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**A TIME OF OPPORTUNITIES:
THE *PIQUETERO* MOVEMENT AND
DEMOCRATIZATION IN ARGENTINA**

TRIGGERED BY THE DEEP economic and social crisis that culminated in 2001, broad popular masses took to the streets all across Argentina, protesting against the economic decline and hardship brought by the recession. Gradually giving rise to more organized social movement formations, the protest actions led to increased levels of political participation that in turn altered the face of the country's democratic life.

During the peak of the crisis, the mobilization, today known as the *piqueteros* movement, spread throughout the society, gaining a strong social presence and the status of an increasingly legitimate political force on the national arena.

Within the past five years, the movement has become partly incorporated within the structures of governmental administration, wielding political power in social policy decisions and on the human rights platform through the organs of regional government. In this paper, I review the ways in which the movement has been able to influence the direction and outlook of politics at the local level, discussing the movement's ability to shape governmental policy in the Province of Buenos Aires. In

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particular, my paper focuses on one of the many “Unemployed Workers Movements” (Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados - MTD) founded by the *piqueteros*, the MTD-Evita, assessing its actions and outcomes from the normative standpoint of representative democracy.

I will concentrate on three lines of inquiry:

- What is MTD? This part of my paper addresses the beginning of the social movement. Which organizations, groups, and individuals became part of MTD?
- How is grassroots success channeled into traditional forms of democratic participation?
- In which ways has the interaction between political actors and the MTD-Evita contributed to a greater participation of civil society sectors in decision-making structures, and to transparency and accountability in politics more generally?

A Social Movement is defined by Tilly as a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people made collective claims on others (Tilly 2004). According to Tilly, social movements are the main way for citizen’s participation in public politics (Tilly 2004:3). That is to say, it is a collective attempt to further a common interest or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions.

Anthony Giddens (1985) has identified four distinct areas in which social movements operate in modern societies:

- Democratic movements, concerned with the establishing or maintaining political rights;
- Labor movements, concerned with defensive control of the workplace and with the contesting and transforming the more general distribution of economical power;
- Ecological movements, concerned with limiting environmental and social damage resulting from transformation of the natural world by social action; and
- Peace movements, concerned with challenging the pervasive influence of military power and aggressive forms of nationalism.

In this context, the Argentine “Unemployed Workers Movements” or, collectively, MTD, have attracted the interest of academic researchers approaching the topic of movements and democratization from different perspectives. Recent book-length studies include *Genealogía*

de la revuelta by Raul Zibechi; *Entre la ruta y el barrio* by Maristella Svampa and Sebastián Pereyra; *Piqueteros, notas para una tipología* by Miguel Mazzeo; and *Piqueteros, una mirada histórica* by Iván Schneider Mansilla and Rodrigo Conti. We could also note the several case studies made in the province of Santiago del Estero by Mariana Farietti, who in his “Violencia y risa contra la política en el Santiagueño” contributes to our understanding of the complexity contained in the processes of *pueblada*, relativizing linear analysis of an action; the work done by Javier Auyero in Cutral-Có, for example in his “La vida en un piquete,” which gives an account of the “prepolitical” phase in the gestation of *puebladas* and of the impact of the neoliberal transformation on the processes of mutual recognition and identification among the subjects; or by Maristella Svampa, who investigates the reconstruction processes behind the *piquetero* movement in General Mosconi; and by Pablo Bergel, who focuses on the reviving communitarian life in Buenos Aires. The latter two authors analyze the trajectory of the mobilized social sectors from the year 2001 on, questioning the forms and functioning of political representation in their *Nuevos movimientos sociales y ONGs en la Argentina de la crisis*.

In addition, numerous journalistic pieces, monographs, and working papers have been written that either directly or indirectly tackle the phenomenon and the forms of collective action represented by the *piquetero* movement in Argentina.

