

UN ESPEJO EN PEDAZOS: Argentina Seven Years after the Crash

by JACOB BINTLIFF

ONE AUTUMN NIGHT IN MAY, I ARRIVED HOME from my four-hour economics course at the University of Buenos Aires to discover my bathroom mirror shattered in pieces and stacked neatly in the floor of my shower. When confronted, neither my exchange program host mother, María, nor Marta, the woman she paid to clean the house, confessed to having broken it. There we stood in the kitchen, all suspecting each other. As one of the million-plus workers in the growing domestic service sector of urban Argentina and a (likely illegal) Peruvian immigrant, Marta might have feared losing her job enough to blame the incident on me. Though a fully employed member of the Argentine middle class, María relied more than she would like to admit on the income she earned hosting American exchange students and so might have had ample motive to have my program pay for the damage as if it had been my fault.

The invasion of such deceit into the apartment where I had lived as part of the family for five months is a glimpse of the precarious state of society, political discourse, and economic confidence in Argentina less than seven years after the devastating economic crash of 2001. The conflicted national psyche of this moment could not have found a more apt metaphor than a mirror shattered without a culprit and surrounded by a haze of accusations and mistrust.

I spent February–July of 2008 in Argentina. In that time I studied at four universities, was detained in three separate popular highway roadblocks, found myself in the cross-fire of a *fútbol*-inspired shoot-out, and encountered an untold number of individuals whose experiences as Argentines were as distinct as the dense jungle, rich farmland, and

snow-capped mountain peaks that illuminate this country's diverse terrain. My everyday encounters with the lives and stories of this conflicted but proud people revealed a "national identity" as shattered as my bathroom mirror.

Rising in the distance above the reeds of the Reserva Ecológica where I would spend my Saturdays is a glittering expanse of skyscrapers and construction cranes. This is Puerto Madero, the city's newest *barrio* and home to five-star restaurants, loft apartments, and private art galleries. It is a completely post-crash phenomenon. In 2003, as the economy began to grow again, this former port zone became prime real estate, and an extravagant construction boom began that has not slowed since. This is the shining symbol of the great Argentine "recovery" championed by ex-president Nestor Kirchner. However, as the sun would pass behind those sleek towers, another unavoidable sight of post-recovery Buenos Aires emerged. On nearly every street corner every night of the week, passers-by will notice heaps of trash surrounded by people. They are the *cartoneros*, and if you ask any *Buenairense* about the differences she's experienced since the crash, they will be near the top of her list. In a country where nearly a quarter of the population remains in poverty, they eke out a living sifting through the trash of the city salvaging what they can to provide for the needs of their families and collecting recyclables like cardboard, plastic jugs, and copper wiring to exchange for a meagre income. Seventy-two thousand *porteños* are estimated to engage in this activity as their primary means of existence. Some residents support a plan to incorporate them into a city initiative to increase recycling. Many others, mostly in the wealthier zones of the city, simply see the *cartoneros* as a public nuisance not

to be encouraged. It is difficult to absorb the harshness of a place where some live in the glass towers of Puerto Madero while others collect glass off the streets just to survive, but once you begin to appreciate the intensity of this disparity, it becomes clear why the Argentine of the twenty-first century must find it difficult to recognize his reflection when he looks in the mirror.

This crisis of identity manifested itself in force in the political arena this year. In March 2008, the tax (*retención*) on soy, a crop whose exportation has been a key driving force of the post-crisis recovery, was raised to 45 percent. The agricultural sector responded with a "lockout" involving a halt of all exports

hoarding canned foods in panic, and middle-class Argentines took to the streets in protest in numbers not seen since the crisis. It felt like the first time since the devastation of 2001 that people seriously feared things might be headed downward again. What struck me most, though, was the utter lack of popular consensus. The country's four major agricultural advocacy groups led the lockout in the name of the rural population while the government accused them of representing the interests of the big soy producers. My UBA classmates denounced the conditions of the rural working class, while my host mother accused the government of appeasing multinational investors. In short, everyone was

optimistic country that saw Nestor Kirchner leave office with unprecedented popularity only last year and welcomed his wife, Cristina Fernández, under the same banner of rebounding prosperity (although she now carries a slim 20 percent popularity rating). The sight of so many struggling for mere existence on the streets every night is not the mark of abundant recovery. A national shutdown over the value of soybeans scarcely signifies the unified political will of an ascendant nation. Nothing summed it up better for me than a political cartoon I saw one day during the lockout. A child is looking up from his *cartonero's* wagon at a wall plastered with signs reading "WE ARE ALL THE COUNTRY!" and asks, "Papá,

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and roadblocks on most of the nation's highways. Overnight, we found ourselves in the midst of the largest general strike since "Isabelita" Perón's time. My twelve-hour return trip from Easter vacation became a twenty-four-hour ordeal as our bus weaved around pickets, parked tractors, and stacks of burning tires. Meat began to run out in the capital, and prices of basic food products like milk and bread rose. A friend's host mother began

against the situation, but no one could agree on whom to blame, what to do about it, or how to move forward. The lockout went on for two months, was interrupted by an official dialogue for a month, resumed for two more months, and then halted for another month for the Congress to debate and vote on the *retenciones* plan. At the time of this writing a definitive accord has yet to be reached.

These are not images of the vibrant and

what does *all* mean?" This is the Argentina I came to know in my semester away from the all-nighters and orange tiles of UT. It is a vision that, as tragically unclear as it is for those who will go on living it once I return, will remain all too clearly in my memory.

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Left to right: 1) A rural *piquetero* in Missiones Province. 2) The towers of Puerto Madero rising along the Rio de la Plata. 3) Grain silos in the Pampa.