

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation addresses the relationship between mobilized coalitions of movements and organizations emerging from civil society and the promotion of democracy. It offers a critique of major works in political theory that see in civil society the potential to transform democratic politics, primarily through the protection of civil society from the state in order to allow for the development of new identities and forms of sociability. The three main theoretical objections to these works involve their focus on state-civil society relations at the expense of economic factors, the presupposition that consensus is present in civil society, and the assumption that mobilized civil societies are fueled from the grassroots. Four recent cases of civil society mobilizations from Latin America, in Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Bolivia, are presented to illustrate the deficiencies of current theoretical approaches to civil society. The case studies show the importance of material conditions and the framing of specific grievances in the formation of popular movements grounded in civil society.

CIVIL SOCIETY, POPULAR PROTEST, AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN
AMERICA

By

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Dedication

To my parents, Mauricio and Lola, for pointing me towards the path of the search for truth, free of myth and dogma.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The view that mass popular movements rooted in civil society play an important role in the promotion of democracy has become entrenched among academics and policymakers across the globe in the past three decades. Citizen mobilizations, encompassing a wide range of social actors and held together not by class or ethnic affiliations but by a common political project, have been instrumental in many countries in forcing the reform of political institutions, increased legitimacy and responsiveness on the part of governments, and the protection of rights and privileges inherent in democratic life. Yet, the ideal of a mobilized civil society has been developed by political theorists both too narrowly – paying attention to events in which civil societies pursue very specific goals – and too optimistically – overstating the impact that civil society can have, by itself, on national politics.

The term ‘civil society,’ as is well known, attracted scholarly attention in the 1980’s and 1990’s as a result of its use by dissident intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 70’s and 80’s to make sense of the growing discontent with authoritarian political regimes intent on decimating social ties that could threaten their hold on power. Labor unions, students, and scholars fought the intrusion of overbearing states on social relations and private affairs through non-violent, public actions of resistance, articulating their efforts as those of “civil society against the state” (Arato 1981). Students of transitions to democracy during the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1993) similarly recognized the presence and importance of popular movements that exerted pressure on state governments to respect citizens’ rights and to adopt democratic institutions through the use of

collective protest. In their influential analysis of Latin American transitions to democracy in the 1970's and 1980's, Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillippe Schmitter (1986) see the locus of popular power thus:

In some cases and at particular moments of the transition, many of these diverse layers of society may come together to form what we choose to call the 'popular upsurge.' Trade unions, grass-roots movements, religious groups, intellectuals, artists, clergymen, defenders of human rights, and professional associations all support each other's efforts towards democratization and coalesce into a greater whole which identifies itself as 'the people' (pp. 53-54).

Such mass movements have become archetypes through which later protest waves in several parts of the world have been compared. From the "people power revolution" in the Philippines in 1986, which led to the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos (Thompson 1995), through popular protests fueled by the corruption of elected officials in several Latin American countries in the 1990's (Abente-Brun 1999; García 2001; Espinal 2002; Valença 2002) and Eastern Europe (Spasic 2004; McFaul 2005), to the recent mobilizations against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, following the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafik Hariri in February 2005 (Safa 2006), protest movements intent on restoring democracy and sovereignty in their countries have been applauded as reflecting the strengthening of civil society and its positive effect on national politics.¹

¹ Sparked by alleged fraudulent election results on November 21, 2004, the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in particular captured global attention. "The most significant aspect of this thing is the mobilization of the population," according to Lubomyr Hajda, associate director of Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge, Mass., "it led to the birth of a civic nation, not an ethnic nation" ("Wireless World: the Orange Revolution" in *The Washington Times*, 17 December 2004). The *Kyiv Post* called the Ukrainian Parliament's decision to void the results of that election and call for a new one on December 16 a "massive victory for the Ukrainian people and civil society" (quoted in "Election Pain Yields New Ukraine" in *Slate*, 9 December 2004 - <http://slate.msn.com/id/2110850>) and a *New York Times* article drew comparisons between the events in Kiev and many other instances in which "the people" helped advance democracy ("Heeding the Roar of the Street" in *The New York Times*, 5 December 2004). The scenes from Kiev, as well as similar uprisings in other former Soviet Republics and Eastern European nations in the recent past have renewed the hope many held after the

These events point to the capacity of collective social actors to not only mobilize against states, but to do so in a united front; coalescing, as O'Donnell and Schmitter put it, "into a greater whole." Almost invariably (if sometimes implicitly) these actors, as well as the greater whole of which they are temporarily a part, are identified as "civil society." They suggest that movements and organizations voluntarily formed by citizens through horizontal communication can have a significant impact in the promotion of democracy. In the actions of dissident groups in Eastern Europe, in the popular upsurges in Latin America, and in the more recent waves of mass demonstrations and protests, civil society has made its presence felt through the active articulation of the goals and beliefs of its members.²

Among students of democratic transitions it is accepted that a healthy democracy requires the free and autonomous interaction of citizens and voluntary organizations in order for these to act as a foil to unchecked state action (Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999). Generally speaking, civil society is seen as constituting the space for the aggregation of the wishes of citizens and through which they can organize to pursue them in opposition to the goals of the governing state (Foley and Edwards 1996). Given its origins and subsequent use on the part of scholars and policymakers, the term civil society has become intertwined with a specific form of political regime – liberal democracy, – an idea that has received its share of criticism.

fall of Communist regimes in the potential of civil society to be a force of democracy promotion around the world.

² In this sense, civil society is not a constant in political life but only a potential participant. This should be distinguished from the role ascribed to civil society by scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1983, 1994, and 1995), Adam Seligman (1992), and Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2001, and 2003), for whom social interactions strengthen democracy in a more indirect, passive way – civil society's contribution rests much more on the fact of its *being there* than on the purposeful actions of its components. Hereafter, my use of the term should be understood to refer mainly to social actors who actively pursue political goals.

Empirical work has shown that civil society does not necessarily support democracy (Berman 1997; Encarnación 2003) and several scholars warn against believing wholesale in the “myth” of a virtuous civil society that is always on the right (Loeza 1994, Lechner 1995, Plattner 1995; Hengstenberg et al 1999, Salazar 1999, Rucht 2003). On the other hand, some political theorists have decried the “taming” of the idea of civil society and instead explore its democratizing potential beyond the opposition to openly authoritarian regimes or the establishment of electoral democratic institutions.

The avowedly “self-limiting utopian” visions developed by Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992), John Keane (1988a and 1988b), and Gideon Baker (2002), along with theorists of “new social movements” (NSM’s) such as Alain Touraine (1981, 1982, 1987, and 1989) and Alberto Melucci (1989 and 1992) understand the major conflict between society and the state to be a struggle for hegemony – what Kai Nielsen (1995) calls “cultural leadership” (p. 46) – between the overbearing state and alternative understandings of politics resulting from the free interaction of individuals coming together in collective entities founded in ties of solidarity. This struggle takes place in what Jürgen Habermas (1991) calls the “public sphere,” which implies that counter-hegemonic worldviews be made known through political action. For these authors, civil society is only truly present when it is active, leading them to identify it with social movements. In order to come into being, however, civil society requires that the dominant political powers allow for the opportunity of individuals to act and interact with a certain degree of freedom, such that the fundamental goal of civil society should be to expand on this opportunity, this public space:

Far from viewing social movements as antithetical to either the democratic political system or to a properly organized social sphere (the pluralists' view), we consider them to be a key feature of a vital, modern, civil society and an important form of citizen participation in public life. Yet we do not see social movements as prefiguring a form of citizen participation that will or even ought to substitute for the institutional arrangements of representative democracy (the radical democratic position). In our view, social movements for the expansion of rights, for the defense of the autonomy of civil society, and for its further democratization are what keep a democratic political culture alive (Cohen and Arato 1992, pp. 19-20).

The radical view of democracy that emerges from these works is one in which individuals within civil society are constantly engaged in a struggle for freedom from the machinations and manipulations of elites. "Civil society," as John Keane puts it (1988a), "should become a thorn in the side of power" (p. 15). Civil society and social movements, then, play a similar role in democratic societies as they do in cases of citizen struggles against authoritarianism or foreign domination. But rather than demand the establishment of or respect for democratic institutions, they provide a critical counterpart to the state and the economy and thus contribute to the further entrenchment of the ideal of democracy as a system of government of, for, and by the people.

The legacy of the original civil society uprisings in Eastern Europe and Latin America has encouraged the belief that civil society is unified by a desire for freedom and democracy latent in society, translated into action by organized social movements. The result is the almost automatic assumption that popular movements rooted in civil society are driven by this sentiment – the drive to keep society free from state interference and thus expand democracy – which falls nicely in line with the requirements of liberal democratic institutions (at the same time as it "deepens" democracy) as well as free-market economies (though it replaces in social interactions a 'logic of profit' with ties of solidarity). When speaking of the actions of

collective actors in democratic polities, however, this position becomes problematic, both in terms of the theoretical understanding of the concept of civil society and of its aptness as a tool to understand the behavior of contemporary mass popular movements. Putting aside the obvious fact that some collective actors pursue goals incompatible with democracy (see Tilly 2003),³ the contention that a mobilized civil society pursuing democratic goals will necessarily engage in the development of alternative identities separate from (and critical of) the state requires further inspection.

This dissertation addresses this question, first, by outlining some major theoretical difficulties inherent in the works of “utopian” theorists of civil society and NSMs and, second, by tracing the process through which the complex and heterogeneous sets of social organizations, groups, and movements that constitute civil society coalesce into temporarily unified actors in cases that do not fit that conception. By focusing either on the conflict between society and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Cohen and Arato, Keane, Baker and others) or on the overwhelming penetration of the state in civil society in the industrialized world (Habermas and the NSM theorists), these thinkers neglect the fact that, in many cases, these are neither the most urgent nor the most important problems faced by citizens. In order to make this clear, I examine a number of recent mass mobilizations rooted in civil society in Latin America. In contrast to past struggles against authoritarianism in the region, and even of recent mobilizations decrying corrupt leadership and illegitimate political practices, citizen mobilizations

³ See also Eder (2003) for a discussion of the problematic relationship between identity mobilization and democracy.

in countries as different as Costa Rica (the region's oldest and most stable democracy) to 'fragile' or 'unconsolidated' democracies such as Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Ecuador have been driven as much by a rejection of economic policies embraced by elites as by political demands for responsiveness and accountability. The overwhelming force of these mobilizations, and their self-defined democratic character raises questions on the applicability of the civil society model offered above.

The main focus of the case-studies is on the historical development of the relationship between civil society and the state in four Latin American countries – Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Bolivia – leading up to the mass mobilizations in the recent past, in order to identify how they differ from the cases commonly addressed in this literature. The major problem I see in ascribing particular characteristics to civil society is the fact that it is, by definition, composed of a multiplicity of different groups, associations, and movements, which are most often separate, different, and unequal. The existence of unified popular movements from civil society, given this fact, is puzzling, but instead is treated as a natural state of affairs by advocates of participatory visions of democracy. In this work, I take the position that the appearance of such movements is in need of study, in order to consider whether the process of unification affects the goals and values that they hold as most important. Theoretical works in North America and Europe have tended to concentrate on political and cultural conflicts between society and the state, and as a result cannot account for the type of mobilizations that combine concerns over socio-economic issues with calls for democracy and legitimacy. The primary goal of this

dissertation is to explore whether popular movements rooted in civil society can promote ideals of democracy that substantially differ from their accounts.

In chapter 2, I provide a more extensive discussion of the theoretical works in question and present three objections inherent in their portrayal of civil society and social movements. The first addresses the claim that the goal of civil society and social movements should be essentially to protect the public sphere from “colonization” on the part of the state. This is only acceptable if cultural conflicts are seen as preeminent. If, on the other hand, it is not taken as given that the material needs of individuals are of secondary importance, one must consider that in democratic polities the state is not only the entity on which power is concentrated but also the source of social goods that it is its role to supply. While the authors discussed above recognize a distinction between civil society and the economic market as well as the state, the relationship between civil and economic societies is often glossed over in favor of sophisticated arguments regarding the role of the state as a political entity in society. Yet, the state may be needed to protect society from the sometimes unrestrained processes at work in market economies (Rucht 2003). In other words, the question of whether the goal of civil society is necessarily its freedom from state interference is empirical, and it is a function of the primary concerns of individuals and groups in particular societies.

The conceptual distinction between the ‘civil,’ ‘political,’ and ‘economic’ realms developed by Antonio Gramsci and adopted by the theorists of civil society and NSMs allows for the crucial role played by these actors in contemporary politics. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that such a distinction is rarely, if ever,

present in actual events. It is beyond the scope of this work to enter into a thorough debate on this issue, but it seems to me that the contention that there is such a thing as society independent of political and economic factors and circumstances should not be taken as given. Philosophers like Hannah Arendt (1998) and Habermas have decried the intermingling of “public” and “private” spheres, and researchers such as Ronald Inglehart (1997) have posited a set of “post-materialist” values that dominate Western societies. It is difficult, however, to conceive of social and political matters that are completely divorced from the material conditions present in specific times and places.⁴

The second critique refers to the tendency in this literature to assume a commonality of purpose among collectives within civil society. This ignores the fact that the public sphere, like the political and economic spheres, may be the stage for competition and conflict between different groups rather than a constant idyllic state of solidarity. If civil society is composed of a wide variety of groups formed freely by individuals for different reasons, then the likelihood is that the goals of the different groups will sometimes be at odds. Even when one can safely assume that most individuals and groups in a particular society support democracy, there is no assurance that the relationships between them will be amicable. This, as Michael Walzer (1992) has pointed out, is another reason for questioning the optimality of a civil society constantly trying to separate itself from the state. The importance of such

⁴ The transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe and Latin America were prompted as much (or perhaps even more) by the economic calculations of elites than by demands for democracy from below. Likewise, the current “democratic” revolutions in Eastern Europe are intimately related to those countries trying to gain entry to the European Union, for economic reasons as well as political ones. In the industrialized West, debates over immigration and religious or cultural freedom are often affected by economic considerations (such as the low birthrate in many of these countries, which encourages immigration from the third world as way to reinvigorate the workforce).

consensus is further enhanced by the need to account for the mobilization of different groups within civil society. An active civil society does in fact involve ties of solidarity among its members, as the theorists discussed above posit. Yet, the sources of such solidarity are scarcely examined in their works, and are instead also assumed to exist; “a gift from god,” as Ernesto Laclau (2004) derisively puts it. I maintain that the content of the bonds holding individuals together is contingent and should likewise be studied empirically. An analysis of the common worldviews which form the bases of solidarity in particular cases is extremely important, as it contributes to an understanding of the ways in which groups of citizens in democratic polities engage in collective action as well as help explain why the rare instances of massive collective mobilizations of civil society are so rare and short-lived.

Finally, the implication of the aforementioned cursory look at the sources of consensus is that they are taken to stem from actors within civil society (i.e., from the ‘grassroots’). Yet, this is also belied by real-world cases. Studies of the growth of Solidarity in Poland find that its leadership made symbolic use of past events, nationalistic rhetoric, and religious imagery in order to attract support (Garton Ash 1984; Laba 1990). The choice of a national flag or such other emblem of the popular struggle contains elements of national ideologies inherited from the past, often imposed by elites. Cultural hegemony in this sense means more than the values of elites sitting in power and “spinning” facts to serve their purposes; it entails what Stephanie Golob (2003) calls a “core narrative of identity” through which elites “justify their own authority by equating the survival of the nation and its distinct corporate identity with the survival of *their* state” (p. 366). These core narratives are

internalized by the populace and serve to unify civil society (see, for a similar argument, Gellner 1994). They may even outlive the elites that put them in place, creating problems for their successors. At the same time, as Tarrow (1994) notes, social movements serve not only as conduits of past traditions, but as creators of new and original forms of public contestation. It is in the synthesis of the old and the new that the most successful social movements acquire significance.

The “people’s revolutions” that have taken place around the globe in recent years all have in common the rapid escalation of social unrest and the appearance of popular movements of protest, usually sparked by a dramatic event such as a fraudulent election, a political assassination, or the discovery of a particularly egregious act by a political figure. These mobilizations usually last only as long as the resolution of an immediate crisis is at stake, with demobilization occurring as rapidly as escalation. They are pushed forward by social organizations and movements, which attract mass support by framing immediate political events in particular ways and appeal to commonly held and understood symbols across the nation. In Lebanon, as Safa points out, it was the national flag; in Ukraine, the color orange and the well-known lyrics “*razom nas bahato! nas ne podolaty!*” (“together, we are many! we cannot be defeated!” – see Karatnycky 2005).

Popular movements of this type do not appear out of nowhere. They are ignited by specific events, but they usually arise out of long-existing crises that have caused rifts between society and the state. They also usually are supported by political or economic elite actors with a vested interest against a particular status quo. “Popular uprisings,” despite the rhetoric usually heard from participants are rarely, if ever, pure

instances of “society against the state.” The literature on democratic transitions, while recognizing the presence of “popular upsurges” sees political change as driven mostly by elite actors: popular movements are the result of rifts within the status quo, which is under the control of competing elites (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999). The upsurges in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970’s and 1980’s were backed by emerging elite actors, which in many cases abandoned their alliances with popular sectors after the most critical points of the struggle were past.⁵ Despite this, the behavior of so many citizens in pursuit of a common goal is important, not only for its consequences (long and short-term) but also because it reflects on the values that citizens hold in common. Individuals communicate their cares and wants to each other and transform them into shared visions, the scholarly literature tells us, by joining in collective action through civil society and social movements.

Most people, most of the time, do not engage in this type of behavior, however. As Walzer (1995b) notes, to believe otherwise neglects the complexity of human social activity: “politics rarely engages the full attention of the citizens who are supposed to be its chief protagonists. They have too many other things to worry about. After all, they have to make a living” (p. 8). Social movements arise in order to respond to challenges posed by material conditions or the behavior of elites; they require opportunities and resources (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996), but also a

⁵ See, e.g., Garretón (2001) for a discussion of this phenomenon in post-transition Chile, Moreira (2001) on Brazil, and Baker (2002) on divisions between Solidarity and its allies in Poland. Seligman (1992) notes the “cynicism” that has characterized the use of civil society by elites in post-Communist Hungary (p. 7) and Smolar (1996) argues that “the myth of civil society as united, antipolitical, and supportive of radical reform was one of the first casualties of the postcommunist era” (p. 34). The same is true of more recent examples. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution rallied behind presidential candidate Victor Yushenko, who has since fallen out of favor in the eyes of many former supporters, while protests in Latin America were, if not led by, then at least encouraged by opposition parties.

common purpose and solidarity with other members (Klandermans 1988). The articulation of common interests is a function of “framing processes” through which individuals come to understand a particular situation collectively (Tarrow 1994; Benford and Snow 2000). Social movements must further overcome obstacles to collective action in order to come into being and be effective: from the problem of “free-riding” (Olson 2000) to the tendency of movements to fall victim to defection, exhaustion, and co-optation (Piven and Cloward 1979; Tarrow 1994). These difficulties are intensified in cases where not one but many movements organize and act collectively with each other – when they “coalesce into something more.”

In democratic polities, moreover, there are more opportunities for, and fewer threats against, collective action. But there is also less of a common need for social actors to stand together. Movements and organizations can communicate their demands to the government through institutional means, and governments can in turn address those demands and grievances separately. This creates competition and animosity between social actors (Walzer 1992 and 1995b; Hall 1995). Democracy, in other words, can be said to support the development of civil society but undermine its unity. The potential unity of separate movements, as Arturo Escobar (1992) notes, “cannot be taken for granted but must be constructed through articulation” (p. 79). In order for a confrontation between civil society and the state to take place, there must be, in Jan Kubik’s (1994) terms, a “symbolic/discursive polarization between the Party-state and the populace” (p. 5), which is the result of a framing process that utilizes available symbols – national, religious, ethnic – from what Tarrow (1994) calls the “cultural toolchest” of a particular society (p. 119) in order to transform the

various grievances and goals in that society into a singular set of demands articulated by civil society towards the state.⁶ The sources of these symbols and values are various: religion, established national and ethnic identities, a common culture, and common past experiences. In contemporary democracies, as in their authoritarian analogues, social movements may assume the role of framers and consensus-builders. This requires not only the ability to present existing conditions in broadly acceptable terms, but also for individual movements to adapt their own worldviews in ways that will make them more palatable to society at large. Political and economic crises may turn normally moderate individuals into activists, but they also force the more radical elements of civil society to moderate their views so as to find common ground in a broader movement.⁷

For these reasons, theories that advocate the democratizing capabilities of civil society must address a variety of ways in which democracy is understood by its participants. Otherwise, they become an exercise in reification of little use to an analysis of the very real ways in which civil societies and social movements attempt to effect social change around the world. Through a comparative analysis of recent popular mobilizations in Latin America, this dissertation aims to shed light on the

⁶ During instances of brutal domination on the part of authoritarian states, as was the case in Communist Europe and military-dominated Latin America, there was a clear division between the state and its enemies (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Escobar 1992). Yet, even in such cases, collective action overcame lack of opportunities, the overwhelming danger of acting against the state, and also the dominant cultural discourse established by the ruling elites and accepted by most members of society. The role of the social movements was precisely to create a competing discourse that also had universal appeal: unifying values and symbols that hold individuals together, as well as common grievances and demands that spur them into action (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Klandermans 1988; Tarrow 1994; Laclau 2004 and 2005).

⁷ In the 1970's and 1980's, for example, Latin American communist and socialist organizations found common grounds with more mainstream movements in order to strengthen the fight for goals that they deemed attractive, though insufficient (Mainwaring and Viola 1984; Cardoso 1989; Keck 1992). Oxhorn (1995b) similarly identifies the "moderation" of the ideologies of poor urban social organizations in order to fit into the popular "collective identity."

issue of the formation of collective consensus within civil society; particularly in ways that conflict with those envisioned by North American and European theorists.