First, however, we should place our analysis in the context of the broader literature on collective action and social movements. A number of theorists –Habermas and Offe, rooted in German critical theory; Laclau and Mouffe, with their synthesis of post-structuralism and neo-Gramscian Marxism; and Touraine in his sociology of action– explain the emergence of social movements with a reference to structural transformations and long-range political and cultural changes which created new sources of conflict and altered the process of constitution of collective identities. Habermas views new social movements as struggles in defense of the “life world.” Offe explains them within the context of late capitalist societies, focusing on the contradictory role of the capitalist state, which must ensure, simultaneously, the conditions for capital accumulation and bourgeois legitimacy. Some authors (Habermas, Offe, Laclau and Mouffe) highlight the notion of ‘crisis’ (of hegemony and legitimation) in contemporary capitalist societies and conceive collective actions as rational responses to such crisis. Laclau and Mouffe consider movements in terms of the availability of democratic discourse and the crisis of the hegemonic formation consolidated after World War II. Touraine focuses on the emergence of a new societal type, postindustrial society, characterized by increased levels of reflexivity.

For Offe, the emergence of new social movements must be understood as a reaction against the deepening, broadening, and increased irreversibility of the forms of domination and deprivation in late capitalist societies. The deepening of the mechanisms of social control and domination –the expansion of steering mechanisms– takes place as more and more areas of private life come under state regulation “through the use of legal, educational, medical, psychiatric, and media technologies” (Offe 1985:846). This process, paradoxically, has contradictory effects on state authority: on the one hand, it strengthens it as more areas of civil society come under state regulation and control; but, on the other hand, state authority is weakened as “there are fewer nonpolitical –and hence uncontested and noncontroversial– foundations of action to which claims can be referred or from which metapolitical (in the sense of ‘natural’ or ‘given’) premises for politics can be derived” (Offe 1985:818).

For Tilly, contemporary social movements are no different, in the form and content of their actions, from early-nineteenth century collective actors, since they both employ the same “repertoires” –that is, the limited range of legitimate actions available to collective actors. The consolidation of capitalism and the growth of the national state in the early nineteenth century caused a shift from communal to associational forms of collective action. The emphasis on democratic freedoms (to assemble, to speak, to demonstrate, to organize) encouraged the creation of special-purpose organizations and voluntary associations and the consolidation of civil society. These transformations gave rise to the forms of collective action that characterize representative democracies: rallies, strikes and demonstrations (Tilly and Tilly 1981:19-23; 44-6 and 99-101; Tilly 1978:151-71).

THE UNEMPLOYED WORKERS MOVEMENTS (MTD)

The Unemployed Workers Movements (MTD), collectively known also as the *piquetero* movement, is an expression of the development of popular power in the country.

One could define MTD as a form of popular organization of men and women, unemployed workers, who have formed a ‘movement’ –not a party or a union– that, characteristically of the recent forms of collective action, adopts a broad agenda aiming “to solve all the problems of everyone.” With some justification we could describe MTD as a movement of movements. Its organization is independent of the political parties, the unions, and the Church, and has as one of its basic principles the objective of coordinating its activities with other popular mobilizations cohering around various and often divergent issues.

The *piquetero* movement consists mainly of former employees of metal, electrical, and oil industries and of transportation (railway) and public sectors, and of laid-off food industry, dock, and other similar workers. The membership does not represent “the new poor,” but, characteristically, has as its predominant element unemployed laborers who come with experience of union campaigns accrued in their previous places of work.

The main form of struggle utilized by the workers and the unemployed pushing their agenda through MTD is the *piquete* or, literally, road-blocking, exercised to put tangible and quite public pressure on the government in order to obtain from it provision of food supplies and basic necessity items (like mattresses or ceiling construction materials), social policy measures, improvements in the infrastructure, etc.

In the middle of the 1990s, during the second presidency of Carlos Menem, the *piquetero* campaigns spread to localities in the interior of the country, especially those areas that were centers of the oil industry, which was privatized and reconstructed during the Menem administration (such as Cutral-Co in Neuquén, and Tartagal-General Mosconi in Salta). In addition, the movement developed rapidly in localities that served as major railway junctions (like Cruz del Eje in the province of Córdoba) or centers of agro-industrial production (such as for sugar and lumber, or in the citricultural region of Salteño-Jujeña and along Route 34 connecting with the oil region) (González Bombal, 2003).

