerous responsibilities. These were set out on another piece of paper on the wall:

- Everyone participates in the groups Monday to Friday;
- Everyone has to come to the weekly assembly to participate;
- If you do not attend for 3 days, you have to reapply to the group;
- Everyone has to pay $1 peso per week to cover food costs;
- Everyone has to participate in demonstrations;
- No alcohol allowed in the building.

This was not just a list. I saw the compañeros of MTD San Telmo fulfilling these duties on many occasions—eating together, caring for each other's children, making bread and products to sell, and demonstrating on the streets for their rights and for work (Fig. 4).

Existing norms and social solidarities embedded in particular places can also operate as constraints in the struggle to think alternatives (Harvey, 2001: 201). A hurdle in the creation of a new social subject is overcoming existing loyalties, dependent relations to trade unions and local state officials, and the continuing attraction of wage-based, consumer society as an organising principle for social relations. While trade unions have ceased to be the main negotiators of collective identity and rights in the context of widespread unemployment, government influence remains strong through patronage networks of the Peronist party that continue to distribute unemployment benefits (Delamata, 2003). Encouraging autonomous individuals, then, does not come easily, especially as many unemployed workers come to the MTDs from large, Peronist-dominated industrial workplaces steeped in hierarchical ways of organising. It is from such understandings that the MTDs have come to focus on the creation of new forms of sociality that brings people together in place rather than divides them.

Popular education and reflection are key tools in the defence of the autonomous self. Popular education identifies the oppressors and the oppressed, but also the oppressor in all of us. Hence, one of the main struggles for the MTDs is the struggle against themselves. As one MTD member commented:

The struggle doesn’t just mean blocking roads or challenging the police, but that it is a daily struggle, it is to struggle against ourselves, and the old ways of thinking to incorporate new thoughts where relations are based upon solidarity, collectivity, friendship (quoted in Situaciones, 2001).

Through popular education they attempt to break the dependency on types of social interactions that lead to oppression. Popular education, then, is used to understand why people crave and desire authority and how people can organise their own lives without the ‘fear of being free’. MTDs undertake frequent workshops and training as a way to check and recheck their agreements and how their activities function. Reducing dependency on those who have greater skills, experience or confidence is central and delegates from each work group rotate and are fully recallable. This is a process with no clear end. A member from MTD Solano (2003) commented:

We perceive horizontality like an exploration, like a process of constituting new social relations, that destroys the values of capitalism and generates a new subjectivity. For that reason we must say that we are far from arriving at a total horizontality and we see it more as part of the challenge of everyday struggle.

‘Perhaps the biggest success of capitalism since the 1990s has been simply to decontextualise daily life, erase limits, wipe away paradigms, break the ability of understanding reality in the hearts and minds of the masses’ (Iglesias, 2002). Hence, one of the aims of popular education is to rebuild critical skills that enable people to understand and contextualise their daily lives. A key part of this collective, autonomous education has been the right to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories.
in their own words. A broad popular press has emerged, with the MTDs publishing their own books, supported by independent media groups such as An-Red and Indy media. 12 Such self-representation is a key part of creating their own place stories and taking control over how their struggle is represented.

This reflexive autonomous and collective sociality aims to step beyond both the ‘bad, deviant subject’, and the ‘good, conformist subject’ towards the ‘non-subject’ who thinks and acts outside the parameters of the current capitalist system (Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1998: 45). This is particularly pertinent for the unemployed workers, who under classic Marxism are defined negatively as the reserve army of industry (Zibechi, 2003). The MTDs fuse their position outside the formal economy with a creative refusal of wage labour and labels such as worker/non-worker. Hence, forms of sociality are aspired to that do not merely critique capitalism but reframe social relations but go far beyond them. While the MTDs are willing to listen, learn and share, at the same time they remain committed to an anti-capitalist praxis.

It is a declaration, not of being ‘complementary’ or ‘subordinate’ to capitalism, but of the right to develop workable alternatives.

9. The road is made by walking 13

The background for the struggle of the MTDs is the tension between those who are using the state to build a political project, and those who have rejected state power as a legitimate aspiration. The MTD’s struggle for autonomy reflects this growing anti-power that is made real through an autonomous politics of place, a commitment to a solidarity economy, and a collective social subjectivity. It is a negative notion of civil society which challenges that of the individualistic bourgeoisie and the homogenous citizen (Dinerstein, 2002: 29). There is no future roadmap here. Experimentation, failure and hope partially mark the way, but the rest is contingent and constructed every day. Like most other social movements, the unfolding struggle of the MTDs for autonomy is far from clear, with little end in sight and more questions than answers. In many ways this is inevitable. The goal posts have shifted away from easy to understand vanguardist revolutions. The fundamental question in the struggle for place autonomy becomes, as Holloway (2002) puts it, how do you change the world without taking power? Here, the anti-political slogan of the Argentinian uprising ‘que se vayan todos’ (get rid of them all) becomes a key motif. This is not just a rejection of a political elite, it is a rejection of politics embedded in the power of the state. Echoing the sentiments of the Italian autonomists, the aim is not to reproduce state power but to create a society built on non-power or anti-power.

Today’s realpolitik is that the global political and economic elite are unbeatable on their own turf. Hence disengagement, or desertion and exodus (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 212); are tactics of those seeking autonomy. It is due to this mistrust of the state that people have sought not to take power but to undermine it, by ignoring it (Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1998). This leaves us in very unfamiliar territory: an ill-defined enemy, an eschewal of power, a rejection of blueprints and a mistrust of leaders. Reassurance perhaps comes from understanding that ‘not knowing’ is part of the revolutionary process (Holloway, 2002: 215). This is the journey for autonomy which the MTD, like others, have embarked upon. The starting point is clear; it is a refusal. The direction is unclear; it is made by walking. An end-point is avoided; and necessarily so.