Civil Society Uprisings in Latin America

While the mass protest movements in such countries as Ukraine and Lebanon have been almost universally applauded as signals of the continuing role civil society can play in the promotion of democracy, a recent wave of popular mobilizations in Latin America, directed mainly against democratically-elected governments and focusing on economic as much as political factors has not received similar praise. In several countries, nationwide massive mobilizations and protests have paralyzed countries for weeks or even months, frequently resulting in drastic changes of state policies or the resignation of government officials, including heads of state. They have been striking in their magnitude and intensity, often representing the largest instances of collective mobilization these countries have ever experienced. Like the cases discussed above, they are characterized by the rapid, usually unexpected, simultaneous mobilization of collective actors arising from these countries' civil societies – labor unions, neighborhood associations, university and high school student federations, middle class groups, “new social movements,” and many others – which seem to overcome economic, ethnic, social, and political differences and find common grievances against their political representatives and collectively stand up to the power of the state. Lasting from a week to several months, these intense periods of collective action are usually followed by equally swift demobilization.

Such was the case in Costa Rica in 2000, when unprecedented nationwide demonstrations led by public-sector unions and university students were supported by

hundreds of social organizations and “unaffiliated” citizens in order to protest against a government initiative to open the electricity and telecommunications industry to market competition. The rapid collapse of the Argentine economy in late 2001 brought about angry crowds of protesters, leading to the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa and, in rapid succession over the course of a few weeks, three temporary replacements. Two Ecuadorian presidents, in 2000 and 2005, were kept from completing their constitutionally-mandated terms in office by protests headed by indigenous confederations along with other movements and opposition political parties that decried the manipulation of political institutions and rejected successive attempts to impose austerity measures on an already impoverished population. In 2000, the protests culminated in a short-lived coup d’etat led by the major indigenous group and some dissident factions of the armed forces. In Paraguay, President Luis González Macchi barely escaped a similar fate in 2002, when a series of large mobilizations against his alleged corrupt practices and neoliberal economic policies brought about an attempted coup in 2002. Bolivia too, saw two presidents forced to resign by protesters, in 2003 and 2005, also in response to unpopular economic measures and allegations of corrupt behavior on the part of important political figures. Mass mobilizations of civil society occurred in Venezuela in 2002, except that in that nation President Hugo Chávez was the one rejecting neoliberal compromises and supported by many among the poor while protesters rejected his economic policies and his populist, semi-authoritarian governing style.

Instability and conflict between the state and society are, of course, not new in Latin America. As a rule, transitions to democracy have not been sufficient to change

this pattern. In many countries, democratic transitions were completed in the midst of deep economic crises, creating social instability and violence. The steps taken to resolve these crises – in virtually every case, the adoption of a structural adjustment programs with international financing and support – were not always received with open arms. In some countries, political and economic change paralleled each other and the one came to be identified with the other. Social protest against neoliberal reforms in Latin America was common in the 1980's and 1990's, led by labor unions, left-wing political parties, and other activist groups (Walton 2001). It has grown progressively with the appearance of important new collective actors, which oppose both the limited reach of electoral democracy and market solutions to social problems, such as indigenous organizations in Ecuador and Bolivia in the early 1990's, the “*Zapatista* revolution” in Mexico in 1994, the Landless Peasant Movement in Brazil, and unemployed *piqueteros* in Argentina.

It has been repeatedly suggested that civil society and social movements may contribute to further democratization in Latin America. Research on NSMs (Escobar and Alvarez 1992a; Zamosc 1994; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998a; Dagnino 2002; Yashar 2005) pays special attention to their pursuit of political aims like recognition of excluded social groups, multiculturalism, human rights, the protection of women and the environment, and so on. Alain Touraine, one of the initial theorists of NSMs has repeatedly asserted his belief that cultural conflicts trump socio-economic ones in Latin America (e.g., Touraine 2003). Studies of civil society in the region are clearly informed by the work of Keane and Cohen and Arato (e.g., Alexander 1994; Lechner 1995; Oxhorn 1995a and 1995b; Mayorga and Paz 1999;

Bobes 2003). Several theoretical works combine analyses of social movements and the idea of the autonomy of the public sphere to consider the possible “deepening” of Latin American democracy into a more participatory form (Lievesley 1997; Ellner 2001; Oxhorn 2001; Avritzer 2002). Referring to social organization among shantytown dwellers in Chile under military rule, Oxhorn (1995b) identifies the need for the popular sectors to form a “collective identity,” which he terms “*lo popular*,” that contributes to pro-democratic collective action.

The popular insurrections in Latin America in recent years do not seem to be driven by these goals, however. While clearly the work of civil society and social movements,⁸ they have been fueled by a combination of political crises of representation, cultural conflicts (regarding indigenous populations in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador), and by issues relating to economy policy and social welfare. How these relate to each other is a central concern of this study. It does not seem, however, that autonomy from the state, presumably in order to encourage the development of multiple forms of life and identities, is at the forefront of ordinary people’s priorities. As Pablo Andrade (2000) points out:

In conditions of social, economic, and political inequality [...], it is easy to imagine social movements that at the same time as they develop new collective identities and new forms of life, push for politics that revolve around the state and that tends, even, to diminish civil society (p. 44).⁹

⁸ See Schuster et al (2002) and Armony and Armony (2005) on Argentina; Postero (2004 and 2005) on Bolivia; Garita (2001) on Costa Rica; Zamosc (2004) on Ecuador; López (2004) on Venezuela.

⁹ It is well known that competition for political and economic primacy in Latin America revolves around control over state institutions (e.g., Véliz 1980; Diamond and Plattner 2001), and that traditionally elites have been able to co-opt important social actors such as organized labor into particular political programs. More recently, as Oxhorn and Graciela Ducatzenzeiler (1998) note, the move towards neoliberalism characteristic across the region has led to the marginalization of social sectors that do not approve of structural adjustment policies.

Despite the undeniable presence in contemporary Latin America of civil society organizations and social movements that espouse radical democratic or anti-capitalist ideologies, it is my contention that these ideals are not what hold the mass popular uprisings together. Many of these collective actors have been at the forefront of the protests, but like their predecessors they have modified their immediate demands in order to fit them into the broader concerns of their respective societies. Their ability to mobilize large numbers of people has contributed to highlight social, political, and economic issues, and the ties between their members have provided an example for commonly apathetic or powerless citizens. Social protest against states in Latin America begins with these movements and organizations; it expands through them, and is in many ways shaped by them. A detailed analysis of these social actors is crucial for understanding the expressions of “people power” in the region.

Some scholars see them mainly as threats to the precarious stability that took the region so much time and effort to find (Schamis 2002; Levitsky and Murillo 2003; Ollier 2003; Valenzuela 2004). Referring to the Andean cases (Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru) John Peeler (2004) warns of the danger of too much mobilization in these unconsolidated democracies. Omar Encarnación (2002) argues that the events in Venezuela put into question whether “a strong and invigorated civil society is an unmitigated blessing for democracy” (p. 38). In some cases authors use even stronger language, as when Philip Oxhorn (2002) refers to the Argentine protests of 2001 as “mob rule” or Moisés Naím (2004) argues that many social movements involved in protests across the region “feed off the politics of rage, race, and revenge” (p. 104). These works appropriately highlight the dangers of instability in a region that has

seen its share of political violence and economic disaster. At the same time, they strongly imply that the expressions of discontent coming from civil society are either unimportant or dangerous for democracy. They fail to consider the possibility that increased citizen involvement in politics, even if it is in the form of street protests and demonstrations, may have a positive impact on state-society relations in Latin America.¹⁰

A growing literature, on the other hand, has applauded the rise in social protest over the last decade, and particularly the popular uprisings of recent years, precisely for their potential to right economic and social, as well as political, injustice. Scholarly accounts of the events in Argentina on December 2001 depict them as a watershed moment for national politics (Altamira 2002; Auyero 2002a and 2004; Cafassi 2002; Schuster et al 2002; Filippini 2002; Dinerstein 2003a and 2003b; Zibechi 2003; Sueiras 2004). Many proclaim the beginning of a new revolutionary period through a radical democratic transformation led by “civil society from below” (Mattini 2000 and 2003; Houtart 2001; Negri and Cocco 2002; Ferrara 2003; Barbetta and Bidaseca 2004; Hardt and Negri 2004) and by citizen-centered “counterpower”

¹⁰ Concerns for the survival of democracy seem overstated, however, as some of these authors admit (Schamis 2002; Hunter 2003; Levitsky and Murillo 2003). No Latin American nation has reverted to authoritarianism in over a quarter of a century, and public opinion strongly supports democracy as a form of government across the region (Encarnación 2004). There have been few military coup attempts by conservative factions since 1990 (e.g., Venezuela in 2002), and some by “radical” military groups (Venezuela in 1992, Ecuador in 2000, and Paraguay in 2002), but only a handful have succeeded in removing a government and those who have invariably have surrendered power to civilian authorities in a matter of days or even hours. There are also no longer significant groups from the left calling for the overthrow of ‘bourgeois democracy’ through violent means (Hayden, 2002, Castañeda 2003). Furthermore, advances in the availability and access to information, a global trend towards advocating democracy and the protection of individual liberties, and increased economic integration across borders reduce the opportunities of national elites to resort to non-democratic means, but at the same time solidify the existing status quo (Wiarda 1999, Weyland 2001 and 2004). As Peter Hakim puts it, “[t]he main concern is not whether democracy will survive in Latin America. It will. Rather what is at issue is the quality of governance and politics in Latin America” (quoted in Encarnación 2004, p. 31).

(Colectivo Situaciones 2001 and 2002). Rather than involving a violent appropriation of the means of production, the “civil society” revolution involves the creation of new normative identities based on communal relations and “shared life experiences,” which require the communal administration of material resources as well. Neoliberal economics, intended to leave economic outcomes to the workings of markets, are singled out as the primary enemy of the Latin American people. Similar conclusions appear in studies of Bolivia (Assies 2003; Mamani 2003; Tapia 2005), Costa Rica (Vargas 2000), Ecuador (Miranda 2003; Zibechi 2004; Unda 2005), and Latin America in general (Houtart 2001; Sader 2001; Seoane and Taddei 2003). Some authors see national protest waves as a prelude to transnational opposition to U.S.-led neoliberal globalization in a cosmopolitan “movement of movements” (Cox 1999; Robinson 1999; Cockburn and St. Claire 2001; Mertes 2004).

At issue for these authors is the defeat of the hegemonic order historically imposed by political and economic elites. Like the theorists of civil society discussed above, they see in social protests a rejection of the established order, to be replaced by a new politics based on solidarity and horizontal decision-making. In contrast to American and European works, on the other hand, this perspective does not limit its conception of civil society and social movements to their role in promoting democracy. It understands that immediate material needs may trump political ideals. It openly rejects both liberal democracy and free market capitalism as commensurable with “real” democracy, and finds no difference between popular struggles against neoliberal reform and those against military dictatorships in years past. Such views are explicitly held by many social movements in Latin America, and many of these

works tend to ascribe to the nationwide protests precisely these ideals. The problem is that this assumes that the only real challenge to the status quo may come “from the bottom up.” The importance of popular protest in this view is limited to its ability to mount a counter-hegemonic alternative from the grassroots.

As has been pointed out, theoretical accounts of the democratizing potential of civil society generally take such consensus (on the desirability and primary importance of democracy and autonomy from the state) for granted. So do the interpretations by Latin American scholars of the Latin American cases, which envision the popular movements as the beginning of an all-out campaign against liberal democracy, neoliberal capitalism, and, often, American imperialism. They do not address how different, often incompatible identities or demands are transformed in order to support another group’s struggle or to pursue new joint goals. Alliances between social actors, like those between political actors, may be purely strategic. Civil society usually represents not a collection of collective associations in equal standing but a complex series of interactions between social organizations with varying degrees of power and influence, in addition to political and economic elite actors looking for social support. The difficulty of finding common ground for action is well-known in Latin America, where there is a long history of political elites co-opting or forming long-term clientelistic relationships with social actors – what Oxhorn calls “controlled inclusion” (Oxhorn 1995a and 2002). Despite all of this, the most recent outbreaks of social protest in Latin America do indeed see social actors coming together and forming, for a time, a united front that sees itself as representing the will of “the people.”

In Chapters 3 and 4, I offer detailed accounts of what seem to be the “purest” instances of civil society opposition to the state among the available cases: Argentina and Costa Rica. In both nations, the actions of a core of opposing social actors was joined by a much larger set of organizations, movements, and individuals so that for a time collective action took on the form of “the people versus the state.” Unlike other countries, in which the actions of civil society were bolstered by their interaction with opposition political parties, economic actors, or the armed forces, in Argentina and Costa Rica there appears to have been a clear sense of division between ordinary citizens and the political class – government officials from all branches of government, political parties, influential figures, and so on – in general. This, I believe, makes it more likely to identify the role played by civil society organizations and social movements. Conflicts based on ethnic or regional differences – which introduce complicating factors in the state-society divide – are not significant in their impact in either Argentina or Costa Rica. In both cases, moreover, the presence of relatively large middle classes facilitates an analysis of values and demands that cross class boundaries and truly represent the “voice of the people,” as opposed to only the marginalized sectors of society.

The discussions of the events in Argentina in 2001 and 2002 and Costa Rica in 2000 are taken from the following data sources: 1) media accounts of relevant events, provided by mainstream and “alternative” sources; 2) my own direct observations of these events, through personal involvement (in the Costa Rican case) and conversations with other individuals involved in collective actions; 3) pictorial accounts, in the form of television coverage, documentary films, and photographs; 4)

public statements on the parts of figures involved in the events, including political leaders as well as heads of social organizations; 5) press releases and other original sources of communication from organizations and movements involved in the protests; 6) previous scholarly discussions of these events; and 7) a limited number of interviews, conducted by myself or made public in media outlets or book form. The focus of the discussion is on the civil society organizations and social movements that engage in long-term active opposition to the state, taken to be the initiators of collective action, mainly responsible for the framing and articulation of social demands that is expressed in these mass mobilizations.

The conclusions reached through the two in-depth case studies are subsequently compared to two other cases of nationwide mobilizations in Latin America. Chapter 5 presents popular uprisings similar as those seen in Argentina and Costa Rica, which have taken place in Ecuador and Bolivia in recent years. Each case presents the formation of a core of social organizations actively mobilized against their governments, fueled by a combination of disillusionment in the political leadership and rejection of particular neoliberal economic policies. In both countries these social actors are joined, not once but repeatedly, by a broader coalition of actors that comes to constitute popular insurrections. That such events occurred more than once provides an opportunity to compare the characteristics of one popular upsurge to another in very similar circumstances.

Ecuador and Bolivia do present problematic factors such as ethnic divides, regional animosities, military and elite interventions, and even foreign war. Unlike Argentina and Costa Rica, which have enjoyed periods of economic development and

social well-being in the past, these two Andean nations are among the poorest in Latin America. In addition, these cases see a much larger level of cooperation between civil society and expressly political actors. This seems to violate a primary requirement for the constitution of civil society as discussed in the theoretical literature – that civil society be independent from political society. But such a restriction would exclude as civil society action many of the movements that inspired the concept in the first place, as well as more recent ones such as the Orange revolution in Ukraine. For the purpose of this discussion I prefer to grant that completely autonomous action on the part of civil society is rare, while considering the important effects that the mobilization of social actors may have on political affairs.

An analysis of the actions of social movements and other civil society actors is fundamental, since it is through them that the broad popular coalition is formed and its demands and goals articulated. An account of the formation of such coalitions is not offered by analyses of civil society in the extant literature, however. The cases examined in this dissertation provide an opportunity to observe in what ways social movements contribute to this process. I suggest that a “core” of social movements exists in each country that engages in continued opposition to state policies and institutions. In most of Latin America, and certainly in the cases discussed here, the 1990’s were years of reconfiguration of older movements, the appearance of new ones, and the consolidation of many of these into coherent blocks of opposition to national states. The goals of these movements pertain to political rights or to material issues, but very often combine both in some manner. They often frame their actions in

terms of a broader goal of changing the political and economic systems at a fundamental level, be it in the form of revolutionary or reformist action. Were the popular uprisings in recent years simply the natural evolution of these movements, the values and goals behind them would be clear, but I believe that they are not.

The binding force tying the various participants of the popular uprisings in Latin America, I contend, is grounded on a critique of contemporary political practices and economic policies that is explicitly democratic, but based not on radical democratic or socialist principles but on a particular understanding of the role of the state in society. This is an outcome of the particular experiences of citizens in each country. The popular movements in the region are indeed fueled by democratic sentiments, but these are inextricably linked to notions of social and economic justice that are perceived as being neglected by national governments in the region today. Concerns over economic welfare often conflict with the idea that civil society is necessarily better off when it is left alone by the state. In fact, I believe, the rejection of neoliberal economic policies is based on strongly-held attitudes within Latin America regarding the role of the state not merely as watchman but as responsible for providing for its citizens, and that these are partly the result of changes in national narratives following “critical junctures” in the various countries’ histories.¹¹ The

¹¹ There is an important current of thought that believes Latin American politics to be the function of a particular cultural heritage (Stepan 1978; Veliz 1980; Wiarda 1999). Howard Wiarda (2003), an important representative, argues that “even if Latin America changes sociologically and economically, its political and civil society situation will look quite different from that of the United States” (p. 92). Even if accepted as true (which I am reticent to do), a view that ascribes such a deterministic role to culture cannot account for differences among countries in the region. Constructivist approaches, on the other hand, underline the importance of specific historical processes. In certain momentous occasions, according to this line of thought, the “core narrative” of a nation can be reshaped by elites through processes of education and the establishment of political and cultural institutions (Golob 2003). Core narratives are particularly vulnerable during periods of national crisis, what this literature terms “critical junctures” (e.g., Collier and Collier 1991). They are, in other words, contingent, though it is

combination of political corruption and an economic agenda that benefits the rich and powerful are seen as a breach of the “social contract” that is central to Latin American nations’ understanding of politics. This is a far more powerful call to action than the ideals of radical or participatory democracy.

The interpretations of the protest movements offered by Latin American scholars recognize the importance of economic factors, but have a tendency to misrepresent the mobilizations as all-out attacks on market-driven globalization. Electoral support for pro-reform candidates throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s seems to belie this view, as does that fact that many economic reforms have in fact received widespread support. It should be kept in mind that the levels of social protest seen in these cases appear in response to very specific issues – a specific piece of legislation, a political scandal, a presidential declaration. As intense and powerful as the popular movements are, they last for relatively short periods of time, afflicted by the obstacles of exhaustion, defection, and cooptation, which have been well documented in the literature. In addition, the aftermaths of these periods of protest have not brought about increased support for anti-systemic ideologies or political candidates, though it has for political figures perceived as alternatives to established elites. This distinction is crucial, and is expanded on throughout this work.

Nevertheless, the renewed mobilization of civil society may still affect, perhaps even positively, the future of political, social, and economic relations in Latin America. Even if political change is primarily driven by elites – a notion that I

important not to fall into the trap of believing that such core narratives – from which shared values stem – are arbitrary or that they can be interpreted as purely conventional. They are affected by national and regional cultures, by past dominant narratives, and certainly by existing material conditions.

generally accept – the expression of popular dissatisfaction with current conditions should elicit a response from elites. Latin American popular protest is not driven by a coherent ideological alternative to free-market capitalism or electoral democracy, but by a strong conviction that it is the state’s role to take care of its people. Such beliefs do not originate in the social movements. They are tacit but accepted elements of the dominant national narratives, which social movements make use of and elites have ignored at their peril.

In the conclusions presented in Chapter 6, I return to the theoretical questions and summarize how the empirical findings inform the debate on civil society and social movements. It is not at all my intention to argue that the commonalities I identify in the various mass mobilizations constitute the most important or prevalent political conflicts in Latin America. As Susan Eckstein (2001a) has noted, and as is clearly seen in the following chapters, confrontations between social movements and states usually revolve around specific socio-economic issues. Most of the time, political mobilization is the work of social organizations and movements acting separately, or in conjunction with a well-established core of opposition. The phenomena I examine here represent special cases, but ones that may teach scholars something about the general attitude that Latin Americans have towards their governments and their system of government in general.

Chapter 2: Civil Society in Political Theory

The insistence to only consider civil society in relation to the state overshadows the relationship between civil society and economic forces. Some theorists borrow the term from the classical liberal tradition of John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment (Seligman 1993; Gellner 1994), and understand the freedom of civil society to consist to a large extent of economic activity. To them, it is incorrect to speak of civil society in places like Latin America or Eastern Europe at all, since civil society is the result of a specific historical process. Even if one granted that civil societies do exist in those regions, an antagonism between civil society and market forces does not have a place in their theories. Those who appropriate the concept from Antonio Gramsci (1999), on the other hand, take pains to distinguish civil society from both the state and the economy, but dedicate the bulk of their analyses to its relationship with the former. When, as in the cases examined below, the boundary between political and economic power is unclear at best, idealized versions of civil society as protecting the integrity of an abstract societal “lifeworld” are not very useful.

The Gramscian branch of the literature tends, frequently implicitly, to assume some sort of unifying set of values that make civil society the “realm of solidarity,” though never abandoning the fundamentally plural and heterogeneous nature of its component associations. Not only, as I will argue below, does this contradict Gramsci’s understanding of the term, but it ignores some major questions. Under what circumstances will civil society *actually* act with some degree of unity under the

banner of democracy? What makes a particular issue become the center around which the plurality of associations in civil society become, for a while, a single movement? And, beneath the catch-all banner of democracy, what are the real goals that drive these movements? Studies on social movements provide some insight into these questions, though without looking at civil society specifically. This is, to an extent, understandable; a concept as vague as civil society is not useful in the crafting of rigorous, empirically-derived theories. Nevertheless, I contend that focusing on civil society, with all its ambiguities, provides certain insight into the politics of the countries in question.