Later on, the spread pattern extends further to peripheral popular neighborhoods in the margins of great cities such as Rosario, Santa Fe, and Córdoba, in 1999 reaching the popular neighborhood and the “villas” of the Conurbano Bonaerese near Buenos Aires, where *piquetero* action campaigns started rapidly increasing in 2000, continuing to present day.

It was in La Matanza, a suburb to the west of Buenos Aires and home to two million impoverished inhabitants living in the shadow of hundreds of closed factories, that the first road blocks were erected during a major campaign cutting off traffic on urban routes and catapulting the *piquetero* movement to the national political arena. Today, the *piqueteros* of La Matanza form the central nucleus in the movement’s activities that show no signs of abatement.

MTD thus began to grow in size and attain recognition as a new actor on the national level. Due to the growth and concomitant pluralization that it experienced after attracting a number of other groups and initiatives under its umbrella, the movement became highly diversified, accommodating orientations and currents with varying levels

of organizational maturation, as well as different dimensions, regional characteristics, ideological influences, relations to labor movement and political party organizations, and repertoires of action (González Bombal 2003).

The spread of MTD has been accelerated through the multiplication of its constituent movements operating in different regions of the country. Many of the (rather different) MTD campaigns formed and continued developing independently of one another, not as ramifications or sections of a centrally organized and managed parent initiative. The participating movements were characterized by their mutual diversity and by the particular attributes of each neighborhood or locality in which they operated.

The newly established visibility and status of the movement (composed, as stated, of a loosely knit network of diverse local and regional initiatives) as a nation-wide phenomenon was manifested in the two national assemblies in which *piqueteros* from around the country gathered in 2001 and 2002, with the intent of creating alliances, coordinating logistics, and pooling resources in a broader struggle that was formulated and also perceived as something shared in common. Nevertheless, the results of these efforts remained relatively unsuccessful, much due to the movement's nature as something very dynamic and decentralized, frequently fluctuating and relatively open-ended.

However, some significant coordination did take place as a result of the efforts to bring the various MTD actors closer together. The MTDs of the ten districts of the *conurbano* –Almirante Brown, Lanús, Solano, Florencio Varela, Esteban Echeverría, Quilmes, Presidente Perón, Lugano, J. C. Paz and Berisso– and of La Plata, Quilmes, and Lanús became integrated as the Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados “Aníbal Verón” (CTD), forming a joint organization coordinating and directing the actions of the movements of the unemployed that participated in it. CTD is composed of *compañeros* or “companions” representing each of the participating groups and meeting weekly to discuss the situation in each district and in CTD itself. The proposals of CTD then become discussed in neighborhood assemblies, in which all the *compañeros* from each neighborhood involved gather to solve and elaborate new proposals.

Within MTD, democratic decision making is understood to evolve from below up, as all the decisions, from formulating demands to the mobilization for the actual action campaigns, are taken collectively in assemblies that remain open for participation at the level of neighborhoods or municipalities. The assemblies convene weekly in the municipalities, biweekly in the provinces, and monthly on the national level (as national commissions). The organization of the assemblies

allows for an open participation in the proposals, discussions, and resolutions. As intended, this is in fact a two-way process, given that the agreements reached as a result of the decision making processes through their very manner of coming into existence also have as an aim the deepening of the formal democratic system actually existing in the country.

Using narrow, effective tactics, the *piqueteros* have imposed a broad agenda in the form of demands presented to the government. During a *piquete*, or a road-blocking action campaign, demands to free jailed militants are aired, as are calls for the withdrawal of the police force from events organized by MTD, for food assistance, for decent jobs, for better wages and unemployment benefits, for agricultural subsidies and irrigation projects, for improved infrastructure (paved streets), and for provision of electricity and medical facilities.

