

Politicising sadness

Colectivo Situaciones

MORE THAN FIVE YEARS after the insurrection of that Argentine December 2001, we bear witness to how much the interpretations and moods around that event have changed. For many of us, one phase of this winding becoming was accompanied by a feeling of sadness. This text recovers a moment in the elaboration of 'that sadness' in order to go beyond the notions of 'victory and defeat' which belong to that earlier cycle of politicisation that centred on taking state power, and, at the same time, in order to share a procedure that has allowed us to 'make public' an intimate feeling shared between people and groups.

Sadness came after the event: the political celebration – of languages, of images, of movements – was followed by a reactive, dispersive dynamic. And, along with it, something happened that was then experienced as a reduction of the capacities for openness and innovation that the event had brought into play. The experience of social invention (which always also implies the invention of time) was followed by a moment of normalisation and the declaration of 'end of the celebration.' According to Spinoza, sadness consists in being separated from our *potencia* (powers-to-act). Among us, political sadness often took the form of impotence and melancholy in the face of the growing distance between that social experiment and the political imagination capable of carrying it out.

'Politicising sadness' sums up in a slogan an intention to resist: to elaborate once more what came to light in that collective experiment within a new dynamic of the public sphere, because far from shrinking or having stopped, the process which erupted then is still the fundamental dilemma of today's Argentina. In this



context and with that intention, a diverse group of collectives that shared the lived experience of political transversality in Argentina during recent years – *Grupo de Arte Callejero* (GAC – Street Art Group), the educational community *Creciendo Juntos* (Growing Together), the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD) of the neighbourhoods of Solano and Guernica, the communication collective *Lavaca* and *Colectivo Situaciones* – met for several weeks at the end of 2005. Inevitably, we write this text from our own perspective on what was then discussed, which implies – also inevitably – to write in tune with a dynamic that is still under way.

I. POLITICAL SADNESS

1. The logic of specialists is imposed. 'If you do arts, then don't do politics, because in the arts, we are those who handle the visual language, aesthetics, and who can say what is and what is not art.' The same kind of border is imposed from the social sciences and philosophy: a distinction has to be made between those who are fit to invent concepts and to make legitimate use of social research, and those devoted to 'political propaganda'. Thus, after a period of 'disorder' the categories of the specialists arrive to restore and resurrect classifications that – they wager – never completely dissolve. An analysis done in this way disregards the political operations that made a project, a slogan or a movement possible. There are also the experts in politics, who organise disorder in the opposite sense: 'if you do not have a clear power strategy, what you are doing is not politics, but "social activism", philanthropy, counterculture, etc.' Thus, the hybridity implicit in every creation of new political figures is intention-

ally confused with a costume party after which the old classificatory powers come back to distribute uniforms, ignoring the fact that those processes always have a certain irreversibility.

2. Repetition without difference. The key to the productivity (both expressive and organisational) reached at a moment of effervescence is that it enables personal and group 'fusions', along with a mixture of languages in which what matters is not the authorship of what is being created, so much as the extent to which energies come together. However, these effects cannot be repeated and reproduced outside the situations in which their meaning is rooted without becoming formulaic. Sadness arises when this uprooting occurs – but it is not perfected into a 'politics' until pure

ARGENTINA: THE DISAPPEARED REVOLUTION

by Tazio Mueller

Que se vayan todos! ('They all have to go!') Thus went the oft-quoted slogan of the *argentino*, the uprising, rebellion – maybe even revolution – of 2001. The iconic images beamed across the world by the global news agencies from Buenos Aires' main square, where street fighting was raging all the way up to the presidential Casa Rosada, where social movements forced three presidents out of office in the space of two weeks, were really only the tip of the iceberg. They were moments of excess, moments of radical transformation for which years of militant and autonomous struggles had laid the groundwork.

Neoliberalism proper hit Argentina in the early 1990s. In the midst of economic crisis and hyperinflation, President Menem fixed the peso to the US dollar and pushed through a programme of privatisation, free trade and 'deregulation'. As a result, while 'the economy' stabilised, hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs, and social conflicts multiplied. Around the mid-90s, the by now famous *piqueteros*, movements of unemployed people all around the country, made a key strategic innovation. Being excluded from the labour process, they could not go on strike. But in a post-Fordist, 'just-in-time' economy, they found that blockading roads was an effective way to mess with the economy, and pressure governments at all levels into making commitments – at the same time as the road blocks became embryonic forms of the 'popular assemblies' that would later inspire so many movements across the world.

During the 1990s, however, 'the economy' was still strong enough to satisfy the powerful Argentinian middle class, leaving the poor and unemployed tactically powerful, but strategically isolated. But by the turn of the millennium, things started to look different, because by then, large fiscal deficits and an overvalued peso began eroding middle-class incomes, as well as the jobs of the poor. Unemployment skyrocketed, and when the Asian crisis contaminated the Argentinian 'emerging market', an outflow of capital escalated into a recession that culminated in the economic meltdown of November 2001. As a devaluation of the peso loomed, the

repetition crystallises and becomes established as a formula ready to be applied. The automation of the formula freezes our own capacity to temporalise the process. If the creation of time consists in opening possibilities, political sadness prevents the elaboration of lived experience as a present and future possibility. The crystallisation of the living past interrupts its elaboration as political memory.