It is true that some definitions of “social movements” would exclude the type of massive, spontaneous, and short-lived mobilizations that occupy most of the attention of the case studies that follow (Escobar and Alvarez 1992b, p. 1; Olzak 2004). Studies of social movements (Piven and Cloward 1979; Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1998, 1999) as well as the literature on democratic transitions (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Diamond 1999) predict the difficulty in maintaining such energetic activity across civil society over extended periods of time. For others, by contrast, spontaneous mobilizations should be considered social movements as long as they show the deliberate pursuit of change, internal solidarity, and symbolic coalescence (Laraña 1999, pp. 175-176). Does a relatively short life-span automatically make a political movement unimportant? That has not seemed to be the verdict of the international community regarding popular movements in Tiananmen Square in China in 1989 or those in the Ukraine in 2004. Even if none of these movements cause significant changes in the political and economic life of their

countries, the issue of the temporary coming together of different groups into an active and mobilized civil society should concern those who wish to underscore its importance to democratic theory.

Transitions to Democracy and the Revival of Civil Society

Much scholarly work has been produced in Europe and the United States since the late 1970's regarding the links between social movements, civil society, and democracy. In fact, what Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992) term the "contemporary revival" of the idea of civil society began with the appearance of social movements striving for democracy in Eastern Europe and in Latin America. Though the concept had appeared in the writings of dissident intellectuals in the 1970's, the world began to pay attention to its potential following the birth of the Solidarity labor union in Poland in 1980 (Arato 1981; Nowak 1991, Baker 2002), which, in the words of Jacek Kuron (1981), was part of "a tremendous social democratization movement in all possible strata [of society] and at the same time its symbol" (p. 94).

Similarly, while the Latin American left was in the process of replacing classic Marxist categories with terms such as 'hegemony,' 'civil society,' and 'democracy' (Baker 1998, Dagnino 1998), the adoption of these ideas for political struggle arose out of the experiences of mobilizations by, among others, urban movements in Brazil (Mainwaring and Viola 1984 and 1994; Baker 2002, pp. 78-79) and human rights groups such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Navarro

2001). Thereafter, civil society became “the political celebrity” of the struggle against authoritarianism in Latin America (Stepan 1988, p. 5).

Since in both cases the primary antagonism took place between repressive, anti-democratic forces and groups demanding more liberties and openness, there has been a tendency among many scholars to only extol the contributions of a mobilized civil society when it is involved in trying to bring about or reinforce liberal or electoral democracy. This “taming of the idea of civil society” (Baker 2002), is reinforced by theoretical work that links the rise of civil society to specific historical developments in the West (Seligman 1992, Gellner 1994). It is evident in studies on transitions to democracy during the “third wave of democratization” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Huntington 1993; Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999) as well as in the tendency of international and transnational organizations to equate civil society with the non-profit (NGO) sector (see Carothers 1999).¹²

The literature on democratic transitions adopts, if not a minimal Schumpeterian definition of democracy, then certainly one that emphasizes elite pacts and political institutions as the keys to democratic governance (Lievesley 1997; Baker 2002). An important influence is that of Robert Dahl, for whom even “pluralistic” democracies are essentially run not by majorities but by a variety of

¹² To those one could add a “neo-Tocquevillian” current of work on civil society, of which Robert Putnam is undoubtedly the most important figure, which conceives the primary role of voluntary organizations to be the creation and reproduction of “social capital.” Life is better in a society with copious amounts of social capital because it fosters trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic engagement. Social capital allows social problems to be resolved through collaboration rather than conflict. These cultural patterns further educate citizens as to how to behave towards each other under a democratic regime (Putnam 1993, 2001). Putnam borrows the idea of civil society organizations acting as “little schools of citizenship” directly from Tocqueville, but does not follow on Tocqueville’s analysis of the possibility of these same organizations standing up to the state when necessary. Instead, social capital appears to place citizens in the service of government, leaving no alternative behavior for when government does not fulfill its democratic role. For critiques of the Putnam argument, see Portes and Landolt (1996), Foley and Edwards (1996, 1997, 1998), Edwards and Foley (1998), Tarrow (1996).

competing minorities (Dahl 1972, 1991). These authors acknowledge the important contribution civil society can make in transitions from authoritarianism and democratic consolidation, but they also point out that large-scale mobilizations of civil society are short-lived. For advocates of a “realist” conception of democracy, moreover, a mobilized public is often seen as more dangerous than beneficial. Particularly in young and “fragile” democracies, continued stability often takes precedence over responsiveness to popular demands (Peeler 2004; Valenzuela 2004).¹³

It is important to point out that the notion of an antagonistic relationship between civil society and the state is present in the liberal tradition. Alexis de Tocqueville sees civic associations as compatible with democracy, but also as protecting individuals from the excesses of democratic rule. For Tocqueville, the problem to be feared from democracy is that it will work too well rather than not well enough. In other words, Tocqueville fears the tyranny of the majority as represented by democratic government. Associations between individuals allow them to join their resources in protecting each other from the rule of the many. Though Tocqueville is not specific on what mechanisms these associations use to resist the state apparatus, it seems that he has economic resources in mind above anything else. For contemporary theorists in this tradition, such as Ernest Gellner (1994 and 1995) and Lawrence Cahoon (2002), the main antagonist of voluntary associations is not the majority of fellow citizens but the state itself. It is through their ability to join in associations and pool their economic resources together that citizens can resist unacceptable intrusions

¹³ Held (1997) outlines many of the different theorists that have taken part in the debate. For an extended discussion of elitist vs. participatory theories of democracy in a Latin American context see Lievesley (1997), Ellner (2001) and Avritzer (2002).

on the part of the state. For this reason, not only is the democratic state a precondition of the existence of civil society from this perspective, but so is the market economy. For advocates of a more “radical” conception of civil society, however, these ideas should be taken further.

The more direct inspiration for these works, and the pro-democracy movements with which they became associated, was the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. His ideas, in fact, have been incorporated into most theories of civil society since (Edwards and Foley 2001, p. 2). For Gramsci,

the fundamental political contest is unlikely to be a confrontation between capital and labor for control of the state and, thus, the means of production [...]. Rather, the contest is likely to be a ‘positional’ one for civil society conceived essentially as a cultural-political domain, indeed the sole public domain where mass consent is at issue (Adamson 1988, p. 325, c.f. Nielsen 1995).¹⁴

Gramscian civil society involves groups and relationships, independent of the state and the economy, that create cultural modes of behavior. The ruling classes are not secure in their position of power purely by means of their monopoly over the use of “legitimate” force, but by the consent of the rest of society, which is precisely what lends the former its legitimacy. Gramsci rejects orthodox Marxism’s dismissal of civil society as purely the superstructural incarnation of what is fundamentally an economic relationship between classes (Gramsci 1999, p. 407). Even were the state to be removed in capitalist societies, he argues, civil society in its usual form would *resist* any fundamental change to the status quo. The “positional” dispute is the attempt by groups within civil society to create new ways of viewing the world and, therefore, is less a contest between groups within civil society and the state than

¹⁴ For other works on Gramsci’s concept of civil society see Joll (1977), Adamson (1980), Pellicani (1981), Anderson, Cohen and Arato (1992), Nielsen (1995).

between civil society groups against each other. If anything, the balance of opinion should benefit the “conservative” element of civil society, which has not only the approval of ruling institutions behind it but also history and the powerful inertia of cultural norms. The struggle for cultural supremacy, for hegemony, is fought *within* civil society. Civil society cannot confront the state until the war of position has been fought and won.¹⁵

Civil society can only be in place if the state and economic organizations cannot incorporate or completely control the various practices, organizations, and institutions of the society that are not economic and not governmental. In the Gramscian model, a nation in which the state has virtually complete control over all aspects of society is more vulnerable to collapse if state institutions are conquered by revolutionary forces (his famous statement that in Russia civil society was amorphous and “gelatinous” (Gramsci 1999, p. 238), while at the same time impervious to “cultural” dissent. This explains the different relationships between Eastern European and Latin American dissidents to Gramsci. For the first, in light of their conviction that Soviet-style states could not be overthrown by force and were unlikely to be amenable to political reform, the creation of civil society *in order* for cultural challenges to be mounted was fundamental (Cardoso 1989). For the latter, the fact that opposition groups and parties were already in existence made the challenges

¹⁵ Most current work that borrows Gramsci’s insights rejects his determinism and emphasis on the role of the party. But to ignore that the strength of civil society in his model stems from the creation of alliances between groups misses the point entirely. Gramsci leans toward civil society at the expense of the privileged historical role of the proletariat because he sees inter-class movements covering a whole range of interests and goals (not only the workers’ drive to escape economic oppression) as the key to cultural change. This makes uncertain the content of the new hegemonic discourse as well as the composition of the hegemonic alliance (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In addition the embracing of non-proletarian groups into the hegemonic alliance opens the possibility of other interests becoming prioritized. “Collective action there would be,” as Sidney Tarrow puts it, “but it might well be on behalf of the collective interests of the bourgeoisie” (Tarrow 1994, p. 12).

coming from civil society possible. This awareness for the need of *any* civil society as a precondition for a particular kind of civil society – one that has democracy as its ambition as well as its inspiration – prompts theorists such as Cohen and Arato (Cohen and Arato 1992, Cohen 1995, p. 37) to posit civil society as “the goal of” as well as “the medium for” radical democratic change.

Rather than facing the complexity of the state/civil society relationship in Gramsci’s thought, however, his terminology has been used in accounts of civil society that are driven by specific political realities. Dissident intellectuals in Eastern Europe in the 1970’s and 80’s transformed it into a conception of “civil society against the state” and “self-limiting revolution” (Arato 1981; Keane 1988a).¹⁶ They saw civil society as fundamentally opposed to totalitarianism. Czechoslovak thinker Vaclav Havel, for instance, emphasized the central role of “the lie” in totalitarianism and the fundamental opposition to “the lie” in civil society (Keane 1985; Baker 2002, p. 21).

In Poland, Adam Michnik adapted ideas by Leszek Kolakowski into his vision of “new evolutionism,” in the hope that change was possible in Soviet-style systems but with a clear understanding of its limited scope. “In my opinion,” says Michnik, “an unceasing struggle for reform and evolution that seeks an expansion of civil liberties and human rights is the only course Eastern European dissidents can take” (in Baker 2002, p. 16). Jacek Kuron, on his part, rather than viewing it simply as a means for attaining more civil liberties, sees civil society as an end in itself, a “system in which the social structure can be established from below” and that “demands more

¹⁶ Arato and Keane have been instrumental in introducing to the West the revived Eastern European idea of civil society. They have also been extremely critical of each other’s work on this topic; see Arato (1989).

pluralism, more democracy” (Kuron 1981, p. 95). The writings of Michnik and Kuron establish a juxtaposition between the state and civil society, albeit one that is unclear on the possibility of society accruing power through self-organization (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 32). They described themselves as democratic socialists, and were concerned with forms of council democracy for the working class and not with parliamentary or procedural democracy (Arato 1981, p. 46; Baker 2002, p. 23).

Though the different conceptions surrounding civil society varied considerably among the Polish intellectuals of KOR (Workers Defense Committee) like Michnik and Kuron, the Czechoslovakian members of Charter 77, among them Havel, Benda, Hejdánek, and Battek, and Hungarians such as János Kis and György Bence, scholars in the West agree that the Eastern European vision revolved around several common assumptions (Keane 1988a and 1988b; Cohen and Arato 1992; Smolar 1996; Baker 2002). First, that civil society is analytically, and should be in actuality, separate from the state. Understandably, they did not give much thought to the possibility of also separating the concepts of “civil” and “bourgeois” society, something that later thinkers would see as crucial in distinguishing “liberal” from “radical” versions of the concept. Second, the Eastern European movements’ main activities were publishing, lecturing, discussing and teaching. The hope seems to have been the building of the moral bases of democratic structures and practices, i.e., a democratic political culture (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 35). The power of the state was such that open defiance of the system was unthinkable. Third, despite the participation of labor and workers’ organizations, they never identified oppressed society with the working class, or any one societal group for that matter. The emphasis was from the start on pluralism and diversity of tactics and goals. Thus, for instance, KOR changed its name to Social Defense Committee-

KOR (KSS-KOR) to indicate its support for all initiatives of self-representation (Arato 1981, p. 23).

However, it was Solidarity, the Polish workers' movement, which came to embody Eastern European resistance to Communism. Following the strike at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, in July 1980, workers across the country organized strikes in support of the Gdansk workers:

As ever-increasing numbers of factories joined the subsequent Inter-Factory Strike Committee (MKS), the list of demands to be met if work were to be resumed also grew. The first and most significant of these, by now highly political, demands was that the communist government must accept 'free trade unions independent of the Communist Party' (Baker 2002, p. 13).

Solidarity was created after the government acceded to the demands and the Gdansk agreement was signed. Though crushed in December 1981, it became a symbol of a nascent civil society in Eastern Europe. Because it was a movement that had triumphed, even for a brief period, many saw in it the potential to rally the masses behind it; in Gramscian terms, to form a new "historic bloc" to challenge the existing conditions (Pelecynski 1988, p. 368).

From the start, Western observers understood the fate of Solidarity to be intimately linked to the success of civil society in Poland to achieve reform. Arato (1981), in particular, is adamant on the fundamental role that social movements must play if civil society is to be strengthened from "below." The leadership of Solidarity itself understood its role as not only striving for the meeting of particular demands but as the standard-bearer for an emerging civil society (Arato 1981, p. 25). Kuron recognized clearly this dual nature: "What we are dealing with is a tremendous social democratization movement in all possible strata. The independent self-managed union Solidarity is just part of this movement and at the same time its symbol." (Kuron

1981, p. 94) But how did it acquire this mantle? After all, Solidarity in actuality represented the demands and interests of a specific segment of Polish society. What led it to be identified with the entire struggle of liberty versus tyranny? If the nature *and* the goal of civil society is to further pluralism, diversity, the freedom to associate with like-minded individuals, then how could one group come to represent all the others? As Arato himself points out, “universality never emerges spontaneously from plurality” (Arato 1981, p. 47).

Ernesto Laclau (2004) argues that “the symbols of *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity) became in Poland the symbols of the absent fullness of society” (Laclau 2004, p. 25). The case of Solidarity allows a glimpse into the important processes through which civil society becomes focalized into one particular group and set of demands. Solidarity shared with other groups a profound desire to extirpate itself from the direct control of the state. The dichotomization of society into the state and its subjects facilitated the drawing of battle lines and the formation of sides in the battle. Solidarity took advantage of the symbols available to it to present itself in a more universal light to the Polish people. An example is Lech Walesa’s insistence on the construction of a monument to commemorate those who died as a result of a strike in Gdansk in 1970, which sparked protests that contributed to the eventual establishment of Solidarity (Garton Ash 1984). Roman Laba (1990) and Jan Kubik (1994) convincingly show how Solidarity made use of Catholic and nationalistic symbols to mobilize support – “Never did the practice of revolt appear to draw so heavily on the inherited symbols of consensus!” (Laba, quoted in Tarrow 1994, p. 132). Laba emphasizes “the innovative quality of Solidarity – the extent to which the dominant symbols were

invented during the strikes, and the degree to which dominant symbols and rituals were lifted from nationalist and socialist traditions and transformed” (Laba 1990. p. 128).

The paradox of a single group embodying a notion that implies heterogeneity and pluralism was bound to create problems, both theoretical and political. In 1981, Walesa terminated KOR’s advisory role to the movement, in part because Michnik and Kuron were critical of Solidarity’s demagoguery, cult of leadership, and “naiveté” (Michnik 1985, p. 130, Baker 2002, p.28). Solidarity, in its newly-acquired leadership role, increasingly related to Polish society as a unified whole (Baker 2002, p. 29). The thinkers of KOR, on the other hand, continued to emphasize societal pluralism. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that the identification of the democratic resistance with the one particular entity benefited the movement in the long run. The presence of a concrete symbol inspired the Polish public and the international media in ways that the discrete actions of many small groups would not have. In order for civil society to mobilize as a relatively coherent whole, a symbol to rally behind, or to oppose, is necessary. The various groups within civil society cannot be assumed to be capable of acting in unison simply because they all value the existence of civil society itself. This has, unfortunately, been ignored by many prominent supporters of civil society.

As in Eastern Europe, the Latin American revival of civil society was intertwined with resistance against authoritarian regimes. As a result, the different approaches to the concept in the region shared two aspects: that civil society was to be understood as standing against an overly repressive state (and later against the

state as such) and that the goal of civil society was to contribute to the struggle for democracy (Dagnino 1998, p. 41). Since the “bureaucratic-authoritarian” regimes in the region received support from conservative elites and often from the United States, resistance appeared mainly from the left. Traditionally, the Latin American left had ignored civil society as a bourgeois component of capitalist domination. This perception was reinforced by the very real deficiencies of incomplete or exclusionary democracies (Castañeda 2003, p. 353), the same regimes that presumed to represent the potential for breaking the cycles of poverty and violence in the region, and which extolled the virtues of liberty and civility.

Left-wing intellectuals began to turn away from orthodox Marxism as they became exposed to European post-Marxist ideas and when the threat of violence inherent in the rule of military dictatorships acquired an unavoidable immediacy. By the late 1970’s, “[t]he antagonism between authoritarianism and democracy [had] largely superseded that posited between capitalism and socialism” (Munck 1990, p. 113). The rediscovery of Gramsci by Latin American Marxists played a crucial role in the divorce of the Left from revolutionary and deterministic ideologies and its adoption of radical democracy as the primary goal of popular struggle (Barros 1986, Chilcote 1990, Munck 1990, Pearce 1996, Dagnino 1998, Baker 1998 and 2002).

Thinkers rejected Marx’s determinism and the surety of an inevitable workers’ revolution. Adopting the concept of hegemony “implies a rejection of the notion of political subjects preconstituted from their place in the economy” (Dagnino 1998, p.

42).¹⁷ The possibility of the construction of an alternative hegemonic forces

underlines the element of *consent* inherent in Gramsci's idea of civil society:

This conception of hegemony as articulation opens the door for a consideration of the autonomy of different subjects and the process of building their own collective identities. The collective elaboration of the basis for such an articulation embodies the core of and the greatest challenge to hegemonic construction (Dagnino 1998, p. 42).

The traditionally state-centered mindset of the Latin American left also moved from a critique of the authoritarian state to a critique of state politics as such (Lechner 1988, p. 21), and thus moved away from the goal of taking over state power. Latin American theories of civil society, like Eastern European ones, emphasized self-restraint and self-organization (Baker 2002, p. 67). Pluralism within civil society replaced vanguardism and monism. That Gramsci's ideas might serve to further non-democratic goals was often ignored or pushed aside. "In my view," states Brazilian Francisco Weffort, "if the notion of hegemony may have an anti-democratic meaning, we must look for a democratic meaning to it... What I am proposing is that we invent, if there is not one, a notion of hegemony which is democratic." (quoted in Dagnino 1998, p. 40). Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1989) summarizes one such approach thus:

Real democratization will arrive (and is arriving according to those who hold that perspective) as it is crystallized in the spontaneous solidarity of the disinherited. It lives as *comunitas*, experiences of common hardship which form a collective *we* based on the same life experience that is transformed only when, through molecular changes, the simultaneous isolation of the state and the exploiters – which will perish at the same time – comes about (p. 313).

Cardoso's critical description focuses on the assumption by many proponents of the new theories that solidarity will appear spontaneously within civil society

¹⁷ This point is central to the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). See also Barros (1986) and Nun (1989).

among the oppressed by virtue of their shared experience of *being* oppressed. His objection that “civil society is ruled by domination – and that – taken by themselves alone – civil society and democracy have nothing to do with each other” (Cardoso 1989, p. 312) has been taken by some to suggest an unwillingness to give up an orthodox Marxist understanding of politics (Baker 2002, p. 55). This, however, ignores Cardoso’s careful examination of the adequacy of the concept of hegemony for the situation in Brazil at that time. Cardoso was dubious at best of the possibility of a democracy “of civil society” that rejected the state and political parties. As was the case in many other South American countries in the period of transition, civil society and political parties were partners in the process of opening up of political spaces. In Cardoso’s words, there was a “pan-politization of the social and a socialization of the state” (Cardoso 1989, p. 319). Though it was successful in its contribution to the democratic transitions, this mixing of the social and the political is precisely what current theories of civil society, such as Cohen and Arato’s and Baker’s, oppose.

Pluralism in civil society, one of the characteristics that made it so attractive, flew in the face of the need to create a new hegemonic force to counter the state. As in Poland, the contradictory necessities of plurality and unity created rifts among Latin American movements and thinkers (see e.g., Mainwaring 1989, p. 198). Attempts to elaborate a notion of “unity within diversity” (Coutinho 1980, p. 31) only added more confusion to the issues:

The importance of autonomy for Latin American social movements during the 1970’s and 1980’s was not simply a matter of catering for alternative political identities. For workers in particular, autonomy meant the opportunity to develop appropriate political organizations and strategies in alliance with other movements. The neo-Gramscian concern with the creation of popular hegemony meant that, for many

Latin American social movement leaders, asserting a plurality of identities was not an end in itself. These identities were important to *collective* autonomy from the state, which is why there were often heated debates (as in Poland over the umbrella role played by Solidarity) concerning the degree of autonomy that movements should have from each other (Baker 2002, p. 77).