At present, the *piquetero* organizations are aiming their main efforts at obtaining assistance for the neediest segments of the population, at creating spaces of open debate and political formation, at generating new levels of participation, at creating social bonds and new organizational ties between neighbors, and at exploring new forms of communitarian organization. MTD as a social movement has introduced a new tactic, the *piquete*, whose very publicity, disruptive effect, and organizational bases allow workers and the unemployed to channel their rights claims into the broader public arena. Among the latter, creation of real jobs continues to play a central role, posing also a more difficult logistical and organizational problem: what this demand calls for is in fact nothing less than an alternative general vision of the society, one that could propel economic transformation with an effect on the rate of employment. Burdened with this necessity, the initial effectiveness of the *piquete* strategy has started to wear away, with the tactics relying on daily road blockings affecting everyday life in the cities and thus gradually starting to work against the *piquetero* campaigns themselves. The consequences may well amount to something similar to what the tactics of the political right strive for: isolation of the demands from below and encouragement of the reactionary tendencies in the middle classes. The *piquete* campaigns, originally an effective tool of political and economic inclusion, are now beginning to be orchestrated from the political right that expediently mobilizes *piqueteros* of their own, thus tending to progressively transform them into a tool of exclusion and isolation instead.

THE MOVEMENT EXPANDING TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT

The great political disenchantment entailed by the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism and its values, making themselves felt in almost all

spheres life, have refocused the attention of the *piqueteros* movement and led it to a search for ways to reconstruct the bonds of social solidarity weakened during the period of dictatorship and the subsequent era of exclusionary policies.

The activities of MTD allow for, and in fact encourage, processes of political socialization and initiatives to organize, to belong, to have an identity, to recognize one's own rights, and to develop one's critical-analytical skills, through participation in various training programs, study groups, and reading groups, thereby fostering the development of a better historical perspective and critical reflection vis-à-vis the social realities of the present.

Finding it relevant to enter into the political arena, MTD, especially in 2001-02, started promoting an integral vision uniting large sectors of social and popular organizations and focusing on political action as a tool of social transformation. Proposing political action does not equal apostatizing social construction; political action is based on the construction of popular power, of an organized popular force able to turn the course of so many years of regressive, antipopular, and antinational policies.

Under the Kirchner government we can see a certain reversal of the policies initiated during the 1990s. Given the back-and-forth movement of the political process and the extreme social fragmentation we witness today, however, the need for tactical alliances grows paramount in a persevering hegemonic system in which, that which has passed, has not yet relinquished its hold.

In view of this situation, MTD has taken a step towards direct participation in the political process, now considering it necessary for the popular organizations to engage in actions that can steer the government towards the construction of a project of national sovereignty. For this purpose, its leadership has called for expansion of the movement membership towards white-collar elements in the government, in order to ensure the kind public policy decisions it considers vital on the local level for the maintenance of popular protagonism as the main means of social transformation.

Acting in the manner of community activists, the *piqueteros*, responding to this call in the neighborhoods in which they spread, have started turning away from mere humanitarian assistance projects under the banner of charity. In their stead, we can see a new emphasis on the need to foster the growth of popular organizations conceived as tools of true democratic process within the framework of the human rights, peace, and justice for all. In the interest of these aims, MTD has extended the scope of its actions and ambitions further still, proposing to work together with other

kindred groups such as local assemblies, youth groups, women's movements, socioeconomic community projects, and other activity centers.

Among the *piqueteros* themselves, we can detect different currents varyingly identifiable with the nationalist and popular matrix, often tending in directions that vindicate aspects of historical Peronism. Some of the organizations and associations act more in the role of negotiators or mediators (Federación de Tierra y Vivienda - FTV), some are more combative than others (Barrios de Pie). In 2003, these strands within MTD shifted their position with respect to the government, identifying as they did a promise in it of returning to the historical sources of Peronism. On the other hand, Kirchner himself could act in ways that encouraged the development of new *piquetero* movements such as, precisely, MTD-Evita discussed below. These developments coincided with the emergence of a broader political bloc in Latin America, aimed on a transnational plane to form a counterbalance to the prevailing global hegemonic discourse and equipped with its own anti-neoliberal rhetoric that has reactivated—and to an extent builds on—elements of the national-popular traditions in the countries involved.