Clearly not taking state power presents immediate limits for the process of autonomy. The MTDs are self-critical and extremely aware of their limitations. They are all too aware of that they face a strong military-backed state repression aimed at eliminating the popular movements (increasingly defined as domestic terrorists), using murder and imprisonment, which also in 2003 faced new legislation making road blocks and mass demonstrations acts of extortion and sedition (Tregon, 2003). Trade unions and other left groups also remain keen to monopolise the autonomous MTDs, and mediate with the government on their behalf. Student groups were also eager to take part in the leadership of the movement and to spread unobtainable goals about what could be achieved through autonomous organising. The unity of the unemployed movement has also been fragmented by the return of local Peronist bosses and their patronage relations based around unemployment committees who offer short-term work in return for acquiescence. Here, the more radical MTDs dedicated to continued disengagement from the state isolate themselves from many unemployed people who have turned to old Peronist links to find work.

12 Recent books to emerge include From blame to self-management (Flores, 2002). Taking blame as a response to the problems of unemployment, the book attempts to recover the history of workers, make a stand against welfare culture and the methods of political clientalism, and in their place encourage cooperativism and self-management as practical tools for social transformation. The group Santa Revuelta, who play at pickets, published To the streets: A history of the piquetero and carceroleo movements (Kohan, 2002), while MTD Solano published Dario y Maxi: Dignidad Piquetera (MTD Anibal Veron, 2003b) documenting the events of 26th June 2002 when two of unemployed youth (from MTD Liniers, Dario and Maxi, were murdered by the Buenos Aires police in the suburb of Avellaneda. A member of MTD Solano, Francisco Ferrara, published Mas Alla Del Corte De Rutas—La lucha por uma Nueva Subjetividad (2003, Catalogos) which explored the struggle for a new social identities beyond the pickets.

13 From the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, quoted in Notes from Nowhere (2003: 499).
Understandably, the MTDs have also focused more on immediate demands such as employment projects, living wages, unemployment benefits and renationalization, which has weakened the focus on a wider anti-capitalist imaginary and praxis. Moreover, Nestor Kirchner, the Peronist President since 2003, has introduced some progressive welfare measures that undermine the militancy of the unemployed workers movements.

Autonomous groups also face the problem of making a future with few workable examples. This ‘work in progress’ nature of autonomous geographies weakens their appeal to potential recruits who prefer the safety of an adaptable capitalist system. Faced with attempts at recuperation and reincorporation from authoritarian leftist groups, trade unions and the state, not to mention the advertising-led commodity economy, it is difficult to sustain loyalty to autonomous ways of organising, which may in all likelihood fail. In uncertain times, and faced with continued hunger and job loss, it is easy to gravitate back to the familiarity of wage labour and state protection. Finally, Petras (2003a: 5) suggests that the MTDs have transformed autonomy from a flexible tool into a dogma, thus precluding many alliances.

In spite of these limits, there is much to learn from and reflect on from this sojourn into the autonomous place-making struggle of the MTDs. Autonomy is valued more than an organisational tool; it is a way of life, a way of doing politics. Returning to Sheehan (2003), the struggle of the MTD is a process and a tension that is worked out in the here and now. Autonomy is based upon an explosive combination of making protest part of everyday life but also making life into a collective workable alternative. It is about finding the future in the present, refusing and escaping from this capitalist place (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Notes from Nowhere, 2003). Here we see the value of micro-scale, localised subaltern strategies of resistance (Pile and Keith, 1997; Sharp et al., 2000) that we can add to our repertoire of post-development or counter-development, non-capitalist imaginaries and practices (Norberg-Hodge, 1992; Rahmna and Bawtree, 1997).

In the MTDs we see the ‘defence of place’ (Escobar, 2001) offering new resources for theory and political action. Here, rather than simply finding a balance between the local and the global, through bland terms such as ‘glocalities’, groups such as the MTDs attempt to manage flows in and out of place to their advantage. The MTDs inspire us to make connections across the myriad of autonomous place struggles that respect diversity, resources, and a right to an economy that is based upon solidarity and mutual aid. Such connections offer hope, but often in ways which we did not expect. For example, autonomous movements are made and remade in emergent, complex adaptive behaviours based upon participative self-organising and collective intelligence that can lead to higher order outcomes which are difficult to control and predict (Chesters, 2003; Urry, 2002).

As Castoriadis (1991) reminds us, autonomy is a project that involves endless movement and questioning. It is a ‘long revolution’. Autonomy then is not an event, but a process of affirmation of self-belief that comes through self-organising together. Commentators make the mistake of looking for signs of an emerging organizational coherence, political leaders, and a common program that can bid for state power when they do not realise that the rules of engagement have changed. Many have simply rejected such meta-narratives. The MTDs are a case in point, who are building a transferable micro-politics that is resistant to incorporation, domination and the emergence of hierarchies. Naturally, the final word, walking through the messy, on-going process of making everyday autonomous geographies, comes from a member of MTD Solano:

I don’t think December 2001 was a lost opportunity for revolution nor was it a failed revolution. It was and is part of the ongoing revolutionary process here. We have learnt many lessons about collective organising and strength, and the barriers to self-management. For many people it opened their eyes to what we can do together, and that taking control of our lives and acting collectively whether it’s as part of a piquete, a communal bakery or an afterschool club dramatically improves the quality of our lives. If the struggle stays autonomous and with the people, the next uprising will have strong foundations to build upon…

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