Still, no resistance movement of the period in Latin America solidified behind a Solidarity-like symbol. Though alliances did exist among movements, there was never a sense that society was unified in its rejection of the authoritarian governments. More than in Eastern Europe, Latin American activists were forced to wait for change to come from above. Once again, the paradox becomes evident. A unified civil society has more resources at its disposal, more leverage in its struggle against the state, but this unity undermines one of the basic aspects of the social arena that civil society represents and, presumably, desires to preserve. There is no inherent common ground among groups and associations in civil society, particularly if one accepts Gramsci's notion that it is within civil society that the battle for predominance across cultural norms is fought.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) have developed an account of the unity/diversity dichotomy inherent in civil society. Strongly influenced by Gramsci, they emphasize not the concept of civil society but that of hegemony, as the process through which politics and culture are articulated. They use Gramsci's to criticize Marx's reliance on a universal subject of history – the urban proletariat. Such a universal subject cannot be assumed to exist, it must be (and is) constructed by a combination of material conditions and the articulation of competing understanding of the world. Thus, “popular struggles where certain discourses tendentially construct the division of a single political space into two opposing fields” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 137) certainly exist, but they are contingent on a number of factors. “In the

Third World,” they argue, “imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a center, with a single and clearly defined element” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 131).

Cohen and Arato (1992) agree: “In both Latin America and Eastern Europe, the juxtaposition of civil society and state was a conceptually dualistic outcome of a period of societal self-organization that led to polarization between democratic and authoritarian forces.” Civil society emerged as “an undifferentiated bloc counterpoised to the political system, and as the only agent of democratization processes” (Salazar 1999, p. 24). As a result, the impetus of civil society mobilizations subsided following the transitions to democracy. Once the repressive regimes were out of the picture, the unifying principle behind the multi-class alliances that formed the basis of the movements disappeared as well.¹⁸ This was the case in both regions. In Poland, Solidarity moved from civil to political society, many former dissidents across Eastern Europe entered the political arena, and a number of Latin American groups were absorbed by the resurging political parties.

Though some movements retained their independence and continued their activities following the transitions,¹⁹ the dream of a unified civil society acting on behalf of the public dissolved in the processes of institutionalization, co-optation, and demobilization alluded to by the seminal work of Robert Michels (1949) and examined at length in the literature (Piven and Cloward 1979; O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Tarrow 1994). Moreover, once democratization was taking place,

¹⁸ For an analysis of this process in Eastern Europe, see Smolar (1996). For Latin America, see Mainwaring (1989); Eckstein (2001b).

¹⁹ Notably, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Navarro 2001).

many organizations representing the interests of the poorest strata of society in Latin America saw their goals being pushed aside in favor of those of middle and upper-class groups to which they had been previously allied (Moreira Alves 2001, Garretón 2001). In spite of this, these civil society movements provided the inspiration for a new wave of scholarly work on the potential for civil society and social movements to continue to advance the cause of democracy beyond a rigid institutional framework of elite-dominated states and political parties.

Civil Society and Social Movements: Fighting Democracy with Democracy

It would be impossible to summarize here, however briefly, all the different ways in which the concepts of civil society and democracy have been examined even in the relatively recent past.²⁰ Here, I limit myself to theories that examine the role of actively mobilized groups and collectives which explicitly strive to promote or expand democracy, with emphasis placed on those that come out of or refer to Latin America. The theories of civil society that emerge from the experiences of Eastern European and Latin American movements discussed above see this role of civil society as crucial. If peoples living under oppressive conditions and the constant threat of political violence could mount a front of resistance against their governments, why cannot citizens living in democracies do the same?

This raises the questions of whom civil society is fighting against in a democratic setting, and for what purpose. Given their focus on resistance to the state, many Latin American writers such as Weffort, Manuel Antonio Garretón, and Orlando Fals Borda (Edwards and Foley 2001) retained the idea that the principal

²⁰ A good overview can be found in Edwards and Foley (2001). See also Foley and Edwards (1996).

peril that society faced was domination from the state. After the transitions to democracy, this trend continued with the influx of ideas from a third influence on the current revival of the concept of civil society – the literature on the “new social movements” and the French “second left” in Western Europe.

The Western European approach arose out of a critique of the welfare state (see Offe 1984) and the perceived need to protect the public sphere from its encroachment. The “new social movement” theories are premised on a redefinition of the relationship between politics and society (Habermas 1991; Touraine 1981, 1982, 1987, 1988; see also Fraser 1993, and Cohen and Arato 1992, Ch. 10). Advanced capitalist societies, it is argued, have undergone a transformation and have reached a “post-industrial” stage; that is, one in which the main goal of social organization is no longer the manufacturing of *goods*, but the provision of *services*. In general, the rise of the standards of living in those societies has made conflicts over the possession of goods secondary. Therefore, the most important social issues revolve around expressions of identity, freedom of speech, participation in decision-making processes, and the creation of a less “impersonal” society. Autonomous and independent institutions are juxtaposed to elite-controlled, bureaucratic and technocratic structure. The stakes involve the free expression of one (or one’s group’s) identity against the weight of external domination. The dynamics of social movements are no longer ruled by conflicts over “issues,” but by the mobilization of “identities” (Eder 2003, p. 62).²¹

²¹ See also Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; Laraña 1999; Melucci 1989.

By far the most thorough and theoretically sophisticated attempt in the recent literature to combine the concept of civil society with the role of social movements is found in Cohen and Arato's *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1992) and in their subsequent writings (Arato 1994; Cohen 1995). Cohen and Arato reject outright the anti-state visions of civil society that emerged from Eastern Europe and Latin America as overly simplistic and optimistic (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. viii, p. 30).²² Their theory endeavors to combine the understanding of the social arena as a separate "lifeworld" of Western Europeans such as Habermas and Touraine, with Gramsci's distinction of civil society from the state *and* the economy. Civil society represents the possibility of genuine democratic citizenship as long as it remains separate, for the actors in political and economic society "cannot afford to subordinate strategic and instrumental criteria to the patterns of normative integration and open-ended communication characteristic of civil society" (p. ix). An outright extrication of civil society from state and economy, on the other hand, is neither possible nor desirable. Civil society's role is to influence the other two arenas in ways that tip the scales away from purely instrumental goals and towards those of "plurality, publicity, legality, equality, justice, voluntary association, and individual autonomy" (Cohen 1995, p. 37):

[T]he political role of civil society is not directly related to the conquest of power, but to the generation of influence, through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussions in a variety of cultural and informal public spheres. Thus, the mediating role of political society between civil society and the state (political society sets up receptors for the influence of civil society) is indispensable, but so is the rootedness of political society in civil society. In principle, similar considerations pertain to the relationship of civil and economic society, even if historically, under capitalism, economic society has been more successfully insulated from the influence of civil society than political society, despite the claims of elite theories of democracy (Cohen 1995, p. 38).

²² Walzer (1995b) agrees: "The network of associations incorporates, but it cannot dispense with, the agencies of state power" (p. 22).

As long as political and economic societies fulfill their function of acting as bridges between civil society, the state and the economy, the relationship between them need not be contentious. But Cohen and Arato acknowledge that this state of affairs has utopian underpinnings (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 452). As a rule, civil society must actively pursue both its independence from political and economic “rationalities” and its continued capacity to influence them for the sake of society (p. 472). The most valuable resource that it possesses, the reason for its importance and the necessity of its “defense and differentiation” they call “solidarity” – “which refers to the ability of individuals to respond to and identify with one another on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity, without exchanging equal quantities of support, without calculating individual advantages, and above all without compulsion” (p. 472). Social movements are the “dynamic elements” of their theory when they are characterized by “self-limiting radicalism” – “projects for the defense of civil society that accept structural differentiation and acknowledge the integrity of political and economic systems” (p. 493).

Crucially, the importance of the new social movements for Cohen and Arato lays not in “what gains and losses they will produce for the actors, but whether they will produce solidarity or not” (p. 556). Accordingly, “the success of social movements on the level of civil society should be conceived not in terms of the achievement of certain substantive goals or the perpetuation of the movement, but rather in the perpetuation of values, norms, and institutions that are rooted ultimately in a political culture” (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 562).

While much of the work on civil society and new social movements in principle is intended to analyze advanced capitalist societies,²³ it has been enormously influential in Latin

²³ Cohen and Arato (1992) state that their theory applies to the West and, partially, to Eastern Europe (pp. 487-491).

America, whether through Cohen and Arato or otherwise.²⁴ Arturo Escobar and Sonia

Alvarez, for instance, state that

[the new social movements] embody a transformative potential in at least two dimensions: first, the widening of ‘socio-political citizenship’, linked to people’s struggles for social recognition of their existence and for political spaces for expression, and second, the transformation or appropriation by the actors of the cultural field through their search for a collective identity and the affirmation of their difference and specificity” (Escobar and Alvarez 1992b, p. 4).

Even for some movements engaged in efforts to secure the most basic services, notions such as the opening up of political spaces, the recognition of a cultural or ethnic identity, and the curtailing of state interference on “local” decisions play an important rhetorical role (Scribano 1999; Nash 2001; Assies 2003).²⁵ This sometimes leads to overly elaborate theoretical descriptions of collective actions, in order to make them fit with a pre-conceived notion of the role of social movements. For example, referring to the Brazilian Landless Peasant Movement (*Movimiento de los Trabajadores Sin Tierra – MST*), Bernardo Mançano Fernández argues that land occupations

are actions that initiate a spatial dimension of political socializations: the space of struggle and resistance. This space, constructed by the workers, is the place where the movement acquires experience and shape. Occupation is movement. In it, new subjects are created. In each land occupation, a new experience-generating source is created that will bring new actors that would not exist without it. Occupation is the condition of existence of these actors. In conceiving of the occupation as a fact, they are continuously recreating their own history. Not to conceive it is not to be conceived (Mançano Fernández 1999, p. 87).²⁶

Similar views have been developed by certain Argentina unemployed organizations (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD Solano 2002; Dinerstein 2003a) and

²⁴ Some recent examples include Bobes (2003); Escobar and Alvarez (1992a and 1992b); Mascott (1997); Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998); Baierle (1998); Mayorga and Paz (1999); Avritzer (2002).

²⁵ To this perspective one could add works that do not emphasize the role of social movements. For some scholars (e.g., Las Heras 2003; Koonings 2004; Sueiras 2004) civil society is strongest when it functions at the level of local communities and is given as much autonomy as possible from political institutions. That this leads to a different kind of dependence on local and national governments (in terms of funding resources, for example) often transforms these initiatives into excuses for governments to pass on their role of welfare-providers onto these organizations, which they are more than happy to do.

²⁶ My translation from the Spanish.

some neighborhood assemblies that formed after the protests of December 2001 (Dinerstein 2003b; Zibechi 2003). Many peasant and indigenous groups also place the goal of developing new identities based on traditional and communal ways of life at the forefront of their ideological programs. These include the Zapatistas in Mexico (Hayden 2002), and indigenous movements in Ecuador and Bolivia (Yashar 2005).

Behind the defense of cultural identities hides an apparent inability to deal with movements that do not have the expression of a particular identity or cultural tradition as their primary goal. In Latin America, this would exclude the majority of instances of collective political action (Eckstein 2001a). To be sure, the continued attention that civil society receives from scholars is due in large part to renewed struggles for recognition around the world and “the extraordinary energy and commitment expressed by the ‘new social movements’” (Walzer 1995a, p. 2). Feminist, environmental, cultural, ethnic, and so many other new social movements certainly do exist, and their study is indubitably important. The emphasis placed on the importance of shared symbols in the creation of collective identities is a necessary addition to the understanding of collective action. There is a tendency to nevertheless pay too much attention to these issues at the expense of others.

Though Cohen and Arato ascribe to civil society the role of protecting the “realm of solidarity” from the intrusion of the state as well as the market economy – “economic rationality and societal solidarity represent competing claims” (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 476) – most of their discussion concentrates on the former. It appears that they are not as ready to admit that the goal of democratizing civil society can be solved by separating it from the economy, as it is from the negative influence of state bureaucracy. This leads to a certain level of contradiction in their argument: since the emancipation of civil society from politics

becomes necessary in part in light of Habermas and Offe's critique of the welfare state, it is strange that, in regards to the economy, Cohen and Arato claim that "there is no reason why workers should not try to represent their interests through compromise [with it]" (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 464). Certainly, if one accepts Touraine's contention that the United States and Western Europe are in a "post-industrial" age where material conflicts are secondary, it is reasonable to spend less time on them. That is, however, most definitely not the case in Latin America.

John Keane has criticized Cohen and Arato's depiction of the economic arena as excessively negative (Keane 1988a, p. 86). A more pointed criticism, put forth by Hudson Meadwell, points out that their notion of civil society requires a thriving market economy. Cohen and Arato's new social movements, he writes,

[are] built, not on the ruins of capitalism, but on some of its successes, and [are] the carriers of criticism and change in this new world. New collective carriers of change have been identified, and the working class has been abandoned. The working class has become the enemy, the harbinger of industrialism in a post-industrial age. Thus this move also provides a solution to the Gramscian problem of 'organic intellectuals.' There is now no need to worry about relations between bourgeois leaders and working-class followers. The concerns of these new social movements are not the material questions of economic production and distribution, but the forging of new collective identities and political cultures that are not based on class (Meadwell 1995, p. 191).

In terms of most Latin American social movements, it is more often than not a mistake to separate identity from material claims. For most movements the goal is not, it cannot be, the separation of civil society from the state. The structure of political institutions in most countries in the region encourages groups to seek institutional recognition and political exchanges to satisfy their goals. This, added to the fact that the constituencies of most of these groups come from the marginalized classes (as opposed to movements in the advanced capitalist countries, where they come from the middle classes) makes Latin American social movements fundamentally political in character (Mascott 1997; Baker 2002). This is as true in countries where ethnic and cultural conflicts are at the forefront of

politics – like the Andean countries, Guatemala, Mexico, and Brazil – as in those where such issues are secondary – as in Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The need for unity is more pressing for Latin American movements because freedom of movement and association often takes a back-seat to immediate demands of basic services. The transformation of the left-wing theorists’ understanding of the role of the state coincided with the new strategies of many movements and organizations, which focused on demanding economic and social concessions from the state instead of the capitalist employers. This “broader class struggle [was] located at the point of consumption (or reproduction) rather than production. Indeed, the capitalist state, and not the employer, came to represent the enemy in this scenario” (Baker 2002, pp. 78-79; see also Assies 1994, p. 83). The literature that links the democratic potential of civil society to new social movements – like Cohen and Arato, Escobar (1992), and Dagnino – often neglects this crucial aspect of the experience of movements in Latin America; by turning their focus to issue-movements such as feminist, human rights, or environmental groups.

But it is important not to dismiss the more recent mass mobilizations purely as relating to the goals of “old” social movements. Much like for the movements in the region in the 1970’s and 80’s, and like Solidarity in Poland, the line separating economic and political demands is not at all clear. The mass demonstrations in Argentina in 2001 or in Costa Rica in 2000 were sparked by economic policies initiated by their governments, but popular unrest was fueled as much by these actions as by the general discontent simmering in these societies over corruption in the political elite, a perception of foul dealings between politicians and powerful economic interests, and the general inadequacy of democratic institutions to interpret the popular will. The social polarization in Venezuela since Hugo Chávez’s electoral

victory in 1998 revolves around a combination of political debates on the nature of democracy and economic issues like the future of the state-owned oil company (Ellner 2003a and 2003b). One should not forget that the elite pacts that initiated the transitions to democracy in the region – in “second wave” democracies like Costa Rica and Venezuela (Peeler 1985) as well as in “third wave” ones (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996) – were the result of economic as much as political calculations, and that current political alliances in most every country hinge primarily on a political actor’s view on the desirability of economic liberalization and privatization of state industries.

Advocates of civil society like Keane (1988a), Held (1997), and Cohen and Arato, realize that for civil society to be truly democratic, the material conditions of citizens are to be taken into account. Yet they do not provide nearly as adequate an account of the role civil society should play in the economic aspect of democratization as they do in the political one. Nor do they pay much attention to the contradictory demands of the two. Mass mobilizations that demand the state to “own up to its responsibilities” (Laufer and Spiguel 1999; Scribano 1999; López Maya 1999) do not wish for a reduction of state interventions in society but an increase (Rucht 2003). As Kurt Weyland (2004) has noted, Latin American political leaders that pushed for neoliberal reform did not gain power through reasonable explanations of the advantages of economic restructuring:

Personalistic, populist leadership, which claims an electoral mandate from the people but determines the content of this mandate at will, went hand in hand with neoliberal reform in a number of Latin American countries. The most outstanding cases were Menem in Argentina (1989-1999), Fujimori in Peru (1990-2000), Collor de Mello in Brazil (1990-1992), Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador (1996-1997), and, with less latitude, Carlos Andres Peres in Venezuela (1989-1993). [...] Their connection to the people had the character of plesbicitarian acclamation than of liberal representation.” (pp. 149-150)

For better or for worse, Latin American voters accepted such leaders, but with the assumption that they would represent and protect the interests of the country as a whole. In

each of the cases mentioned by Weyland, these presidents attracted public anger when they were shown to be dishonest and corrupt. They were ousted (with the exception of Menem, who successfully completed two terms in office) by congressional opposition and impeachments along with public protests. Presidents in the cases examined in the following chapters, enjoyed support from other political elites for the political programs, but were unable to quell the rising sentiments within civil societies that the neoliberal restructuring itself constitutes a betrayal of the government's responsibility to care for its constituents.

Civil society groups in Latin America are very much aware that a retreat of the state in managing social interactions often leads to economically privileged groups taking advantage of the rest (Walzer 1995b, p. 23; Rucht 2003, pp. 215-216). This brings to the fore a second major drawback of accounts such as Cohen and Arato's: namely, the lack of attention they pay to the process through which civil societies unite for a particular purpose. As Meadwell (1995) and Keane (1988a) have pointed out, by completely divorcing economic activity from civil society, Cohen and Arato eliminate a powerful resource through which movements may oppose the state. Without it, the only way in which they can pose a serious challenge to the status quo is through collective mobilizations, the bigger and more durable the better. The problem is that, in conceiving of civil society as fundamentally concerned with the preservation of the purity of the "lifeworld," they assume a level of commonality of purpose across groups that may or may not exist. Hudson Meadwell's (1995) critique of Cohen and Arato addresses this issue:

Consensus not over procedural or institutional arrangements that might address the political problems produced by diversity within a political community, but consensus over the content of the lifeworld, is assumed to be present. Civil society, then, is constituted by identity rather than difference, by unity rather than diversity (p. 193).

In this evaluation, a "fetish of identity formation" makes Cohen and Arato's theory excessively republican, "illiberal and, to some extent, pre-modern" (Meadwell

1995, p. 191).²⁷ Without accepting Meadwell's wholesale rejection of the focus on identity formation, it seems clear that he identifies a serious drawback in Cohen and Arato's work. The question at hand is, therefore, when can (and does) civil society take "the shape of a social movement" (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 75)?

Civil Society in the Shape of a Social Movement

As pointed out above, scholarly work on new social movements has developed important insights into the processes through which identity construction and the use of symbols affect the birth, shape, and lifespan of movements. The study of social movements in the United States, dominated in the 1970's by theories of collective action and "resource mobilization" that assumed individuals to be purely self-interested and stressed opportunity structures as the main driver of group behavior (Jenkins 1983; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1987), has also incorporated more complex accounts of group formation and motivations – "No serious student of movements any longer believes – if any ever did – that material interests translate straightforwardly into guides to action" (Tarrow 1994, p. 119).²⁸ Bert Klandermans (1988) distinguishes "consensus formation," which is a function of existing meanings in particular social networks, and "consensus mobilization," which involves deliberate attempts to use those meanings for a specific purpose. Similarly, William Gamson (1990, 1992), and David Snow and Robert Benford (Snow and Benford 1988

²⁷ This last charge would, one assumes, come as a complete shock to Cohen and Arato, who dedicate the last third of their 1992 book (well over two hundred pages) to establishing their theory's rooting in modernity.

²⁸ A newer direction being taken by scholars appears to be a broadening of the scope of enquiry from social movements to "contentious politics." The presumed gains from this development represent a loss for the interest of this work, however, as the goal of identifying similarities among vastly different episodes of contentious politics is not conducive to the type of focus on civil society required here.

and 1992; Benford and Snow 2000) underline the important of “framing” issues into grievances that will strike a cord with individuals:

Social movements are deeply involved in the work of ‘naming grievances,’ connecting them to other grievances and constructing larger frames of meaning that will resonate with a population’s cultural predispositions and communicate a uniform message to power holders and others (Snow and Benford 1992, p. 136).

The “classic research agenda” on social movements, according to an important recent work, “provid[ed] a reasonable, if overly structural and static, model for social movements. It worked best as a story about single unified actors in democratic polities; it worked much less well when it came to complex episodes of contention, both there and especially in nondemocratic states” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, p. 18). The same can be said of studies of new social movements in Latin America. Though aware of Laclau and Mouffe’s work, writers such as Escobar (1992) and Dagnino (1998) prefer to concentrate on individual groups at the expense of issues that ranges of groups across civil society share:

True, there are some demands that can be universalized, such as the demand to democratize the state, family, local community, and so on; these demands originate in large part in the capitalist mode of production and the unity of social labor. Yet, even these demands are understood and experienced in very different ways by the various social actors (Escobar 1992, p. 79).

The goal of this work is to examine precisely those issues that Escobar and so many others choose to ignore: what are the demands that become universalized? How does this happen, and what role does civil society play in their “framing”? In a formally democratic Latin America, as in the rest of the democratic world, “the proliferation of points of antagonism permits the multiplication of democratic struggles” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 131, see also Laclau 2004, p. 28). As societies become more open, the possibility of the coalescence of individuals into a “people” with common aspirations becomes more difficult. This contradicts the hopes not only of theorists of civil society specifically, but of radical

republicans like Sheldon Wolin (1996)²⁹, and neo Marxists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000 and 2004).³⁰ For all their differences, they share a belief in the capacity of people, of citizens, to unite into a collective at the appropriate time. This sentiment is echoed by Latin American authors who, combining Marx, Gramsci, and postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, hold on the hope that a “civil society from below” will rise to face the new challenges posed by capitalism, even if it has not done so thus far (Houtart 2001, Sader 2001).