3. Duration as validity criterion. These were common questions in the years 2001–2003: How do groups and movements relate to each other? Which common tasks can be completed through fusion, and which ones do not allow for such flexible connections? In each group or collective (artistic, political, social, etc.), questions arose about the practices taking place beyond the group, in a common outside. A

government, to forestall a run on the banks, imposed the so-called *corralito*, limiting the amount of cash that could be withdrawn from bank accounts. That was the government's death warrant.

And here we return to the iconic images of December 2001: pushed by an alliance of social movements that ranged all the way from picketing unemployed people to the irate middle-class folks who, somewhat uncharacteristically, could be seen rampaging through Buenos Aires in make-up and high heels smashing banks and fighting with police. As the movements were on the advance, the state was in retreat. As one president gave way to another in quick succession, effective power in the streets and cities seemed more and more to be wielded by the popular assemblies, people satisfied their needs in the popular eateries, and an autonomous revolution – a revolution not aimed at taking state power, but changing the world without taking power – seemed possible for the first time.

Alas, the state and capital survived, and from exhilaration the movement plunged into deep sadness. As the relative left-winger and former guerrilla-sympathiser Nestor Kirchner took presidential power and began placating social movements, movements in turn allowed themselves – or even wanted – to be coopted. And this is – perhaps – the sad source of the sadness. It does not originate from above before trickling down. It already exists deep inside the movements, and this is precisely why it is a problem. And not only in Argentina. Some would say it is more evident in North America and possibly in Europe too. The source of the sadness – there and here – is ourselves. We desire order and a sense of normality: a job perhaps, some security in our lives.

How can we understand this sadness, how can we *politicise* it? If sadness originates in our preferences for known and safe paths, then how can we escape this? How can we construct a politics *in and against* sadness, and a logic that goes beyond a simple binary of defeat and victory? By politicising sadness perhaps we can invent ways of being which embody – rather than eliminate – the multiplicity involved in creation, in the uncertainty and chance involved in the becomings that are essential components of *power-to*.

key idea to make possible those encounters was that of the 'third group': group-clusters which formed around tasks that reduced differences between the groups, at the same time as they became partners in veritable laboratories of images, words and organisation. Sadness, in its eagerness to simplify, concludes that the temporal finitude of experimentation is enough to undermine its value, making invisible both the 'common outside' and the procedures destined to shape it, thus dissipating the most profound meaning of the process.

4. Contempt for the socialisation of production. 'Anybody can produce images or concepts, forms of struggle, means of communication or ways of expression.' These statements made sense while a kind of impersonal collective production managed to disseminate procedures and socialise creative experiments. A logic of 'contagion' permeated forms of struggle, images and research, questioning the control of businesses and their brands over the field of signs. The normalising reaction arrived later to govern this viral expansion, recoding the circulating signs, once again seizing control over them.

Several procedures helped in this normalisation:

- a) the emptying of collective slogans through literalisation (violently severing them from their virtualities). For example, the 'They all have to go' of December 2001;
- b) the attribution of a hidden meaning as the product of 'manipulation', by the standard interpretation of phenomena of collective creation ('behind each autonomous and horizontal tendency there is nothing but a ruse of power...' or, every 'apparently spontaneous' demonstration finds its 'hidden truth' in the powers that 'orchestrate' it from the shadows);
- c) the most typical prejudices of 'reactive economicism', expressed in phrases such as 'the *piqueteros* only want to earn money without working', 'the middle class only take to the streets if something touches them in the pocket', and all the ways of reducing the subjective interplay to the economic crisis;
- d) the mechanical identification of the 'micro' level with 'small, an *a priori* judgment according to which the concrete forms of the revolt are identified with a prior, local, and exceptional moment, cut off from a 'macro' ('bigger') reality, which must be run according to the guidelines that spring up from capitalist hegemony and its systems of overcoding.

5. The machines of capture. The classical dilemma with regard to institutions – to participate or to withdraw? – was in some ways overcome at the moment of greatest social energy. The resources that the collectives and movements wrenched from the institutions determined neither the meaning of their use, nor their function. On the contrary, they became cogs in a different machine, giving a different meaning to the way of relating to these institutions, without naivety, verifying in practice how that dynamic between movements and institutions depended on a relation of forces. The rise of all these extra-institutional procedures, at the same time as the movements

achieved their greatest presence and voice in the public stage, aspired to a radical democratisation of the relation between creative dynamic and institution, meaning and resources. The institutions that sought to register the meaning of these novelties in general did not go beyond a partial renewal: not so much because they ignored procedures brought into play by the movements and collectives, but rather because they forgot the implications of the reorganisation of the institutional dynamic that such novelties pursued; not so much for trying to give an opposite meaning to the aspirations of the movements, as for underestimating the plane of the movements itself as the locus in which the problems regarding the production of meaning are posed.