In this way, we can see a two pronged movement bringing MTD and the government closer to each other. Driven by a broader political agenda on both sides, a link between the government and the “organized masses” has now been established. While earlier on only the unions were directly engaged on the plane of national politics, now also the *piqueteros* have entered the political horizon of the central administration.

MTD-Evita is one of the *piquetero* groups that the Kirchner government attempted to draw closer to its political framework. In the early months of its application, this strategy to open communication channels with the unemployed and search for ways to cooperate with the largest and most significant popular organizations showed good results, if the official objective of lowering the number of independent mobilizations is held as a measure. In contrast, the initiative to create an openly *kirchnerista* movement for the unemployed has not taken off equally well.

Within MTD-Evita itself, internal developments similarly encouraged this mutual approximation. The leadership in the organization was assumed by Emilio Pérsico, a veteran activist from the so-called “Peronism of Left” and more recently also the *piquetero* movement, who maintains to have found in MTD-Evita “a tool for the struggle for more work and for social inclusion—two crucial issues for the country's reconstruction.”

Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados Evita (MTD-Evita)
Leader: Emilio Pérsico
Area of influence: La Plata and La Matanza
Capacity of mobilization: 2,000 people

The members of MTD-Evita show considerable involvement in the national and provincial governments. Through his position in the organization, Pérsico himself has been able to advance his career and extend his personal influence as a political figure in ways and at a speed unparalleled during his 30 years of political militancy. Rising quickly through the ranks he was soon appointed Undersecretary in the cabinet headquarters of Governor Felipe Solá of the Province of Buenos Aires.

Reflecting on his reasons for joining the government as a civil servant, Pérsico himself stated: "I have already lost count of the companions from the MTD-Evita who work as civil employees in the provinces and for the state, who are deputies and senators. I know who we used to be and I can see what we are now, and that fills me with fear". I am here to fulfill the objective of a national project we have embarked on: generation of jobs and social inclusion through jobs."¹

Assessing that "things are changing quicker than we thought," Pérsico acknowledges his unconditional identification with "Kirchner's popular project" and the concomitant "task of transforming the Province of Buenos Aires under [Governor] Solá's direction."

The mutual understanding of the shared stakes has thereby started to take shape. According to Governor Solá, the spread of MTD-Evita "exemplifies how activism and militancy can proceed to construct and articulate new sectors of representation, as opposed to merely working to delegitimize the majority parties"². Or, as Pérsico has pointed out, "the Evita movement is not merely a political expression; it is a construction tool for uniting social organizations that must become part of the State in the process of creating a new national project."

As a new type of social movement, MTD-Evita is significant in the context of national politics. Nevertheless, its role and impact on the ground have remained relatively weak, even if its actions in helping to provide for certain basic necessities for impoverished sectors (such as

1 Diario El Día de la La Plata. "¿Qué hace un piquetero en el gobierno? Lo cuenta el platense Emilio Pérsico." Lunes 2 de Enero de 2006.

2 Diario Clarín. 14 de Octubre de 2006.

obtaining work tools for those needing them and organizing around housing issues) have been consequential. The organization itself has become confirmed in its belief that in order to stimulate real results, its membership must be extended to civil employees who in turn can influence state policies and partake in decisions with effect on unemployment.

RUPTURE WITH TRADITIONAL FORMS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: THE ASSEMBLY PROCESS AND THE RESURGENCE OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In the social sphere, however, MTD has been able to move ahead with its initiatives, scoring a string of successes that can be said to reverse some of the consequences of the policies implemented during the neoliberal stage of the 1990s—policies that gave rise to the weakening of workers' organizations and a decline in the status of politics and the politicians. MTD actions have resulted in an increase in popular claim making and needs articulation, centered around territorial organizations—not only the *piqueteros*, but also associations and advocacy groups related to the church and the municipality itself. At this historical juncture, organizing among the urban poor gains in importance, such as through the heterogeneous *piquetero* movements constituted of unemployed and workers bound to the informal sector.