Discussions of the massive protests in Argentina in 2001 highlight the importance of cultural rather than class struggle and, to repeat a well-worn phrase, the “creation of new identities” (see Svampa 2000). Though it is clear to all that the immediate causes of the outbreak of the protests were economic, many of these authors contend that, as the NSM theorists argue, the Argentine movement was born in a “post-liberal,” post-industrial,” or “post-modern” context. If capitalism in its current incarnation is to be resisted, it must be done in the realm of meaning. In this, they also recall the arguments of Habermas (1991) and Cohen and Arato (1992) in claiming that emancipation from “outside” cannot occur, since the “emancipators” (the Party) uses the same methods as the dominators. Ana Dinerstein (2003b), for instance, argues that “*que se vayan todos!* demands the impossible and, by so doing, generates an empty space for new meanings to be invented” (p. 194). Raul Zibechi (2003) puts it thus:

²⁹ Wolin’s conception of “the political” entails “an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity.” By contrast, politics is “the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authority of the collectivity. Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. The political is episodic, rare” (Wolin 1996, p. 31).

³⁰ Referring to Hardt and Negri, Laclau comments that the spontaneous unity of the multitude appears as if by “a gift from god” (Laclau 2004, p. 35).

The experience of the new Argentine movement indicates that it is possible to face social change in a different way, with different objectives and, above all, without creating apparatuses that end up becoming parasitic and destroying the popular movement. It shows that the main task of the movement is the recreation of social ties, which are the nuclei of the changes, that, at a certain moment, must be defended through the street actions of the multitude (p. 16).

Luis Mattini adds that the results of the protests are not as important as the fact that they occurred at all. He sees the uprising of December 2001 as a “post-modern insurrection,” and emphasizes the need for a new kind of resistance (Mattini 2003; see also Mattini 2000). The left-wing intellectuals that form *Situaciones*, a collective that aims to produce “militant” scholarship in Argentina, use the term “counter-power” to encompass the different and diffuse forms of struggle. This notion has been adopted by internationally known neo-Marxist writers such as John Holloway and Hardt and Negri, as well as many Latin American academics.³¹

They embrace Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in its recasting of Marxist class-struggle from purely economic to economic/cultural. If hegemony is cultural domination, then the revolution must proceed first in the cultural realm and only later in the political one. Hence, they also accept Gramsci’s division of society into political, economic, and civil. Foucault, however, shows that society is awash with relations of domination. The independent intellectual left in Argentina today therefore rejects traditional forms of organization, including labor unions and political parties. All those form of organization have a totalizing effect and only impose a different set of relations of domination. The only social arrangement that escapes this trap is the one created by a community of equals in terms of their own shared “life experience.”

³¹ See Colectivo Situaciones (2002) and Colectivo Situaciones and MTD Solano (2002). For a collaboration with Negri, Holloway and others see Colectivo Situaciones (2001). Dinerstein (2003a), Zibechi (2003), Bergel and Fornillo (2005), and other scholars use the term liberally.

Otherwise, they argue, the logic of “complexity” undermines the capacity for new creation”

Complexity thus acquires a singular status: not only does it point to the existence of very real structures of domination, creators of values that organize society, but they also act as obstacles to thought that rejects militant inquiry. It blocks, then, through this mechanism the potential of the re-appropriation by peoples of their own conditions of existence (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD-Solano 2002, p. 168).

All forms of political action that think in terms of unifying structures, such as the state, are “homogenizing” and therefore useless for truly critical thought.

Naturally, these authors see it as positive that there was never a single organized resistance movement but an agglomeration of separate groups acting together – “multiple action replaces a unifying concentration,” notes Zibechi approvingly (Zibechi 2003, p. 184).

One issue that arises is the sudden blending of the economic with the socio-cultural. It is very clear to all that the main concerns of the unemployed *piqueteros* in Argentina are not simply a cultural agenda but one of survival. Many of these groups are fighting primarily for work and food. These groups need continual assistance from national authorities – that, in fact, that is their main demand. This “pre-modern” (Meadwell 1995) approach of giving primacy to localized communal identities – for what is modernity if not an attempt to make sense of “complexity”? – to the understanding of collective identity has been criticized by neo-Marxists such as Atilio Borón (1995), and scholars of liberalism such as Michael Walzer (1992), John Hall (1995), and Meadwell (1995). Walzer’s contention, for instance, that a strong-enough state is required for a healthy civil society, specifically, to protect civil society from itself, is echoed in the testimony of a *piquetero*:

In [the Buenos Aires neighborhood of] Quilmes people buy in the exchange markets sugar for three credits and sell it in Bernalesa at three thousand: it's total speculation [...] It's therefore even more liberal; supply and demand at their most savage (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD-Solano 2002, p. 184).

Unfortunately, the dangers of a purely locally-based social arrangement, in which state intervention is rejected in principle, seem to be too much for individuals to bear. The result is an eventual return to conventional politics at best, or to silent and impotent inaction at worst.

Is it accurate to extrapolate the fact that some groups speak of new identities founded on shared life experiences and claim that the root of the national mobilization was this type of resistance? It is my contention that it is not. The united reaction against the state, the national movement that “synthesized and subsumed” the plurality of goals of a plurality of collective and individual actors, did exist for a short time, almost certainly less than one year. But the basis for the movement, its unifying aspect, did not stem from the abstract goal of “creating new identities.” On the contrary, it stemmed from people’s understanding of their identity as citizens of Argentina, their sense of national unity, and their feeling of being victimized by their elected officials. As shall be seen below, the economic program enacted by the Argentine state during the 1990’s had created animosity among the poor, the growing ranks of unemployed and on the millions of middle-class families that saw their standard of living decrease. The basis for the continued actions of social movements was a rejection of policies in which the state *gave up* some of its power. The unification of civil society in the Argentine case was brought about by two acts of government: the closing of access to private bank accounts and the declaration of a

state of siege to confront increasing social unrest. Both were interpreted as betrayals of the role the state should play in public life.

Cohen and Arato seem to recognize this problem to an extent, when they state that the unity of civil society “is not on the level of institution, organization, or even a shared, fundamentally unquestioned normative order” (Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 434) and that “[the] first task of the new movements is to form the very subject that must become the collective actor who will participate in political negotiations and exchanges and then the bearer of gains and losses” (p. 556). Yet, there is no assurance that this collective actor will follow the radical democratic project that Cohen and Arato set out. There is also no way to know where the discourse that will become “hegemonic” will come from. Cohen and Arato are optimistic of its arising from the bottom-up, from the grassroots (pp. 506-507). But it is a fact that social movements and mass mobilizations often rally behind political parties, charismatic personalities, or elites.³²

What, then, holds civil society together, when it acts together? Some advocates of the liberal conception of civil society recognize that something must. Ernest Gellner (1983, 1994), Liah Greenfeld (1992) and Nicos Mouzelis (1995) have persuasively argued that nationalism is intimately connected with the rise of civil society in the West:

Social order requires a shared culture; facts as such cannot, in the nature of the case, engender that shared system of ideas, interpretations and values which make a society viable. Facts are on the one hand recalcitrant, and on the other inadequate. So, any culture is a systematic prejudice (Gellner 1994, p. 32).³³

This seems to solve the problem for liberals such as Gellner – since they do not expect the various groups within civil society to act in concert – but it certainly does not for advocates of an active, mobilized civil society. It seems in fact that nationalist sentiment is habitually present as a cohesive element in mobilizations of civil

³² Torres-Rivas (1989), for instance, argues that popular pro-democracy movements in Central America in the 1980's were elite-driven.

³³ See also Bryant (1995).

society, as in the case of Solidarity mentioned above, and Latin America as well (López Maya 1999, Garita Bonilla 2001). If Cohen and Arato see nationalism as a unifying force in civil society, they do not acknowledge it explicitly, and neither do most of those who use their ideas and terminology.³⁴

As a conclusion to this chapter, I would like to suggest that Laclau and Mouffe's ideas raise some issues relevant to this question.³⁵ As already noted, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) reject the existence of a given social actor that a priori represents "the people" as a whole. "The people" signifies an actual relation between social actors, but one that is contingent on the particular meaning which is given to it. Thus, the term may be used to mean the whole of the population of a country, the members of a national group, or, as it often does in Latin America, the *plebs* or lower classes. Mass movements habitually appropriate the concept of "the people" to attain legitimacy in the eyes of participants as well as antagonists. In effect, "[i]t does not designate a given group, but an act of institution that creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements" (Laclau 2004, p. 24). The construction of such a popular identity is what Laclau (2004), in a later work, terms "populist reason." The whole of the people rarely wants the same thing at the same time. Particularly in democracies, different groups are engaged in the pursuit and articulation of various claims. There is no "society" beyond the sum of its components. For Laclau, the basic social actor is not the group, but the discursive claim or "demand." But demands only make sense if there is an actor that is the target of those demands. This creates an internal "frontier" within society, which divides those groups that articulate demands, on the one hand, and the entity that is supposedly capable of satisfying those demands.

³⁴ Jeffrey Alexander (1994) is a notable exception.

³⁵ My understanding of Laclau and Mouffe's work benefited immensely from my participation in a seminar led by Ernesto Laclau at Northwestern University in the fall of 2004, and from his generous permission to access his unpublished manuscript *On Populist Reason*.

The result is a dichotomous social configuration with power distributed unequally, with the upper hand held by the target of the demands (presumably the ruler, state, or government) and a chain of equivalent though dissimilar demands competing for the former's attention and acquiescence. This is not unlike the image of civil society we see in Cohen and Arato and in the new social movement theorists.³⁶ The difference is that, in this view, social heterogeneity is "ultimately irreducible to a deeper homogeneity" (Laclau 2004, p. 23). Therefore, the question of how a temporary and incomplete homogeneity is achieved becomes central. This is the "logic of hegemony." As in Gramsci, hegemony refers to the prevailing cultural discourse³⁷ one in which one of many possible sets of norms and values becomes dominant. In contrast to Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe conceive of hegemonic discourses as constantly changing. Through a process of articulation and dissemination (which, admittedly, is not clearly outlined³⁸), a demand comes to be taken as representing itself and all the others, it is simultaneously an individual demand and the symbol of the whole existing heterogeneous set.

If there is no permanent common goal or principle among the widely divergent groups and associations of civil society, the formation of a mass mobilization that encompasses a great number of them would follow a process akin to that envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe. That is, a particular issue or demand would come to represent, if only for a short while, all the rest. I nonetheless share Tarrow's

³⁶ Though Laclau and Mouffe would likely not agree, particularly since much of their work combines a particular interpretation of Gramsci and the theories of thinkers such as Lacan and Derrida. I do not intend to discuss the usefulness of post-structuralism and Lacanian psychology in an analysis of real-world political events, not do I wish to engage in the many complexities of their theories (for a good debate, see Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000).

³⁷ We may add, accepted freely by social actors (as opposed to being forced upon them by an external force). This is certainly what Gramsci has in mind, though Laclau and Mouffe neglect to dwell on it (Dagnino 1998, p. 37).

³⁸ Keane (1988a) notes that "Laclau and Mouffe do not specify the institutional mechanisms of hegemonic articulation [...] They fail to see that their defense of stable openness or self-limiting democracy counterfactually implies – at a minimum – the same procedural framework to which they are hostile: a pluralist civil society secured through accountable state institutions" (Keane 1988a, p. 239).

(1994) doubts about thinking of politics as a “text to be interpreted” (p. 119).³⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, influenced by Lacanian psychology and post-structuralist theory tend to put little emphasis on existing material conditions, despite their Marxist roots. A close look at the symbols and language used by social actors is useful and important, but so are careful considerations of historical and material factors. In particular, I believe, one must pay attention to the dominant narratives within civil society. Political theorists – Tocqueville and Gramsci indubitably among them – have long understood that state power is legitimized through a combination of force coming from the rulers and the consent of the ruled. Recently, constructivist approaches, notably in the field of international relations, have focused on the values and norms that shape a nation’s identity and its importance to politics (Wendt 1996). Stephanie Golob puts it thus:

Officials interpret the national interest in terms of what constructivists have called a nation’s ‘shared’ or ‘corporate’ identity; they justify their own authority by equating the survival of the nation and its distinct corporate identity with the survival of *their* state. Their ultimate goal is to shape the definition of national interest so as to reinforce the political and emotional connection between the citizens and the state through a *core narrative of identity*. In this way, they demonstrate the state’s identification with, and commitment to, the nation’s highest ideals and its most treasured self-schemas (Golob 2003, p. 366).

Governments gain legitimacy not only through political institutions, but also from adhering to the national core narrative of identity. Historic institutionalism and studies of path dependency argue that, during certain “critical junctures” in a country’s history, this core narrative can be reshaped to serve the purposes of those wishing to retain power (Golob 2003, p. 367, see also Thelen 1999). The new core narrative is solidified and maintained by different mechanisms of reproduction,

³⁹ Although Laclau has repeatedly stated that he believes the politics of hegemony encompass politics *tout court*, I pointedly limit myself here to suggesting that Laclau and Mouffe’s account of hegemonic formation may be of use in understanding the coalescence of civil society into a movement that purports to represent “the people.”

enacted through institutions and education. The hegemonic struggle, or the attempt to replace a core narrative with a new one, not only takes place between civil society and the state, but also within civil society. Social movements and other actors' are constrained by pressure to conform to the dominant culture attitudes, even as they try to change them *through* collective action. This is clearly recognized by Cardoso (1989):

If, on the other hand, the *basista* (grass-roots) thrust and the constitution of a collective-popular subject so as to support a new historical subject of democracy breaks the confining bonds of past institutional forms, on the other hand the reform-democratic thrust which accepts the contemporary reality of the pervasiveness of the State breaks the illusions about the possibility of a democracy 'of civil society' (Cardoso 1989, pp. 323-324).

The conflict for hegemonic supremacy is long and difficult, as Gramsci was very much aware. While the dominant view among theorists of liberal democracy seems to be that this can only be accomplished by elites, the literature discussed here is faithful to its Marxist inspiration in believing that those "below" can ultimately prevail. The problem is that, by eliminating Marx's belief in an objective "subject of history," one is left with the multiplicity of actors that compose civil society. In Latin America at least, they do not seem strong enough in their few moments of unity to create the thorough upheaval that their champions anticipate.

Chapter 3: Crisis and Protest in Argentina

The economic crisis that rocked Argentina in the late 1990's and early 2000's was accompanied by an unprecedented wave of popular mobilization. In this chapter, I trace the development of the distinct elements of civil society that engaged in contestatory actions against the state, and the process through which they came to coalesce into the popular mobilizations that led to the resignations of four Presidents in a span of three weeks. As shall be seen below, despite the fact that the high-point of the protests, in December of 2001 and January of 2002, was preceded by a wave of lootings and food riots across the country, the majority of mass mobilizations expressed political values and goals and therefore should be considered the actions of organized civil society. The protests in Argentina illustrate the flaws in the theoretical literature on mobilized civil societies since they were the result of socio-economic grievances combines with political ones, they demonstrate the difficulty in establishing and maintaining consensus across civil society, and in the articulation of grievances and goals predominated a sense of loss for past elite-driven politics in which state officials were responsible for the welfare of the citizenry.

In late 2001, with the Argentine economy on the verge of collapse, nationwide protests denounced the government and President Fernando de la Rúa. The situation veered towards chaos with the outbreak of riots and lootings in the city of Rosario on December 12. Within a week they had spread across the country, as crowds of poor and unemployed people accosted supermarkets and other businesses demanding food and other goods. Late in the evening of December 19, de la Rúa imposed a national

state of siege in an attempt to stabilize the situation. But rather than abide by the presidential decree, middle and upper-class Argentines flooded into the streets. Banging pots and pans (*cacerolas*) and calling for the resignation of the president, economy minister Domingo Cavallo, and the rest of the cabinet, people in nightgowns and slippers, many with small children in tow, showed the politicians “where they could stick their state of siege.”⁴⁰ On the night of December 20, 2001, after a day of violent confrontations between police and demonstrators, de la Rúa resigned the presidency and evacuated the premises by helicopter, off the roof of the Casa Rosada (the presidential palace), for fear of being attacked by the crowds.⁴¹

Over the next two weeks, four different men were appointed president of Argentina by the Congress: Ramón Puerta, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, Eduardo Oscar Camaño, and Eduardo Duhalde. The “provisional” presidents were pressured by new outbreaks of protests that led to their swift resignations. Political cartoonists poked fun at the country with the “three-day presidents” in the international media as the world awaited a resolution. Duhalde eventually was able to restore calm, benefiting from his predecessors’ efforts and from the initial outpouring of public anger gradually losing steam. Though he still faced months of continued popular mobilizations, he established enough legitimacy to finish de la Rúa’s tenure through 2003.

⁴⁰ A common impromptu song heard around the capital was “*que boludos, que boludos, el estado de sitio se lo meten por el culo*” (“those fools, those fools, they can stick the state of siege up their ass” – “Saqueos, Muertos y Cacerolazos y el Fin de Cavallo. El Día y la Noche del No Va Más” in *Página 12*, 20 December 2001.

⁴¹ Bereft of popular support, de la Rúa sought backing from his fellow political leaders but found he had been abandoned. It seems that he had been blind to the machinations of his political opponents, who were waiting in the wings for the right moment to relieve him of his position. See “El Gobierno Llama a los Políticos a Concertar Contra los Destabilizadores,” *Diario Página 12*, December 7, 2001

Scholars in the United States have interpreted the events of December 19 and 20, 2001 (hereafter December 19/20⁴²) largely as an outburst of popular anger, basically a “food riot,” over the state of the country’s economy (Oxhorn 2002; Schamis 2002; Levitsky and Murillo 2003; Ollier 2003; Valenzuela 2004). These accounts do not examine the motivations of the participants or their varying types of organization that were present. They also pay little attention to the buildup of popular organization that had been taking place in Argentina for years prior. They focus instead on the deleterious effects that social instability can have on the adequate functioning of democratic institutions.⁴³ Though it points to some very real problems, this perspective fails to recognize a major change in the relationship between civil society and the state in Argentina.

During the late 1990’s there was a tremendous increase in organized political mobilizations across the country, involving organized labor and unemployed workers’ movements, left-wing political parties, human rights and ecclesiastical organizations. A “cycle of protest” (Tarrow 1989), a period of high levels of collective mobilizations against the state, strongly impacted national politics between 1996 and 2002 (Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2000; Recalde 2003). Most protests were peaceful, organized by established groups, and had clear political as well as material goals. The lootings and vandalism of December 2001 were the exception rather than the rule. It is widely believed in Argentina that the lootings themselves were instigated by opposition

⁴² Although this paper addresses the periods before and after those two days in December, they create a good reference point for analysis, as they have been prominent in political, media, and academic discussions.

⁴³ They are influenced by recent studies of democratic transitions and consolidation, which argue that consolidation is more likely to happen in societies where popular mobilization from civil society is channeled through traditional political institutions (Schmitter and O’Donnell 1986; Aguero and Stark 1988; Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999; Diamond and Plattner 2001; see also Ellner 2001).

forces form within the political elites, and thus were not spontaneous outbursts of popular rage at all.⁴⁴

On the other hand, a number of works, mostly within Latin America, depict December 19/20 as a watershed moment for Argentine politics (Altamira 2002; Auyero 2002a and 2004; Cafassi 2002; Schuster et al 2002; Filippini 2002; Dinerstein 2003a and 2003b; Zibechi 2003; Sueiras 2004). Some accounts proclaim the beginning of a new revolutionary period, either in the form of a socialist revolution (Sáenz and Cruz 2002) or through a radical democratic transformation led by “civil society from below” (Mattini 2000 and 2003; Houtart 2001; Negri and Cocco 2002; Barbetta and Bidaseca 2004; Hardt and Negri 2004). Many of these authors point to December 19/20 as the moment in which a plurality of collective protest movements acquired a common purpose. Yet, this picture of the conflict between civil society and the state is also misleading. Not only does it downplay the traumatic wave of violence that enveloped the country for one critical week, but it also presupposes too readily the existence of a cohesive popular movement.

The large public mobilizations in Argentina involved a revival of citizen participation in politics, which reflected a strengthening civil society. Despite unlawful actions by some, the cycle of protest referred to here was dominated by peaceful, organized demonstrations with clearly stated goals and demands. The urgency of the economic situation as well as specific political grievances prompted many Argentines to engage in collective action. Each of the many groups that

⁴⁴ Essentially, it is argued that poor people were incited by political operatives sent by high ranking officials from the opposition Peronist party, including Duhalde. This charge was discussed in the national media as early as December 21, and has made its way into scholarly discussions (e.g., Schuster et al 2002). A good account of the circumstantial evidence and various allegations can be found in Bonasso (2002).

protested against the state in this period organized around a shared identity and articulated common demands. The discussion below focuses on the most important ones. During the climactic days of the crisis – between December 12, 2001 and late January, 2002 – the intensity of citizen protest was at its highest, and there were signs that the various social groups could indeed unite into a single national movement representing “the people.” Ultimately, a long-lasting political actor would not emerge.