6. Autonomy as corset. Up to a certain moment, autonomy was almost equivalent to transversality among the collectives, movements and people. That positive resonance functioned as a surface for the development of an instituent dialogue outside the consensus of both capital and the alternative 'masters' of the party apparatuses. But, once transformed into a doctrine, autonomy becomes desensitised vis-à-vis the transversality that nurtures it, and to which it owes its true *potencia*. When autonomy turns into a morality and/or a restricted party-line, it drowns in a narrow particularity and loses its capacity for openness and innovation. To the autonomous groups and movements, sadness appears as the threat of cooptation, or of giving up the search. It appears also as guilt for what they did not do, for that which they 'were not capable of', or precisely for that paradoxical process of normalisation, one consequence of which is a certain form of resentment.

7. Sudden appearance in the limelight. The mass performance that the explosion of counterpower in Argentina at the end of 2001 entailed was accompanied by a violent redrawing of the map of relevant actors, but also of the parameters for understanding and dealing with this new social protagonism. The (perhaps inevitable) spectacularisation spectacularises: it creates stars and establishes recognised voices. The consumerist relation to the 'hot' spots of conflict led to a colossal change of climate, in which the collectives and movements went from being observed, applauded and accompanied, to being suddenly ignored and even scorned, which is usually experienced with a mix of extreme loneliness, disappointment and guilt.

II. POLITICISING SADNESS

A politics 'in' and 'against' sadness cannot be a sad politics. The reappropriation and reinterpretation of the event presupposes:

1. Elaborating the event in the light of memory as *potencia*. The process does not end in defeats and victories, but we can of course be immobilised and removed from its dynamic. Learning to dismantle forms and formulae that were successful in days gone by cannot turn into a kind of repentance or simulation. Leaving behind one

formula can only mean to recover all of them as possibilities, to equip ourselves with a true political memory.

2. No victimisations. Sadness only points to our momentary disconnect within a dynamic process, which need not be understood as a long phase (of stabilisation) with periodic interruptions (by the crisis of domination), but rather as a process that political struggle can go through. Not only is sadness a politics of power-over, but also – and above all – the circumstance in which the politics of power-over becomes powerful.

3. Power of abstentionism. If the *potencia* of practice is verified in the democratic sovereignty we manage to actualise in it, the politicisation of sadness can perhaps be understood as a form of prudence in which the apparent passivity radically preserves its active, subjective content. A 'despite everything' disposition that prevents us from being swept along with the current or simply conquered.

4. New public spaces. Public existence is instituted in our mode of appearing, and a way of appearing that interrogates is radically political. The institution of new public spaces in which we appear with our real questions, ready to listen to the content of the situations, does not require exceptional conditions, but a non-state institution of that which is collective. This is what the *Mujeres Creando* call 'concrete politics'.

5. The reelaboration of the collective. The collective as premise and not as direction or point of arrival: like that 'remainder' that emerges from a renewed effort to listen. The collective as a level of political production and as mutual companionship in experience. We are not talking about group formulae (of agitation or its opposite, self-help): the collective-communitarian is always a challenge of opening towards the world. It is not merely looking 'outside', in terms of a classical topology that would distinguish a 'communitarian inside' and an 'external outside', but rather the collective as complicit in the adventure of becoming a situational interface in the world.

We would like to end with a hypothesis: the ongoing dynamic in Argentina gives rise to what we could call a 'new governability' (new mechanisms of legitimating elites; innovations in understanding the relation between government and movements, between international and 'internal' politics; regional integration and global multilateralism). To prolong sadness leads to isolation in this new phase of the process.

As a 'translation' of the event, the 'new governability' distributes recognitions among the instituent dynamics and opens spaces that were unimaginable in the

Mujeres Creando ('Women Creating') is an anarchist-feminist collective based in La Paz, Bolivia.

previous phase of bare-knuckle neoliberalism. However, all this is happening alongside an effort to control and redirect those dynamics. There is no room for a feeling of 'success' for the former or 'defeat' for the latter. With the drift from political sadness to the politicisation of sadness we intend to take up the dilemmas opened by the ever present risk of getting lost in fixed, and therefore illusory, binarisms, which confront us as victory-defeat. Paolo Virno summarised what is opening in front of us this way: beyond the foul oscillation between cooptation and marginalisation, what is at stake is the possibility of a 'new maturity'.

The group *Colectivo Situaciones*, literally 'Situations' Collective, came together in Buenos Aires in the late 1990s and since then they have been attempting to connect thought with the new forms of politics which were emerging in Argentina. For more on the collective and what they call militant research/research militancy, see their 'Further comments on Research Militancy' and Nate Holdren and Sebastian Touza's 'Introduction to Colectivo Situaciones', both in the web journal *ephemera* and available at <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-4/5-4index.htm>. This piece was translated by Nate Holdren and Sebastian Touza and appeared in *Chto Delat?/What is to be done?* #16, March 2007 (http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=category&ionid=17&id=173&Itemid=167). It is reproduced here with some revisions by Rodrigo Nunes and Tadzio Mueller.