For their decision making processes, these movements utilize the assembly practice. In the assemblies various needs become expressed, and through the ensuing discussions and debates, also the broader issue of the place of movements in society becomes broached (if not directly addressed). This practice of assembly participation corresponds to a political movement with strong territorial presence, proposing a new form in which to think of the role of the institutions. For Hannah Arendt,³ politics is not restricted to the sphere in which the institutions of government and administration predominate; what it concerns rather is the institution of a sense of a political community (to consume and to work). It is constituted through the actions of human beings entering into relationships with one another, in a space where the type of bond created emerges through actions and words. In the light of this analysis, the assemblies may indeed emerge as an instantiation of the politics of representation superior to the traditional representative politics within the confines of representative democracy.

In the space of the assemblies two dimensions intersect⁴:

3 Arendt, Hannah (1993), *La condición humana*. Barcelona: Editorial Paidós.

4 En Svampa, Maristella (2003), "El análisis de la dinámica asamblearia," in Bombal, ed., *Nuevos movimientos sociales y ONGs en la Argentina de la crisis*. Buenos Aires: CEDES.

In the first place, the assemblies constitute a space for organizing and deliberating that represents a rupture with the traditional forms of political representation, favoring instead alternative forms of self-organization that arise from the social milieu and are inclined towards horizontal modes of organization and the exercise of direct action.

Secondly, the assemblies can be viewed as an expression of an emerging, disruptive new type of protagonism, irreducibly social and political at once, that breaks with the fatalism of the ideological speech of the 1990s and reinvests individuals with their capacity to be true actors in the public life –indeed, to become subjects of their own destiny, in both the individual and the social sense. In this fashion, the assemblies brought with themselves a promise of the creation of trust and spaces of solidarity through which social bonds can be (re)constructed.

In the *Human Development Report of the United Nations* (1993), addressing the issue for participation, it is stated: “A greater participation of the population is not any more a vague ideology based on good desires of few idealists. It has become an imperative –a condition of survival.” In Argentina, the role of MTD in this respect has been significant, in strengthening the processes of democratization and in forcing a confrontation with social problems that affect broad segments of the population.

A great majority of those participating in MTD campaigns and activities do not have a past history of union membership or participation in political and local organizations. The practice of claim making through the *piquetes* organized by MTD utilizes provocative means (men equipped with sticks, wearing hooded jackets) to underline the urgency of the activists’ message before the intransigent government. This mode of activism entails risks such as repression, retaliation, persecution, threats, and even death. For the practice of the *piquetera* struggle, determined effort and a strong commitment to an ideological position thus become critical. The processes of political and ideological formation encouraging the emergence of such a strong dedication and loyalty to the cause are the task of the leadership, which must succeed in convincing the actual and potential movement members about the legitimacy of the claims advanced. Accordingly, the MTD leadership has stressed in its speeches and position papers the inadequacy of the traditional forms of citizen representation.

The question of civic dignity involves moral recognition of social equality (Rodríguez and Morello 2003). The social actors participating in MTD actions assume a more active role when joining in marches and *piquetes*, in this way repositioning themselves in a social sector that, in spite of the always possible repressive countermeasures or the

indifference of the government, we see continuously regenerating and rejuvenating itself in the country.

Besides staging direct action campaigns to express concrete demands, what MTD participants accomplish is a degree of participatory democracy “in action,” building largely on the distrust of the representative and delegative political system that is now subjected to questioning as something that has not offered any tangible solutions during all the years of democratization demands. What the new social movements, MTD among them, in effect demand is a new political paradigm that lays fresh emphasis on the *substance* of democracy.