Virtually all the mobilized groups coalesced behind the call for the resignation of de la Rúa and his government, as well as more generally directed anger at the traditional political class, expressed in the cry “*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*” (“they should all go, not one should be left”). The specific targets of popular anger, other than the politicians, were the high rate of unemployment, the devastating economic crisis, government corruption, and the perceived leniency towards alleged criminals such as former President Carlos Menem (Auyero 2002a; Armony and Armony 2005). Concerted action was facilitated by open communication among groups and very real common grievances (which grew as the crisis exacerbated), but also common ideas and values – nationalist symbols, appeals to historically significant events, a unifying national “myth,”⁴⁵ an “us versus them” attitude among protesters (Auyero 2002a). Yet, after only a few months, the movement dissipated as the economic situation began to gradually improve, groups and movements squabbled internally and with each other, and the government

⁴⁵ Armony and Armony (2005) suggest that the dream of a “Great Argentina” is integral to the way Argentines see their relationship to their country. In an analysis of presidential speeches, they argue that Menem employed the idea of Great Argentina to “sell” his neoliberal program, and that this added to the sense of betrayal felt by the citizenry. They also find that de la Rúa’s successors tried to re-establish the hope in a return to the national destiny. As Eduardo Duhalde put it, “Argentina is doomed to succeed” (quoted in p. 46).

successfully co-opted some of the major actors. The discussion below examines the instances of concerted action on the part of civil society groups, the ways in which political, social, and economic issues were blended together in the process of the creation of temporary alliances, as well as the difficulties for the endurance of a popular movement in contemporary Argentina.

Social Protest in Argentina before 1996

Peronists and Militaries (1940-1983)

The primary source of social mobilization in Argentina before 1976 was organized labor. The umbrella General Confederation of Workers (*Confederación General de Trabajadores* – CGT) emerged as a political force by joining forces with populist Colonel Juan Domingo Perón and his Justicialist Party (*Partido Justicialista* – PJ) in the early 1940's. As minister of labor during a period of military rule (1943-1945), Perón had risen rapidly in popularity due to a number of pro-labor reforms enacted under his direction. This prompted his removal and incarceration, but on October 17, 1945 massive demonstrations led by the CGT forced his release and not long after the elections that would win him the Presidency. During its heyday (1946-1950), the PJ institutionalized a clientelistic regime based on direct ties between the government and specific social sectors. Argentina's advanced industrial economy made the labor unions key conduits through which the government could mobilize, and also reward, support. The economic corporatism that characterized this period of the country's history was fundamentally tied with these ties between the government and important social groups (Godio 2000; Collier and Collier 2001).

Organized labor remained loyal to Perón, as Marcelo Cavarozzi (1986) argues, “as the main symbol of a return to a better past [that] constituted Peronism’s greatest attraction for the masses, and in particular for the working class” (p. 28). It is already evident in this period that what would become the country’s most influential political ideology relied on the idea that the rapid industrialization of the early part of the twentieth century was the key to welfare for the entire population. The accusation that traditional land-owning elites and the new capitalists, in collusion with the military, were trying to exclude the majority of Argentines from these benefits would be a fundamental driving force in political conflicts for decades to come.

The unions acted both as advocates for the working class (and expressed material demands) and as a source of civil support for a political movement and party. Yet, if organized labor played some of the roles that would later be ascribed to civil society – allowing citizen involvement in politics outside of elections, articulating demands, and facilitating the collective pursuit of shared goals – it did so by remaining closely tied to the Peronist political machine and to a fundamentally class-centered ideology. The PJ, on its part, developed neighborhood, local, and provincial units that penetrated communities and became permanent fixtures in the lives of poor and working-class Argentines. This network of agents, which continue to exist today, greatly affected the shape of social mobilization in Argentina (although it lost part of its luster in the 1990’s).⁴⁶ The alliance between Peronism and the labor movement

⁴⁶ Auyero (2001) provides an excellent in-depth discussion of present-day Peronist “survival networks” and the different ways in which the PJ retains a prominent space in neighborhood social life. This well-known presence of the PJ in poor neighborhoods and shantytowns gave credence to the claim that the lootings of December 2001 were instigated by “*punteros*,” as the “embedded” (to borrow an in vogue term) Peronist political activists are known.

would endure through military coups, guerrilla violence, and a brief return of Perón to power in the early 1970's (Horowitz 1990; Collier and Collier 2001; Di Tella 2003).

Perón's two presidencies strongly polarized Argentine society, initially between the poor who benefited from his welfare policies and were attracted by his populist eloquence, and the traditional elites he had pushed aside. Particularly during his second tenure (1951-1955), however, his personalist rhetoric, anti-communism, and support of former Nazi immigrants gained him the enmity of many on the left. He was criticized for his treatment of political opponents and his disrespect for free speech, and by 1954 had alienated the Catholic Church as well. An alliance of conservative groups, centrist and leftist political parties, and several sectors of the Armed Forces organized a coup that termed itself the Liberating Revolution (*Revolución Libertadora*) and took over the government on September 16, 1955. Organized labor, the only significant social actor still loyal to Perón, launched demonstrations demanding his return, but soon conceded defeat and retreated. For the next decade, the military allowed for limited electoral experiments (the PJ was excluded from participation) but the ambivalent support for democracy among the country's citizens did not suffice to mount much resistance to yet another coup in 1966.⁴⁷

The CGT, though it experienced internal splits regarding questions of strategy in dealing with anti-Peronist governments, remained unified in its loyalty to Perón. (Godio 2000). The most significant cases of large-scale labor protests took place in 1969 and 1970 – in a number of worker “takeovers” of various provincial cities, most notably in Córdoba (Lobato and Suriano 2003, Ch. 3). They were instrumental in the

⁴⁷ O'Donnell (1988) argues that the 1966 was tacitly supported by a significant part of the population.

fall of the 1966-1973 military government since they reflected a lack of support among the citizenry for the regime (Bermeo 2003, p. 180). These historical instances of political action initiated “from below,” along with the worker demonstrations of 1945, would be used in the 1990’s to inspire popular mobilization.

The last military regime in Argentina (1976-1983) targeted labor unions as a possible source of organized opposition, gutting their leadership, infiltrating government agents into labor organizations, and imprisoning, torturing, and executing politically-active individuals (Godio 2000; Lobato and Suriano 2003; Recalde 2003).⁴⁸ A primary goal of the ruling junta was to weaken civil society; along with the unions, left-wing political parties, student federations, and other activist groups were forcibly demobilized (Cavarozzi 1986, p. 21). Though the effort was not completely successful, as shown by the appearance of a variety of new citizens’ movements, the legacy of repression on social activism would cripple most social organizations for years thereafter.

As in other Latin American countries dominated by repressive military regimes, human rights organizations became significant political actors in Argentina. Relatives of Detained and Disappeared Individuals for Political Reasons (*Parientes de Detenidos y Desparecidos por Razones Políticas* - PDDRP), Mother of Plaza de Mayo (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo* - Madres), and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* - Abuelas) were born between 1976 and 1977, the earliest days of the last military period. These groups confronted the state on issues of civil liberties, human rights, and the abuse of government power, and originally stayed away from economic debates. Their achievements in undermining the government’s

⁴⁸ Bermeo (2003) shows that the unions were weak even before the 1976 coup (pp. 205-208).

legitimacy and attracting international condemnation has been seen as a contribution to the eventual return to democracy in 1983 (Oxhorn 2001).

Madres was (and continues to be) the most prominent of these groups.⁴⁹ It was formed on April 30, 1977, by fourteen women whose children had “disappeared,” who convened to meet at Plaza de Mayo to make their grievances public.⁵⁰ Though “initially dismissed, often ridiculed, and later on brutally persecuted” (Navarro 2001, p. 241), Madres slowly carved its place in the national consciousness. Their calls for the “live return” (“*aparición con vida*”) of their loved ones evolved over time into “marches for life” (“*marchas por la vida*”), which sometimes attracted several thousand participants (Recalde 2003, p. 130). Developing from chance encounters and conversations, Madres perfectly embodied the paradigm of the “new social movement,” centered on a collective identity shaped out of shared personal experiences and pursuing similarly shared goals of government openness, respect for individual rights, and accountability for perpetrators – making “the personal” political (Navarro 2001, Zibechi 2003). The quiet manner of their usual processions belied their commitment, and when members began to be harassed and arrested the group found various ways to fight for its own rights as well. Like the worker battles of 1945 and 1969, Madres’ defiance would serve as inspiration for the protests against governments in future confrontations.

⁴⁹ Though it shares many characteristics with Abuelas – see Arditti (1999) – Madres’ symbolic significance in Argentine culture is indisputable.

⁵⁰ As the movement’s official story has it, on one of their first excursions a guard in uniform approached them and order them to “move along, move along” (“*circulen, circulen*”). So the women did just that, and began a slow circular march around the square, which became their distinctive *modus operandi* (Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo 1995).

The period examined in this section provides examples of three different types of social mobilization. First, there is organized labor, which was unified by an ideology of class struggle, a sympathetic government that provided direct benefits for a decade, and later by a strong allegiance to Perón and his movement. As representative of many sectors of society, the CGT was a typical instance of a Latin American social movement intimately linked to a political entity, and therefore a poor example of independent civil society action. Though important in the fall of previous military regimes, the presence of the unions was much less felt during the last military period (1976-1983). The CGT would emerge into the newly democratic Argentina weakened by a long period of inactivity, political persecution, and a decimated leadership.

Second, there is the broad coalition of anti-Perón groups that formed towards the end of his second presidency. This instance of opposition to the state shows that politics in Argentina were not dominated by class conflicts, but rather by alliances against particular political leaders (usually presidents) and government policies.⁵¹ The anti-Peronist opposition illustrates the potentially divisive nature of society when politics are dominated by personalistic figures. These alliances also show that many Argentines were willing to sacrifice democratic principles during periods of political conflict, a pattern that would change later on, as Nancy Bermeo (2003) has pointed out. Finally, there are the emerging new social movements, which concentrated on issues of human rights, citizen protections, and institutionalized democracy, and which would lead the fight against the military dictatorship. Bermeo notes that by the

⁵¹ See Bermeo (2003, pp. 195-199) for a discussion of the low level of polarization in Argentina between 1951 and 1973 as reflected in voting patterns.

mid-1970's the Argentine population was showing a stronger commitment towards democracy, and was much less supportive both of the military takeover of 1976 and of the regime that followed in general (see esp. Ch. 6). In each case, there were central issues separating the ruling political actors from the rest of society, and the opposing coalitions identified with them. It would take almost two decades into the democratic period for a similar wave of collective action to appear.

Dual Transition (1983-1995)

Democracy was nevertheless welcomed in 1983 by a timid citizenry. Raul Alfonsín of the Radical Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Radical* – UCR) was elected President amid much hope, but soon faced some complicated realities. Factions of the armed forces, which had given up power grudgingly, attempted to seize power by force repeatedly in the early years following the transition. The national economy, as in the rest of the region, was in the midst of the debt crisis that would lead to the 1980's being remembered as the “lost decade” in Latin America. Alfonsín was also openly challenged by organized labor and human rights groups. In addition to protesting the government's handling of the economy, the unions pushed for the return to power of the PJ, though labor protests were much less severe than in other Latin American countries during the same period (a result of the highly effective repressive tactics of the military regime).⁵² Unlike their counterparts in other countries, Argentina's human rights groups did not disappear following the transition to democracy but relentlessly continued to seek legal prosecution against human

⁵² See Walton (2001). The CGT would eventually call for thirteen general strikes during the Alfonsín period (Lobato and Suriano 2003, p. 133).

rights' abusers (with meager results, given the urgent need of the civilian authorities to placate the military brass).⁵³

In the late 1980's, organized labor reformed its ranks behind the new face of the PJ, Carlos Saúl Menem (Murillo 2001), who decisively won the 1988 presidential election on a populist platform. Once in power, however, Menem initiated a radical "neoliberal" program of economic reform designed to control inflation rates and modernize the economy, with Domingo Cavallo as the head of his economic team. They successfully halted inflation behind Cavallo's "convertibility strategy" of pegging the Argentine peso to the American dollar, brought large quantities of foreign investment to the country, privatized most state holdings, and produced impressive rates of GNP growth for most of the decade. The strong currency and the virtual elimination of trade barriers encouraged the acquisition of imported goods; as a result, the levels of consumption of the upper and upper-middle classes began to resemble those in Europe and the United States. Though criticized for corrupt dealings and a penchant for semi-authoritarian practices, Menem was widely praised for his foresight on economic matters, and Argentina was lauded as a model for economic reform in the age of globalization (see, e.g., Corrales 2002).

As became increasingly evident through the 1990's, there were negative outcomes to the reforms as well. Economic and social inequalities became more marked, unemployment grew rapidly, and the welfare state became less effective due

⁵³ For examples of the dissolution of such groups in Chile and Brazil see Garretón (2001) and Moreira Alves (2001) respectively; see also Foweraker and Landman (1997). These authors contend that following the transitions to democracy in their countries the goals of these groups were cast aside. Madres and Abuelas refused to retreat, and were able to gather support for their activities, including a national demonstration on March 21, 1985, which attracted hundreds of organizations and 50.000 participants in. Yet, it seemed for a long time that they would be much less effective in a democratic climate than in the authoritarian period, when the enemy was clearly defined.

to sharp cuts in public expenditures. Many from the traditionally large middle class fell into poverty, while more and more workers lost their livelihood as privatized industries looked to increase efficiency and profits. Despite all of this, Menem was reelected in 1995. Continued support from the CGT, the approval of the upper classes for his policies, and the failure of the previous government in keeping inflation under control contributed to the persistence of his economic model into the 21st century (Murillo 2003).⁵⁴ Unrepresented by the major political parties or the labor unions, the “losers” of the Menem period – the impoverished middle and working classes, the unemployed – did not have the organizational capability to mount a coherent opposition movement.

Middle class protests were especially rare, though some neighborhood-based groups had decried government economic policies through “*apagones*” (“blackouts”) – in which all participants would turn off their electricity, or disconnect their telephones, at a particular time for two or three hours, – “*bocinazos*” – honking of car-horns in unison, – and *cacerolazos*. These last had emerged as a result of Menem’s policies in opposition parties’ rallies and in marches organized by white-collar workers, especially teachers, in 1990 and 1993 for example (Schuster et al 2002, pp. 24-25).⁵⁵ As a rule, the Argentine middle classes during the Menem period were seen (and saw themselves) as eschewing direct political participation, other than at the electoral ballot, electing to wait and enjoy the fruits of the newly modernized

⁵⁴ See Stokes (2001) for a discussion of Menem’s shift from populist rhetoric to neoliberal policies.

⁵⁵ Many in the media commented, following December 19/20, that the middle class protests that contributed to the electoral defeat of Peronism in 1999 essentially brought it back to power in 2001 (a number of news articles and editorials discuss this issue in *Página 12*, December 21, 2001, though there are many other instances). Conversely, it did not escape the most observant commentators that the middle classes in Chile had employed *cacerolazos* to protest left-wing president Salvador Allende’s policies and, partially, pave the way for the military coup lead by Augusto Pinochet.

economy. The legacy of state repression constituted a further deterrent against collective action.

Early signs of popular discontent were nonetheless evident in the poorest areas of the country. The State unions' Front (*Frente de Gremios Estatales* – FGE), in the province of Jujuy, joined left-wing parties to demand higher tariffs for large corporations in 1990. Dismissed oil workers in the towns of Tartagal and Mosconi staged demonstrations against the privatization of the state oil company in 1991. In the city of Santiago del Estero, on December 16, 1993,⁵⁶ state workers and private citizens forcibly invaded the state legislature, the executive House, and the courts buildings and set them on fire. Protesters also attacked the homes of PJ and UCR officials perceived to be especially corrupt. Initially dismissed as a disorganized riot, Javier Auyero (2002b) has shown the *santiagoueñazo* to be a purposive (if to an extent spontaneous) action that had clearly framed objectives and targets of protest: “protesters thought of themselves as the ‘honest pueblo’ that fought against a corrupt political class” (Auyero 2004, p. 322).⁵⁷ In 1994 and 1995, similar uprisings took place in La Rioja, Jujuy, Salta, El Chaco, Tucumán, Entre Ríos, Catamarca and Tierra del Fuego. These so-called “*puebladas*,” in which masses of protesters took over entire towns for a day or two, were not centrally organized, but launched by *multisectoriales*, heterogeneous ad hoc alliances that counted on the presence of

⁵⁶ The historical account of the birth of the unemployed movement, beginning with the *santiagoueñazo* of 1993 is provided by Laufer and Spiguel (1999), Oviedo (2001), Kohan (2002), Recalde (2003), Lobato and Suriano (2003), Svampa and Pereyra (2003), Zibechi (2003).

⁵⁷ Auyero's analysis of the Santiago del Estero riots has influenced my discussion of the Argentine cycle of protest leading to December 19/20: he examines “how, as collective action escalated, brokerage efforts multiplied, networks were formed, lines of culpability were collectively drawn (i.e. the targets of popular anger were defined and concretised in specific places), and violence (and fire) was learned and normalized” - <http://www.sunysb.edu/sociology/faculty/Auyero/Auyero-Relational%20Riot.htm>. The picture that emerges from my analysis is necessarily less detailed than his, however.

union leaders, recently unemployed workers, pensioners, non-employed women and children, groups protesting abuses by private-service companies, and human rights organizations (Laufer and Spiguel 1999, p. 30; Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2000). They would inspire the unemployed movement that would emerge soon after.

For the first time since the 1940's, organized labor faced an ideological conundrum. Its relationship with the PJ had been long and profitable (at least to the highest-ranked leaders), but Menem's policies threatened to harm the working class. Amid growing concerns over the outcomes of neoliberal reform, and of heated internal debates, the CGT leadership chose not to withdraw its support for Menem.⁵⁸ As a result, an opposing camp (notably state workers' unions) broke ranks with the CGT to form the Argentine Workers' Central (*Central de Trabajadores Argentinos – CTA*) in 1993. Truck and bus drivers' organizations formed a second dissident group, the Argentine Workers' Movement (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos – MTA*), in 1994. They began to convene their own strikes - the first one on August 2, 1994 (Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2003), signaling the first ever major division within the labor movement under a Peronist government (Godio 2000, p. 1228). The CTA and the MTA channeled their electoral support to opposition parties UCR and emerging third party FREPASO, which would unite in the late 1990's to form the Alliance for Progress (*Alianza para el Progreso – Alianza*), though Menem's reelection showed that the PJ still had the upper in terms of influence at the local level in many provinces.

⁵⁸ Individual unions mobilized and declared strikes over privatization programs - telephone workers in 1990, miners in Sierra Grande in 1991, railway workers in 1991, steel workers in Somisa in 1992 – but the CGT called for only one general strike during the first Menem administration, a twenty-four hour work stoppage on November 9, 1992 (Iñigo Carrera 1999; Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2003).

Human rights' organizations were active during the first half of the 1990's. Menem decisively dealt with the issue of human rights' abuses by supporting "amnesty laws" for members of the armed forces. In fact, the military brass had never publicly acknowledged that any human rights abuses had taken place. Nevertheless, Madres took a leading role in the fight against *menemismo*, using language that would come to become prevalent among opposition movements:

This puppet leadership does not privatize, it gives away; it does not pay attention to the needs of the people, it smashes it; it pays no attention to the constitutional system, it turns it into a viceroyalty. *Menemism* or any other type of personalist leadership must realize that this people, like the kids say, no longer "eats glass"; and, naturally, it unites slowly but surely, because we know that the alternative we face is solidarity and struggle or hunger and repression.⁵⁹

Though Madres, Abuelas, and other groups continued their weekly pilgrimages to the public squares as well as periodic "Resistance Marches" (*Marchas de Resistencia*), Menem's reelection was seen as a serious setback. Their fortunes changed in 1995, with the publication of a series of interviews between journalist Horacio Verbitsky and former military officer Adolfo Scilingo, in which Scilingo described the handling of political prisoners during the military period (see Verbitsky 1996). For the first time, a relatively high-ranking member of the armed forces openly discussed torture, disappearances, and political assassinations, the "dirtiest" details of the dirty war. After the Scilingo affair, demands for official accountability acquired renewed strength, as several other former military officials came forward to confess crimes in the following months.

HIJOS ("children")⁶⁰ was created in 1995 by sons and daughters of the disappeared. Young adults who had been orphaned by the military, and who had

⁵⁹ From a pamphlet convening for the 12th March of Resistance, 9 and 10 December 1992.

⁶⁰ The name of the group is also an acronym: Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence – *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contral el Olvido y el Silencio*.

shared their experiences in group-therapy sessions and other projects established to help the thousands of affected children, took to developing workshops and discussions in order to deal turn their personal experiences into political demands. Madres and HIJOS shared more than their goals. The latter group deliberately adopted the formers' emphasis on the "affective" relationships between their members, based on their shared history. HIJOS gained prominence not only for the legitimacy of its demands but also for the novelty of its tactics. Its members first popularized a type of public demonstration called *escrache*, in which people gathered outside the home or business of a person deemed guilty of crimes and organized a "celebration of denunciation" next to it. The *escrache* was not simply an act of "finger pointing," but a new way of combining social, cultural, and artistic activities with political ones. *Escraches* were soon launched not only against alleged human rights' violators but also against corrupt politicians and unpopular public figures. In several cases, especially in the charged period of 2000-2002, spontaneous *escraches* took place in front of public officials' homes or offices, and even when particularly reviled individuals were spotted eating at a restaurant or walking down the street.

