

Scherlen, Allan, (2005) Review of "Argentina: Hope in Hard Times," Directed by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young. (Produced by Moving Images Video Project. Distributed by Bullfrog Films. **Counterpoise**, 9:3 (Summer 2005) [Video Review]

Argentina: Hope in Hard Times (Documentary Video) Directed by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young. Produced by Moving Images Video Project. Distributed by Bullfrog Films. 2005. Color. 74 min. VHS or DVD: \$275 Rental: \$95.

At the end of 2001 Buenos Aires police were clashing with their citizens in the streets of the "Paris of Latin America." The currency had declined and unemployment was beyond anyone's ability to measure accurately. Inflation was running at about 300 percent. Most argued that the crisis stemmed from "The Washington Consensus." The World Bank and IMF had pressed one of the most prosperous countries in South America close to collapse with cruel austerity measures. No one in the IMF seemed to care that its prescriptions to deeply cut spending on everything, including benefits and wages of the poor and elderly might destroy the country's economy. When the crisis came, many feared that society would collapse. However, something unexpected happened. Instead of turning against each other, the people of Argentina joined together in a grass roots effort to bring their country back from the brink. They chanted in the streets, "Que se vayan todos!" "Kick out all the elected officials who did the dirty work for the World Bank and the IMF, Kick them all out!" The workers took over closed factories and transformed some of them into cooperatives; farmers stopped growing crops demanded by the world market and began growing locally needed food crops. People organized meetings on street corners to discuss ways of rebuilding their economy for the benefit of Argentina rather than to serve the World Bank and IMF.

The documentary film, *Argentina: Hope in Hard Times* is the story of how people can take local control of their economic lives. It is a close up look at how Argentines faced what anyone could easily have called a hopeless situation with strength, humor and grace. Thousands took to the streets not to riot but to talk, play music, and set up food stands to feed those in need.

Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young had not planned on making a documentary about how the people of Argentina responded positively to crisis when they visited the country in 2002. But as they later viewed their home video footage of elated Argentine people

who had suddenly lost so much, they had to return to cinematically capture this intriguing social phenomenon. The film examines a country previously held up as a model of successful economic globalization that is suddenly plunged into a depression far worse than the US suffered in the 1930s. But the film conveys an equally important image of a grass roots spirit of mutual cooperation that focuses on building the local economy rather than expanding international debt and trade. This is an alternative economic model that can heal a society suffering from the harms of neoliberalism.

The film opens with street scenes of people raising money to pay for tetanus shots for the “cartoneros,” Buenos Aires street people who survive by sorting through trash in search of recyclables. The city helps the cartoneros by providing a special train to carry them and their materials. Citizens of the city assist by separating their recycled items. All over the city could be seen signs which read, “We are the cartoneros.”

The film shows how Argentina was able to build an alternative economy by setting up bartering centers. Barter credit slips served as currency to allow people to exchange goods for services and so forth. It shows how farmers can survive by going back to their traditional motivations for agriculture- to grow food to feed the local people rather than growing vast amounts of soy beans or other industrial crops to serve the needs of corporations overseas.

The former chief economist for the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, visited Argentina during the time of the crisis, and the film captures some of his critique of how the banks of Europe and the United States were responsible for the problems in Argentina and elsewhere. In particular, he emphasized their role in irresponsibly encouraging countries to take on too much debt and then expecting unreasonable schedules of repayment.

Clearly those interested in Latin America and Argentina will find the film to be of interest. It is also valuable to those interested in globalization and alternatives to neoliberalism. But most of all, *Argentina: Hope in Hard Times* is a testament of the power of hope and joy in the face of seemingly overwhelming economic adversity.

Allan Scherlen, Appalachian State University