We may therefore view MTD as constituting a privileged site of societal reflection *and* a proposal for political action seeking concrete solutions and new paths for the processes of problem solution. The effectiveness of MTD on these two fronts is based on its formative and organizational origins in contexts that, following Bourdieu, we could analyze with the help of the notion of “habitus”: it draws upon and activates the values and traditions represented by *piqueteros*, and is impelled forward by the dictates of their concrete subsistence needs and collective identity needs. It becomes necessary for the political system therefore to become so oriented that it can better accommodate and productively absorb the impact of social movements –something we see happening in the gradual incorporation of MTD members into the government as well. However, following Giddens,⁵ new social movements, operating in situations where elucidation of social problems is at stake, are action forms whose outcomes may amount to no more (and no less) than a creation of a language of protest, significant in itself but with little or no direct consequences for the administrative structures of the government as such.

The management role of the government appears central in different instances, in the sense that Giddens criticizes the ambitions of social movements by stating that neither the movements nor the markets can replace the functions of the government. Citizen initiatives, new movements, NGOs, and the like can never replace governments acting on the national arena; where their accomplishment lies is in making their claims and demands heard by the political system in a fashion that it can constructively respond to.

Racelis (1994) has pointed out that the central thrust of participatory politics of this kind consists in “giving power to the *pueblo* instead of perpetuating the constitutive relations of dependency that characterize the top-down approaches” –in other words, the idea is to share in the power, not assume or even less seize it.

5 Giddens, A. (1999): *La tercera vía. La renovación de la socialdemocracia*. Madrid: Taurus.

The practice of the MTD-type of participatory democracy emphasizes effective popular sovereignty, political justice, economic equality, and robust civic life. Nevertheless, as a precondition for a better functioning direct democracy, greater involvement of MTD membership is called for; if it is to contribute with its knowledge of social problems, create awareness of its agenda and the underlying issues, and thus better influence the administrative offices, resulting in turn in better political decisions.

The rise of MTD can be deemed to mean an end to “passive democracy” and the inauguration of an era of “intelligent democracy,” in which the citizens are informed, have channels to express their opinions and needs, and possess a degree of power to exert constant influence in the management of public issues. However, the importance of strategic alliances will still remain high, allowing different participating actors to become articulated at sectoral and national levels for the benefit of effective political action in concert.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

At present, politics seems removed from the level of people’s priorities, needs, and social wants. Given this distance, there is a need to reform democratic institutions and practices in such a way as to allow for a confrontation with inequalities within the framework of an effective political process. Such a strengthening of democracy can only be accomplished in a continuous process bringing about the development of socially sensitive institutions of the government and predicated on the existence and efficient operation of strong, independent mass media, autonomous judiciary, instruments of human rights protection, and cooperation among networks of the unprivileged poor (social and cooperative networks, enabling networks of mutual assistance).

The development of democracy is bound toward a search for greater social equality, the struggle against poverty, and the expansion of the rights of citizenry. Full and functional citizenship implies the simultaneous possession of civil, political, and social rights, as well as the ability to make real use of such rights in the daily life (Kessler, 1996).

How, then, to sum up the experience of MTD? Following the line of Toni Negri (2003), it is my view that the confrontation into which MTD entered with the state power allowed it to subsequently reconstruct the kind of social and political relations through which then emerged those “new singular and subjective devices that construct a new composition of resistance and desire to oppose... It is the example that can be located essentially in the documented struggles of the *piqueteros*—the Argentine revolt against neoliberalism.”⁶

6 Negri, Toni (2003): “Argentina: La revuelta piquetera”. Buenos Aires.

During and in the aftermath of the institutional crisis peaking towards the end of 2001 in Argentina, a prevalent popular reaction has been to renounce and turn away from the politicians and the political parties, point to the delegitimation of the representative system brought about by corruption, and refer to the hegemonic crisis of the bourgeois system, the debt crisis and the crisis of the financial system, and the deepening social crisis that, as summed up by Toni Negri (2003), has “destroyed the productive capacity (rampant unemployment) and reproductive capacity (crisis of public education and health)...” At the same time and building on the foundation of this diagnosis, we have seen a related response that, to continue with Negri, represents “a multitudinal antipower organized in independent systems of production, interchange, and political organization, in wholly original forms.” In Argentina, and all over in Latin America as well, what we are witnessing today is the emergence of novel forms of protest and organization, and the formation of new social activities as an extension and also building blocks of these new phenomena.