The first Menem presidency, in sum, encountered some opposition among the citizenry: from disgruntled factions within the labor movement, human rights organizations, left-wing political groups, and the occasional appearance of town-level *multisectoriales*.⁶¹ With the exception of the human rights' groups, which were among the first to equate political concerns over repression with unemployment and

⁶¹ Scribano (1999) notes that it is a mistake to think of the 1989-1996 period as one completely dominated by social apathy. He points out that there were 1734 protests in Argentina in those years – 877 union, 345 economic but not union, and 512 "citizen-led." Still, he acknowledges that mobilizations had a much bigger impact after 1996.

hunger, the mobilizations in this period revolved around specific socio-economic grievances, though the formation of collective identities revolving around a sense of disenfranchisement is evident in the provincial uprisings. As Auyero shows in the case of the *santiagueñazo*, poor Argentines had the tools, the opportunity, and increasingly the communal feelings of solidarity to join in collective action in situations perceived to be extreme. The federal and provincial governments negotiated settlements, such as payment plans for dismissed workers, and were thus able to temporarily secure order. Protests were mostly isolated geographically and socially (i.e., participants belonged to the same socio/economic class), and the Menem presidency dealt with individual groups separately. It could afford to since neither most of the poor nor the middle class were perceived as capable of large-scale organized mobilization.

The Protest Cycle (1996-2002)

New Actors, New Alliances (1996-1999)

Beginning in late 1995, the relationship between the state and the citizenry as a whole changed drastically. The quantity and size of protests markedly increased, but there was also much more cooperation among groups, even between seemingly unrelated organizations. Additionally, the rhetoric of labor and unemployed protesters incorporated more general issues of politics and citizenship. Rather than fight for specific benefits from the government, protesters decried corruption, poverty, unemployment, and crime. It became common to hear complaints against a political class that had “stolen Argentina,” sold it to foreigners and pocketed the profits. These complaints were frequent during the Alfonsín and Menem years, but their prominence

in labor mobilizations, demonstrations by Madres and other human rights groups, as well as in reports by the mainstream media increased dramatically.

On September 6, 1995, the CGT, CTA, and MTA jointly called for a general strike for the first time, though the CGT remained as a whole a supporter of the administration. They would do so again five times between 1996 and 1999, with each strike including large demonstrations and marches, and attracting more and more non-union members as the issue of unemployment became preeminent (Iñigo Carrera 1999; Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2003). The roadblock was incorporated to most large labor strikes as a form of protest in 1996, influenced by the success of nascent unemployed organizations around the country.⁶² The content of workers' demands changed as well. Lacking a coherent economic alternative to *Menemism*, the CTA and MTA decried the model as throwing the country into disarray.

The gradual merging of complaints relating to democratic principles and economic grievances in public demonstrations was evident on March 24, 1996, the twentieth anniversary of the last military coup. As Madres, Abuelas, and H.I.J.O.S. commemorated the dead and continued their campaign to punish those culpable, a Federal March, organized by representatives from all three labor organizations in conjunction with left-wing groups, student federations, pensioners' organizations,⁶³ parts of the Church, and several others attracted tens of thousands of demonstrators under the slogan "Work for All." Menem's attempts to change the national Constitution in order to seek a third term in office also provoked widespread

⁶² For a detailed discussion of the adoption of the roadblock by organized labor see Svampa and Pereyra (2003), pp. 29-36.

⁶³ Such as the National Coordinating Organization of Retired Workers and Pensioners (*Mesa Coordinadora Nacional de Jubilados y Pensionados*) and the Independent Movement of Unemployed and Pensioners (*Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados*).

indignation.⁶⁴ Though still acting separately, traditional (i.e., concerned with material issues) and “new” social movements began the process of creating a common language that allowed for mutual cooperation. The core of “anti status quo” protesters had grown significantly, and would rapidly continue to do so with the incorporation of the emergent unemployed movement.

It was during the *puebladas* that the road block, or *piquete*, was adopted as a regular instrument of protest. The first massive *piquete* took place during a *pueblada* in the oil towns of Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincul (in Neuquen province) on June 21, 1996.⁶⁵ It lasted about a week, and it comprised the complete stoppage of traffic of the major highway leading to the area, thus damaging the operations of the large YPF Corporation (see Sánchez 1997). By some accounts, about 20,000 people took part in the protests at some point, in an area with 50,000 inhabitants (Kohan 2002). About a month after the *cutralcazo*, Menem asked for Cavallo’s resignation as minister of the economy.⁶⁶ In 1996 and 1997, massive *piquetes* took place in Cutral-Co once more, Tartagal and General Mosconi (in the province of Salta), and Libertador General San Martín (in Jujuy). The central demand of these demonstrations was work for the unemployed, fueled by a sense of disenfranchisement due to the closing of the oil plant. Unionized workers also participated, as did pensioners, housewives, children and the elderly, joined by the sense of abandonment of the community: “The people

⁶⁴ Even with the growing presence of vocal opposition, the possibility of Menem’s second reelection was all too real for supporters and opponents alike. The UCR publicly opposed such a move, and former president Alfonsín declared Menem a “usurper of power” – “Para Alfonsín Menem es un Usurpador” in *La Nación*, 10 February 1997.

⁶⁵ There are different opinions as to when the “very first” *piquete* took place among different *piquetero* groups and scholars (Kohan 2002; Svampa and Pereyra 2003), but the *cutralcazo* is universally seen as the turning point.

⁶⁶ Laufer and Spiguel (1999, p. 32) contend that the two events were linked, though that is to a large extent speculation on their part.

in this town need to be aware of the things we are losing,” said one protester, “of the things the government is taking away from us” (quoted in Auyero 2004, p. 320).⁶⁷

From the very first, the *puebladas* were understood to signify the unification of social groups in the face of catastrophe.⁶⁸

The *piquete* fully entered the national consciousness as the signature weapon of an organized unemployed movement when it made its appearance in Gran Buenos Aires, initially in areas such as Florencio Varela and La Matanza in 1997. The action itself proved to be very effective in attracting an official response. With a minimum amount of effort and a relatively small number of people traffic could be stopped completely, keeping workers and executives from arriving at their job stations and slowing ground commercial traffic. The authorities had a difficult time breaking up the protests since the participants were not easily identifiable (many groups took to wearing masks), they had community infrastructures behind them, and were willing to engage in physical confrontations, having “nothing to lose” (Svampa and Pereyra 2003, p. 30). The *piquetes* also provided new opportunities for the public expression of grievances, spawning larger public gatherings that often involved the distribution of food and other goods, as well as public debates on issues of import. Once the authorities were forced to negotiate, protesters organized into assemblies to ascertain

⁶⁷ A municipal worker in Cutral-Co expresses his grievances thus: “The plant that they finally built in Bahía Blanca was producing 10,000 jobs. It was ours and they took it. [...] When YPF was here, it was a boom, a joy; every two steps you had a restaurant, a candy store, that was life. Now there’s nothing, it’s dead” (quoted in Svampa and Pereyra 2003, p. 108).

⁶⁸ The most important legacy of the *cutralcazo*, according to a CTA figure, was “union, union in conflict, and a bitter taste about all this because they stole our hope, and it deepened because we were left with nothing, no job sources, and people are getting poorer” (quoted in Svampa and Pereyra 2003, p. 110).

the will of the majority. Negotiators were elected, often with provisions that called for new representatives to take their place every day.⁶⁹

Soon after their appearance on the scene, *piquetero* organizations began to be courted by unions and by party representatives from all corners of the political spectrum. While initially demarcated by their geographical location, many *piquetero* groups later sorted themselves out according to their political affiliation. Two umbrella organizations, by far the largest, became preeminent: the Combative Class Movement (*Corriente Clasista Combativa* – CCC), allied to the Revolutionary Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Revolucionario* – PCR), and the Land and Home Federation (*Federación Tierra y Vivienda* – FTV), which joined the CTA. Several groups adhered themselves to smaller parties such as the Workers' Party (*Partido Obrero* – PO). The most important independent organizations came from the unemployed workers' movements (*movimientos de trabajadores desocupados* – MTD) of the south side of Gran Buenos Aires: the *Piquetero* Block (*Bloque Piquetero*), the Teresa Rodríguez Movement (*Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez* – MTR), and the Unemployed Workers Central Aníbal Verón (*Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados Aníbal Verón* – CTD-Verón).⁷⁰

As the unemployed rallied around the *piquetes*, the number of actions grew exponentially – from 140 in 1997 to over 2000 in 2002. The second Menem

⁶⁹ It is tempting to paint these public actions as a spontaneous democratic utopia, but the assemblies rarely lasted more than a week or two – though a notable exception is the Unemployed Workers' Union of Mosconi (*Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados de Mosconi*), which supplanted the local CGT as the main engine of popular mobilization in the area (Svampa and Pereyra 2003, pp. 132-146) – after a deal had been reached with political authorities. If anything, more organization and the unavoidable development of clear leadership positions proved to be the path that most unemployed groups ended up taking.

⁷⁰ It is not possible to do justice here to the complexity and variance of the *piquetero* phenomenon. For a detailed discussion of the different sub-groups see Svampa and Pereyra (2003), pp. 54-70.

administration reacted initially through limited shows of force, but rapidly turned to cooptation and the development of social aid programs, particularly the stipend-based “*planes trabajar*.” Almost from the start, provincial and local governments (dominated by PJ officials) attempted to establish paths of negotiation with the *piqueteros*. These were strongest in 1997, when the economy was showing signs of recovery.⁷¹ The first massive governmental response of over 200,000 work plans, and the promise of future work as the economy continued to improve, placated the protests for a time. This state of affairs benefited the large agglomerations of unemployed, the CCC and FTV, at the expense of smaller ones such as CTD-Verón, which had to compete with well-established Peronist networks (see Svampa and Pereyra 2003, pp. 88-94).

Despite these government responses, the first joint mobilization between organized labor and the unemployed, which included the CGT, CTA, MTA, CCC, independent unions (like the metal workers’ *Unión Obrera Metalúrgica*), Peronist associations, left-wing parties, and student federations, took place on August 14, 1997. It involved a general strike, large marches, and dozens of roadblocks across the country. Though small, relative to the largest mobilizations of 2000-2002, it signaled an increasingly united front of social protest.⁷² This wave of mobilizations also encouraged the formation of non-union social movements like the *fogoneros*, new political parties such as FREPASO, and lobbying groups such as the National Front

⁷¹ Lobato and Suriano (2003) note a decline in the number of roadblocks in 1998, only 51. After that, the number of *piquetes* shot to 252 in 1999, 514 in 2000, 1,282 in 2001, and 2,334 in 2002.

⁷² The number of joint actions increased after 1999. Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo document 685 road blocks in Argentina between 1993 and 1999. The unemployed are responsible for almost half (47.6%) and the unions for 36.8%. Notably, the two acted jointly only 26 times (or 3.8%) of the total. This, however, does not mean that both groups were not protesting simultaneously, but that individual roadblocks were usually manned by either by organized workers or by *piqueteros*.

against Poverty (*Frente Nacional contra la Pobreza* – FRENAPO). The most important organization of its kind in this period, FRENAPO’s “board” includes the CTA, Madres, and dozens of other middle class organizations, as well as congress members from left-wing parties.⁷³

From 1999 on, the *piqueteros* became the most important engine of protest in Argentina. The independents, like the CTD-Verón and the Unemployed Workers Movement of Solano (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de Solano* – MTD-Solano), have been particularly innovative in their adoption of the language of “radical” or “participatory” democracy.⁷⁴ “We do not look to replace the proletariat with the unemployed,” states a member of the MTD-Solano, but “the MTD is a proposal, a project, that takes as its axis the issue of work – in this case unemployment – but that is much broader” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002, p. 40). For these organizations the roadblock is a part of a project to create new forms of sociability through community action, workshops, education, round-table discussions, and so forth. In their intellectual development, the CTD-Verón and MTD-Solano acknowledge the influence of the Landless Peasant Movement of Brazil (*Movimento dos Sem Terra* – MST) and the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*) in Chiapas, Mexico. The hooded spokesman of the Zapatistas, “Subcomandante Marcos,” was a major influence with his interpretation of the concept of “civil society” as the basis for a new, localized type of democracy independent from the state (see Hayden 2002).

⁷³ For a complete list, see Schuster et al (2003), p. 16.

⁷⁴ See Colectivo Situaciones (2002); Colectivo Situaciones and MTD-Solano (2002); Ferrara (2003); Svampa and Pereira (2003); Zibechi (2003).

Their attractiveness to democratic theorists notwithstanding, the segment of the *piquetero* movement that argue for horizontal and autonomous decision-making has always been a small subsection of the mobilized unemployed.⁷⁵ For better or worse, their rejection of institutionalized incorporation into the political system (or non-institutionalized co-optation) have made the CTD-Verón and MTD-Solano a divisive elements in the overall resistance movement. Their critique of union leaders, even of the CTA and MTA, has often been as harsh as that of Peronist politicians. In contrast, the larger CCC and FTV have been more pragmatic in their goals and affiliations, often subordinating ideological consistency for results on the ground. Their leadership is openly recognized and firmly established (the CCC is headed by well-known activist Carlos Santillán, for example). Both embrace the language of class struggle commonly used by their closest allies (the CTA for the FTV and the communist PCR for the CCC).⁷⁶ Their political rhetoric is non-revolutionary but clearly Marxist in inspiration; they refer, for instance, to the “three pillars of the working class:” workers, the unemployed, and pensioners, and trace their origins to the labor struggles of the 1960’s and 70’s (Kohan 2002, pp. 35-37).⁷⁷

During the late 1990’s, Madres, Abuelas, and HIJOS bolstered the growing number of organizations that opposed the government’s economic policies as a matter of “human rights and human dignity.” They participated in protests, signed public petitions, and belonged to larger organizations that opposed the process of economic

⁷⁵ Perhaps a few thousand at their highest point, compared to over 120.000 for the FTV and 70.000 for the CCC.

⁷⁶ An illuminating discussion of the CTA-FTV relationship in terms of the self-interested of their leaders appeared in the daily *Página 12*, June 22, 2002.

⁷⁷ See “La Corriente Clasista y Combativa desde Sus Inicios” at <http://www.cccargentina.org.ar>. Svampa and Pereyra (2003) make a helpful distinction among *piquetero* groups depending on their primary orientation: syndicalist (the CCC and FTV), territorial (provincial and neighborhood-based groups), or political (CTD-Verón, MTR, MTD-Solano).

liberalization. They understood their mission as naturally pertaining to the fight against poverty and misery, which they saw as no less criminal than the behavior of the military in years past. For their annual December March of Resistance in 1998, they called to action all those “harmed by this system that claims to be democratic but obstructs justice. All those who wish to see the [military] criminals in jail and those who demand work and a dignified life.”⁷⁸ The yearly Marches occurring every December came to adopt a format in which representatives from the CTA, *piquetero* organizations, FRENAPO, and other groups would give speeches to ever-growing crowds, with Hebé de Bonaffi, Madres’ leader, giving the final address.

The intensity of mobilizations in the provinces and the capital from late 1995 to early 1997 waned somewhat in the immediate aftermath. The official CGT, still the largest labor organization, did not (or could not) adopt an openly hostile position towards the Menem government, and labor strikes in 1997-1999 did not reach the numbers of those in the previous two years. The CTA, MTA, and the *piqueteros* took on the mantle of representatives of the working classes. They would act together often throughout the protest cycle, but much more so after 1999. Most *piquetero* groups were still in the embryonic stage, after all, but after a decrease in 1998 the number of roadblocks rapidly rose. These groups’ protest actions were mainly fueled by economic issues such as the availability of employment and the decline in the standard of living of the working poor, though it was not the call for class warfare that won them allies among the middle classes, environmentalist and human rights

⁷⁸ From a pamphlet convening for the 18th March of Resistance, 9 and 10 December 1998.

groups, but their positioning themselves as defenders of the country and its interests against those of the “*políticos choros*” (“thieving politicians”).⁷⁹

As can be seen, by the end of Menem’s second term in power there was a fairly solid coalition of civil society organizations that opposed the neoliberal economic adjustment program. This coalition encompassed the CTA, MTA, the *piqueteros*, human rights’ organizations, and several smaller groups, in addition to left-wing political parties. Economic issues (especially poverty and unemployment) were the principal contributors for the expansion of the “anti-status quo” opposition, which created a consistent interpretation of politics in Argentina. In their eyes, the difference between the democratic governments of Alfonsín and Menem and those of the military turned to be mostly cosmetic, as human rights abuses remained unpunished, and the poor were the victims of “state violence” (in the form of impersonal “markets” rather than direct repression).⁸⁰ Yet, as long as discontent was seen as stemming from the lower classes the Menem and de la Rúa governments adhered to the neoliberal economic project, concentrating primarily on placating the IMF and reducing fiscal spending. The political elite successfully established in the public consciousness a distinction between “legitimate” demands and the “chaos” created by the working poor and the *piqueteros*. After all, Menem had been reelected and de la Rúa had not promised a change in economic policy during the campaign to succeed him. Those in the opposition were the unfortunate victims of a necessary, and

⁷⁹ “We do not accept it when they tell us there is no alternative. While the government affirms that there is no money to solve the issue of unemployment and to reactivate the economy, between March and August there was an ‘escape’ of twelve billion dollars in public reserves,” said Víctor de Gennaro, head of the CTA, during a march in August 2001 - “La Movilización a la Plaza Fue Más Multitudinaria de lo Esperado” in *Página 12*, 9 August 2001.

⁸⁰ Many journalists opposed to the government adopted this view through editorials and news stories. Horacio Verbitsky, for example, found that the commander in charge of controlling protests in early 2000 was an alleged torturer during the military regime (Kohan 2002, p. 65).

ultimately beneficial, process of reform.⁸¹ It was only when the middle classes joined in on the protests that, in Ernesto Laclau's (2005) terms, the struggles of "the plebs" became those of "the people."

Argentina "On Fire" (2000-2002)

With de la Rúa's electoral victory, the CGT leadership lost its privileged position close to the ruling party, and joined the labor protests with renewed enthusiasm. Despite a strong dispute over leadership within the CGT – between Rodolfo Daer and Hugo Moyano (originally of the MTA), which led to the eventual formation of an "official" CGT (or CGT-Daer) and a "dissident" faction (or CGT-Moyano) – the year 2000 saw organized labor unified again behind a common opposition to de la Rúa (Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2000). Disputes over proposed drastic changes to the national labor code and reductions of the national deficit (the "Zero Deficit" law) saw particularly strong responses from the unions. De la Rúa and his cabinet, still insistent on the need for and the widespread support of the proposed labor legislation, claimed that "the CGT is practically alone" in opposing it.⁸² Moyano, whose faction had supported de la Rúa during the electoral campaign, declared that

Alianza has violently changed sides. Before, they used to turn up at our rallies, have their pictures taken with us, and encouraged us to strike. Now it seems that the IMF has persuaded them that the workers are to blame for all the ills in Argentina.⁸³

A similar sentiment was expressed by Madres, though with their usual emphasis on human rights and denunciation of officially sanctioned violence:

⁸¹ "The future will prove me right," stated de la Rúa in response to protests and general strikes – "De la Rúa No Habló de Concertación y Cargó contra el Sindicalismo" in *Página 12*, 10 June 2000.

⁸² "El Gobierno Utiliza la Consulta para Presionar a la CGT" in *Página 12*, 1 February 2000.

⁸³ *Latin American Weekly Report* – WR-00-06 – 8 February 2000 – p. 62

Despite the usual promises of reactivating the economy and creating jobs, the first act of Fernando de la Rúa's government was repressive: facing the sustained protest of the population of Corrientes demanding bread and dignified work, he ordered police intervention, [which resulted in] the murder of five people and the injuries of dozens more.⁸⁴

Between May of 2000 and December of 2001, there were eight general strikes called by all three labor organizations (Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo 2003)⁸⁵ and dozens of mobilizations that counted with their approval and their ability to add volume to the crowds. Workers were indubitably more active when particular policies affected their employment or benefit status, but the large marches and protests of 2000 and 2001 adopted the view that equated the plight of the working class and the rest of the poor, particularly unemployment, to the undemocratic practices and human rights' abuses of the military era.⁸⁶ The formerly pro-status quo CGT quickly turned against de la Rúa and joined the ranks of anti-status quo radicals, mainly due to the severity of the economic crisis. The form of the general strikes changed accordingly. Traditionally, labor strikes, when including an organized demonstration, revolved around a central act led by the heads of the unions and the CGT high-command. Even following the breakups in the 1990's, joint strikes of the CGT and CTA followed the same structure. After 2000, there appeared to be a lot less centralization, given the simultaneous raising of dozens of road-blocks and of several marches. The umbrella labor groups still retained a degree of importance in that they determined the dates of

⁸⁴ "Vivir Combatiendo la Injusticia" by Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, available at http://www.madres.org/marchas/marchas11_20/marchas19.asp

⁸⁵ With the independent MTA having been replaced by the "dissident" CGT-Moyano.

⁸⁶ During the June 9, 2000 general strike, the first with the wholehearted support of Daer's "official" CGT, Moyano stated that the overwhelming support to the strike was "a cry from the insides of the people, that says to the government that we cannot continue with an economic model that increasingly starves and kills people" – "Los Gremios, Conformes, Imaginan el Día Después" in *Página 12*, 10 June 2000. Bonasso (2002), Kohan (2002), and Zibechi (2003) among others portray the experiences of protesters as facing security forces that had no qualms in using violence, as did the human rights' organization, now involved in debates over economic issues.

the protests, but the social struggle could no longer be seen as class-based (Zibechi 2003).⁸⁷

In an attempt to diminish Peronist influence on the CCC and FTV, de la Rúa reduced the amount of resources that went through local officials. The result was precisely the opposite, in that the large groups protested the reduction of social programs (from over 200.000 in 1997 to less than 40.000 in 2000), and the smaller, localized ones were free from the pressure of the Peronist machine (Svampa and Pereyra 2003, p. 99). As the economy deteriorated, the response of the security forces became more repressive. The rise to power of Alianza, therefore, combined with continued economic deterioration, provided both the incentives and (for the smaller organizations) the opportunities to increase their level of mobilization. Their ability to pressure the government increased as their alliance with labor strengthened. Between October 31 and November 4, 2000, for example, a joint action of most of the major *piquetero* groups prompted de la Rúa to order the security forces to respond forcefully, but the CTA and CGT-Moyano successfully negotiated official concessions by threatening to call a general strike.