MTD provides us with an example of a *de facto* method of how workers and the unemployed can be organized and brought together with impoverished elements of the middle classes, to jointly build up political networks of resistance both inside and outside of the structures of the state. It was around 2000 that MTD started calling itself *piqueteros*, adopting this self-identity on the conviction that *piquete* or road blockage formed part of the legitimate tactics of social protest calling for increased aid and respect of the protesters’ rights. The *piquetes* stand out as an autonomous expression of people coming from vastly varying walks of life, still equally motivated by their desire for an egalitarian social system. Specifically, the concept of *piquetero* refers to the moments of mobilization, defined by Tilly (2000) as “disruptive and discontinuous.”

The experience of the *piquetero* struggle in Argentina can be described as an urgent manifestation of “reactive” tactics aimed at reclaiming or a defending something lost or on the verge of being lost, and at the same time as an instance of “proactive” mobilization for social justice, anti-corruption work, and a more egalitarian society capable and willing to offer dignified work for all of its members.

The unemployed workers have demonstrated a distinct capacity to promote anti-free market tactics lending themselves for emulation worldwide. The actions so far demonstrate that the power behind fundamental change does not reside in the cabinet rooms of the politicians, but comes from independently organizing social sectors spearheading participatory forms of democracy on local, regional, and national levels. In Argentina, the state has been the target of these

actions, provoking calls for its reconstruction and regeneration to ensure its ability to cope with the need to reduce poverty and inequality. For this to take place, though, the political system itself will need to lower the barriers of social exclusion and inequity and attain a capability to promote economic growth in harmony with the broader objectives of human development.

Giddens, in a recent book of his, outlines “a Third Way” to respond to the contemporary dilemmas related to globalization, individualism, the terms of the Left vs. Right thinking, our capacity for political action, and ecological issues. For Giddens, the overall aim of the Third-Way politics should be to help citizens pilot their way through the major revolutions of our time: globalization and transformations in personal life and our relationship to nature. Such politics is concerned with the equality of opportunities, personal responsibility, and mobilization of citizens and communities. In addition to various rights, it highlights the role of responsibilities. Accordingly, the Third Way as a political program would have “to maintain social justice and to accept that the range of questions that escape the division into Left and Right is greater than ever.”⁷ Among its basic principles would have to be the reform of the state and the government. The government must be able to act in concordance with civil society if it is to have the capacity to manage the solution of social problems and promote the development of the community it serves. The economic base of the association between the government and civil society is a new, mixed economy, which can only become effective to the extent that its institutions are modernized.

Those active in MTD affirm that from its actions a renewal of politics and leadership can follow, but only if the relationship between the state and society is articulated anew, with the movements contributing their experience and understanding of the social situation of the underprivileged as needed for the development of a more human and participatory state.

Social movements like MTD are a fluid element within political and social systems, from which more formal political organizations arise and may bring radical change. At the moment, the challenge for MTD and other similar movements is to find ways to extend their forms and scope as a mobilized public protest to new areas and consider their possible continuities and their future, this way expanding and strengthening the broader political project behind the express actions of the temporary mobilizations. How, in practice, to strengthen direct

7 Giddens, A. (1999): *La tercera vía. La renovación de la socialdemocracia*, p. 81. Madrid: Taurus.

democracy through participatory mechanisms, and how can the latter be designed so that they increase the responsibility and responsiveness of the government vis-à-vis the citizenry? At the same time, MTD must continue to explore ways to identify dilemmas involved in the efforts to attain these goals, and in the methods conducive to the effective formulation of social policies aimed at consolidation and extension of democratic projects more generally.

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