A distinct, and smaller, form of collective action also appeared among the unemployed during de la Rúa's presidency. Dismissed workers from individual factories, usually those that were going out of business altogether, would organize

⁸⁷ On August 8, 2001, a general strike of the CGT and CTA was accompanied by several dozen roadblocks and a march of tens of thousands of people to Plaza de Mayo. A "high ranking government official" admitted that there was a clear consolidation of the opposition movement and "coordination among groups that had previously protested separately." The government official added that he did not see a rise in the level of protest, only in the unification of separate groups, but that assessment would prove to be wholly incorrect. – "No Hubo Gran Crecimiento de la Protesta, Creció la Coordinación" in *Página 12*, 10 August 2001. The national press identified the presence of "unemployed, state workers, teachers, students, and 'loose' individuals from the middle classes" – "La Movilización a la Plaza Fue Más Multitudinaria de lo Esperado" in *Página 12*, 9 August 2001.

and “retake” their workplace as impromptu communes. The first, on August 18, 2000, involved metalworkers in the neighborhood of Avellaneda, “occupied” the factory in which they had been employed and began production on their own.⁸⁸ Over the next two years, and inspired by December 19/20, the number of occupied factories reached one hundred, attracting national and international attention. In some cases, workers have maintained productive activity for years, sometimes even with governmental help, making the “recovered” factories less a revolutionary cadre than a curious type of community-based development project.

What the various groups of the unemployed share is a primary demand: the availability of “dignified” work. Finding themselves in new circumstances, the newly unemployed and underemployed developed their organizations around the common (undeserved) status of *unemployed worker*. They ascribe responsibility for their situation to the state and directed their energy towards confronting it. While politicians extol the generosity of welfare assistance plans, the unemployed make a point of pointing out that the plans were “torn from the government through collective struggle” (Svampa and Pereyra 2003, p. 97).⁸⁹ It is often missed by scholarly accounts that an important element of *piquetero* identity stresses a past era in which the people of Argentina, even blue-collar workers, could live a dignified life.⁹⁰ The calls for change emanating from the unemployed movement (as also

⁸⁸ Factory takeovers had taken place in isolated occasions before. In Argentina, the first such action occurred in 1985, when laborers at a Ford factory took possession of the machinery and continued to turn out products for eighteen days.

⁸⁹ The distribution of the food, money, and tools received by communities of the government plans was almost from the start an issue divisive issue. In some cases, local governments took it upon themselves to distribute the goods, while in others the unemployed organizations were allowed autonomous decisions. Charges of favoritism and corruption, not to mention physical intimidation by “bosses” in charge of distribution, are common.

⁹⁰ Svampa and Pereyra (2003) and Armony and Armony (2005) are welcome exceptions.

became the case with the impoverished middle classes) entail a conception of current politics as a fall from grace, and a political class which could have done better for the public at large. During a large “March for Dignity” on August 9, 2001, a young *piquetero* expressed his response to the alliance between unemployed and pensioners: “My eyes feel with tears when I see the grandpas joining in the fight. They lived in a different society, where there was education and health care for all.”⁹¹ This sentiment was more prevalent in the de la Rúa period because it was echoed by the traditional labor movement, which equated the glorious past to the heyday of Perón, and eventually by the middle classes as well.

Nobody expected or predicted the explosion of middle-class anger that would take place on the night of December 19, 2001, but they indubitably marked a turning point. Menem and de la Rúa had assumed the lack of vocal opposition from the middle classes to represent support for their policies – as “pro-status quo moderates” – despite sporadic instances of discontent.⁹² Governments are usually more hesitant to use violence against middle class protesters, and this was understood by organizations in the opposition (particularly the poor and unemployed), who were often the target of police brutality. As the members of the MTD-Solano note “the state of siege was designed to repress the organized sectors.[...] Had it not been for the middle classes we would have had it much worse” (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD-Solano 2002, p. 142). The presence of mass middle-class protests in a country that thought of itself for

⁹¹ “Los Piqueteros Marcharon desde la Matanza a la Plaza de Mayo” in *Página 12*, 9 August 2001.

⁹² Some scholars believed the Argentine middle classes could not be trusted to support democratic institutions, and therefore saw a lack of political mobilization as a good thing. Surveys, such as the *Latinobarometro* democracy database, showed the population of Argentina to be very unsupportive of democracy in the 1990’s (Lagos 1996; Blake 1998). Hector Schamis (2002) has commented that the continuation of democratic institutions in Argentina following the crisis of 2001 is an unexpected, if welcome, outcome given the country’s track record.

half a century as predominantly middle class meant the difference between a strong minority opposition and widespread rejection of the government. Many among the impoverished middle classes took it one step further, and explicitly joined the protests of workers and the *piqueteros*.

In hindsight, though, it is possible to identify some early signs that pointed to a potential awakening of the middle classes. Menem's popularity had waned towards the last years of his presidency, as a result not only of the economic problems but of a series of political scandals that reduced his overall support. Perhaps the most important were accusations against Menem, Cavallo, and other high government officials of illegal arms sales to Ecuador and Croatia. Human rights groups, both national and international, had also denounced Menem on his handling of the investigation of a terrorist attack on the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, while his purposeful dawdling on the issue of military confessions (several officers came forward after Scilingo) continued. Rumors of appropriation of state funds for "secret" bank accounts in Switzerland or some such foreign destination, on the part of the president and most every national public official were common in opposition circles. The increased visibility of the *piqueteros* as disturbers of the peace reflected poorly on the government as well.⁹³

Many in the lower middle classes had suffered (fell into poverty, lost their jobs) during the Menem years and the situation exacerbated under de la Rúa with the

⁹³ As late as July 2001, according to a Gallup poll, 73% of Argentines disapproved of the roadblocks. Many saw them as a new form of political violence or, at the very least, a nuisance for productive economic activity. In many circles they were simply referred to as "*negros*" – dark-skinned, poor criminals, always at the beckon of the Peronist bureaucrats and "*punteros*." This began to change in mid-2001, when news of the deaths of some young *piqueteros* made national headlines. Acts of remembrance for the dead were joined by labor and human rights' groups under the slogan "today we are all *piqueteros*."

growing budget and debt crises; but this by itself was not enough to spur the great majority of their numbers to action. The arm-sales scandal again irrupted into the public scene when indictments were filed against Menem, who was placed under temporary house arrest in 2001. To make matters worse, after the resignation of economic minister Ricardo López Murphy, de la Rúa appointed Cavallo – Menem’s alleged accomplice in the arms deal, and his partner in instituting the new economic model – as his successor on March 20. Not too surprisingly, the move proved to be widely unpopular. Upon his reappointment, Cavallo’s drafted a plan to reduce economic expenditures by over \$3 billion in 2001 and 2002. Three of de la Rúa’s ministers resigned in protest almost immediately, and small demonstrations around the country decried the move. Despite growing popular discontent, Cavallo was granted “superpowers” by congress to increase the efficiency of his remaking of the Argentine economy. Some opposition congress-members argued the move was unconstitutional (and therefore, reminiscent of Menem’s strategies). The protests of the pilots and flight attendants of *Aerolíneas Argentinas*, which reached its highest point in 2001, also angered the middle classes, who identified with the white collar workers and called them the “middle-class *piqueteros*” (Zibechi 2003).

Legislative elections in October of 2001 proved to be a turning point. The voting public of Argentina, which historically turned up in very high numbers, expressed its displeasure by either abstaining from participating (26% of the electorate, a remarkably high number) or voting null (an unprecedented 21%, 40% in certain provinces).⁹⁴ It was the null ballots that made the strongest impression, as

⁹⁴ See the extended coverage of *Página 12*, *El País*, *La Nación*, and other major newspapers, 15 October 2001.

angry voters imaginatively cast their support for *Clemente* (a popular comics character), Osama Bin Laden, or, in many instances, a sliced salami or a block of cheese. The tragicomic aspect of the “*voto bronca*” (“angry vote”) reflected a sense of defeatism, of seeing no alternative to the current leadership, which would reappear in the later cry of “*que se vayan todos.*” A public opinion survey conducted in that period found Argentines to be concerned predominantly with “dishonesty” and “lack of equal opportunities.” While respondents were fairly satisfied with democracy, they found their country to be “unjust,” and showed a marked distrust of their compatriots. Graciela Rommer, the head investigator, assessed that distrust was most marked regarding “the government, the political class, and the unions” and that “the decline of Argentine values translates into the end of the myth of Argentine solidarity, which cannot be seen in reality.”⁹⁵

But the de la Rúa administration was too preoccupied with pressure from the IMF and the international community to pay much attention to voter apathy and plummeting approval ratings. De la Rúa and Cavallo concluded that the most immediate fiscal danger was the flight of foreign capital from the national banks (as the situation worsened, more and more investors removed their money, which naturally contributed to further deterioration). On December 1, 2001, the government announced a series of measures that prohibited the withdrawal of currency from the banks by private citizens, which came to be known as the “*corralito bancario*” (“banking playpen”). The owners of the largest savings accounts, the middle and upper classes were furious. Years of promises of economic development had

⁹⁵ Data quoted in “No Te Metás, Que Ya No Hay Valores” in *Página 12*, 1 December 2001. The survey found that respondents gave a 6 out of 10 score to democracy, and a 3.3 score to the degree of justice in the nation.

suddenly turned to a blatant breaking of the most basic trust between citizens and government: respect for individual property.

On December 12, the Chamber of Market and Enterprise Activities (*Cámara de Actividades Mercantiles y Empresariales – CAME*), an association of small and medium-sized business owners, called for an *apagón/cacerolazo* to protest the *corralito*. The press reported that “no characteristic slogan was heard, because it was evident that any connection to traditional party politics would have been rejected by the anti-political humor of the protesters.”⁹⁶ Organized labor joined in with a general strike in support of those affected by the *corralito*. “The last measures undertaken by Domingo Cavallo,” reported the daily *Página 12*, “have achieved what the workers’ could not by themselves: the unity of the entire syndicalist sector.”⁹⁷ Since the strike did not present any labor-related demand, de la Rúa called it a “senseless measure, with no justification and with a purely political rationale.”⁹⁸ Almost immediately, several left-wing parties, unemployed and neighborhood organizations announced demonstrations in support of the strike. At a demonstration led by the CTA and affiliated *piquetero* groups, Juan González stated that “the crisis is a structural problem that has been implemented since the dictatorship.” *Piquetero* leader Luis D’Elia called for “the middle class that fumes and curses at home to go out to the streets.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ “Los Cacerolazos Pusieron en Máximo el Fuego del Enojo y el Fastidio” in *Página 12*, 13 December 2001.

⁹⁷ “Cavallo Consiguió la Unidad Gremial” in *Página 12*, 13 December 2001.

⁹⁸ “Cavallo Consiguió la Unidad Gremial” in *Página 12*, 13 December 2001.

⁹⁹ “Los Cacerolazos Pusieron en Máximo el Fuego del Enojo y el Fastidio” in *Página 12*, 13 December 2001.

The decision of the labor confederations to strike in protest against economic measures that (directly at least) affected primarily the middle class represents yet another turning point in the unification of civil society. The exhortations on the part of the *piqueteros* for the middle class to come out and join them reflected a growing sense that their plight was the same. Many labor and unemployed protests in the following months explicitly expressed solidarity with the middle classes. Although many among the poor and unemployed did not have much bank savings to speak of, they joined in the protests both because they saw their interests threatened and because they immediately connected the new financial restrictions to their economic distress.¹⁰⁰ The middle classes, on their part, became more attentive to the overall economic climate and its social consequences. On December 13, a highly publicized government report showed the unemployment rate to be 18.3%. That same day the lootings started, many with the participation of *piqueteros* and in some occasions of unionized workers as well. This complicated matters for the government, which was in the middle of negotiations with the IMF regarding debt payments. Incredibly, policymakers did not see the coming storm, as is evident by support in the upper house of congress regarding benefits for senators of up to \$10,000 a month.¹⁰¹

Despite warnings in the media, the de la Rúa administration did little to counteract the expanding wave of lootings. Spokespersons for Alianza were claiming that the lootings were prompted by PJ *punteros* as early as December 16, but they seemed unable to recognize the degree of anger felt by the poor. The first lootings in

¹⁰⁰ In response to the question “why did you come?,” a woman from a poor shantytown responded “to support the people” (Fernández et al 2002).

¹⁰¹ See “Las Cifras de la Cámara Alta. El Nuevo Senado Mantiene las Viejas Mañas”, *Diario La Nación*, December 15, 2001.

Gran Buenos Aires took place on the following day. Many looters told journalists that they had been forced to act by the government's neglect of their plight.¹⁰²

Simultaneously, business owners in the area organized marches and vehicle caravans to protest the *corralito*. The national union of railway employees paralyzed much commercial activity by striking in support of workers in La Pampa, threatened with dismissal due to the privatization of the local railway company. The lootings were therefore not the only instances of collective action, and de la Rúa's inability to see the other expressions of discontent seems to have led to the colossal political miscalculation behind the declaration of the state of siege.

The federal government only responded in earnest to the growing chaos on December 18, when it announced a plan to distribute food to the poorest areas around the country at the same time as it launched a strong police response to the lootings. Violent confrontations were reported in dozens of localities around the country.¹⁰³ This did not stop peaceful middle-class and *piquetero* demonstrations elsewhere, some attracting large numbers of participants. That same day, FRENAPO announced the results of a "popular survey" ("*consulta popular*") that collected three million signatures in support for a subsidy plan to radically reduce poverty – a plan that could not have been further from the immediate concerns of policymakers or IMF officials.

¹⁰² Cameras captured images of looters crying and apologizing to "the people." While no one denies that some participants took advantage of the opportunity to acquire other goods, there seemed to be a significant degree of sympathy for the most destitute in media reports. On the other hand, a young man of east-Asian descent was likewise filmed crying over the rubble of the convenience where he worked, and became the image of the tragic cost of the lootings (see the reports in *Página 12*, *Clarín*, and *La Nación* on 20 December 2001).

¹⁰³ See "El Reclamo de Comida Llega a Buenos Aires," *Diario Página 12*, December 18, 2001 and "La Situación Social. Continúan los Saqueos en los Supermercados," *Diario La Nación*, December 19, 2001

On the morning of December 19, President Fernando de la Rúa met with his cabinet along with syndicalist, church, and industry leaders to assess the situation, at the headquarters of *Cáritas*, an ecclesiastical organization. As he left the premises, de la Rúa's car was pelted with rocks and eggs. Dozens of crowds had positioned themselves in front of businesses and food providers across the country, while business and unemployed protests continued. Public employees in the capital and various provinces took to the streets as well, attempting to forcibly enter government buildings and assaulting some high-ranking politicians in the process. The use of rubber bullets, tear gas, and other riot-control measures left hundreds of injured. With the situation clearly out of the government's control, de la Rúa appeared on national television and announced the state of siege, which sparked the first spontaneous middle-class *cacerolazo*. The middle-class demonstrations of December 20, emboldened by the announced resignation of Cavallo early that morning, marched to the centers of public life: busy intersections, squares, churches, and government buildings.

It would become common in later days to simply attribute the *cacerolazos* to the *corralito*, but this obscures parts of the content of the middle class protests. Though lacking central leadership, the *cacerolazos* represented quite rational and civil collective behavior.¹⁰⁴ Yet, it seems unlikely that such an effective mass demonstration could have been the work of an apolitical and apathetic citizenry. In hindsight, once more, it is possible to identify signs of more meaningful political involvement among young middle-class adults (many of whom had little prospects of

¹⁰⁴ With isolated exceptions, the middle class protests were peaceful (Schuster et al 2003).

employment) in university forums, music performances, and even soccer matches.¹⁰⁵ Amazingly, many participants in the first *cacerolazos* later recalled the public discussions that developed among people waiting in line in front of the banks. The irony of the *corralito* facilitating the venue for the rebirth of the public sphere is striking.¹⁰⁶ Though the massive *cacerolazo* late in the evening of December 19 was by all accounts a spontaneous event, some neighborhood meetings and small middle-class marches had taken place earlier that day.¹⁰⁷

There were some notable aspects to this powerful outburst. The crowds formed within the various neighborhoods of the large urban areas, and subsequently marched towards significant street-corners, public monuments, or government buildings.¹⁰⁸ The most common sentiment was a rejection of the political class as a whole: “*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo.*” There was no concrete demand to be met (after all, nobody really expected all politicians to pack their bags and leave the country), but a repudiation of “politics as usual.” In many debates in the media and among activists, the primary issue was the alleged unconstitutionality of de la Rúa’s imposition of the state of siege. There were no calls for revolutionary action

¹⁰⁵ See Kohan (2002) and Zibechi (2003) for discussions on the role of artistic and sports venues as meeting points for apolitical youths, and their functions as “little schools of protest,” in which crowds learned how to confront riot police. Iván Heyn, president of the student Federation of the University of Buenos Aires at the time, states that these events were much more likely to end in some sort of political action than the meetings of student-activist associations (in Caparrós 2002, pp. 47, 53).

¹⁰⁶ Though there is no systematic data that I know of to confirm whether this took place in more than a few isolated occasions, it is a narrative that has become accepted as true in Argentina (and that many scholars accept as true).

¹⁰⁷ Federico Schuster and his collaborators (Schuster et al, 2003) offer the most detailed account of the highest point of the protest cycle (December 12-January 20). This study identifies the neighborhoods of Belgrano, Villa Crespo, and Liniers in Buenos Aires as holding some of the first neighborhood-level actions.

¹⁰⁸ Nobody seems to know when or where the first such march appeared, but the word spread quickly through telephone conversations, the internet, and television. Immediately after de la Rúa’s short nationally-broadcast speech at around ten in the evening, news commentators remarked on the presence of mobilizations in middle-class and upper middle-class neighborhoods. The term *asambleas autoconvocadas* (self-convened assemblies) was by then already being used.

beyond small isolated activists nor an explicit repudiation of existing political and economic institutions. International observers, particularly from left-leaning media outlets, assigned an “anti-neoliberal” message to the *cacerolazos* that was not really there.¹⁰⁹

If the countless visits to bureaucrats seeking information provided the opportunity for the grieving women who would form Madres to meet each other and share their stories, hours-long waits at the banks did the same for the middle sectors. No organization or plan of action emerged from this improvised public forums but the seeds of solidarity that would grow into the marches and later the neighborhood *asambleas* were planted.¹¹⁰ With the declaration of the state of siege late on December 19, the middle-classes staged their “spontaneous insurrection” on the basis of this newfound “we.” The implication is that the difficult economic circumstances not only encouraged, but *facilitated* the development of the unified civil movement of the middle classes, as they did for the *piqueteros*. In this sense, it is difficult to fault the enthusiasm of some authors (e.g., Kohan 2002; Zibechi 2003; Hardt and Negri 2004) who were led to overstate the significance of these extraordinary events.

If anything, the marching columns vocally rejected the presence of left-wing groups that advocated class-struggle. There are many accounts of jeers and boos

¹⁰⁹ Examples abound. See, e.g., Klein (2003)

¹¹⁰ It seems appropriate to speak of the first two weeks of December 2001 as witnessing the creation of “social capital” among the Argentine middle classes. Robert Putnam (1995) defines social capital as “features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (quoted in Edwards and Foley 2001, p. 8). Bob Edwards and Michael Foley point out that social capital, the foundations of collective action in civil society, can be seen as promoting “public spiritedness” (as in Putnam or other “neo-Tocquevillians”) or, alternatively, “social autonomy” from the state (as in Choen and Arato and others) (Edwards and Foley 2001, p. 7). Putnam’s seminal works point to the need of social capital for civil society to fulfill its role. In the case discussed here, though, collective social action stems precisely from mistrust in the “democratic” status quo.

towards the raising of banners of unions, parties, or other such organizations; only national flags were permitted (and, in later days, those of the *asambleas* themselves). The crowds yelled against the state of siege, the politicians, and the *corralito*, but also sang popular tunes and, in several occasions, the national anthem. Several of the protests turned into *batucadas* (“musical protests”). The battles between crowds of protesters and the security forces on December 20 added an element of “brotherhood of arms,” which contributed to the creation of the neighborhood *asambleas* in the following days. Many later accounts refer to the “campaigns,” with its militaristic connotations, of December 19/20. The campaign ended in victory: the resignation of de la Rúa and his embarrassing departure off the roof of the Casa Rosada.

On December 20 the situation was chaotic and violence was prevalent, so much so that residents of lower-middle class neighborhoods were advised by police to arm themselves against the coming mobs of looters coming to burn their homes (these never materialized). Government buildings, businesses, and the private residences of prominent political and economic figures (including de la Rúa’s daughter) were vandalized. Of note was the arrival of Madres to Plaza de Mayo (December 20 was, as it happens, a Thursday) and the fierce reception they encountered from police.¹¹¹ Along with Judge María Romilda Servini de Cubría, Madres would subsequently lead the calls for an investigation of government-sanctioned violence during December 19/20. For the participants in the protests, December 20 constituted a battle against

¹¹¹ In a public statement, Hebé de Bonaffi condemned the repression unleashed under de la Rúa’s orders: “Not even during the dictatorship was the charge against Madres so strong. While we were being run over by horses from the back, we had the infantry with tear gas in front” (*Página 12*, December 21 2001).

the armed government forces abusing their position. The two-day confrontations would yield thirty-four dead, hundreds of injured, and thousands of arrests.

Conspicuous for their absence were the leaders of the two CGTs and the CTA, even though a general strike had been called for December 20.¹¹² The principal labor leaders, Daer and Moyano of the two CGT's and Víctor de Gennaro of the CTA, were later criticized for their hesitant approach to the protests. The joint actions between organized labor, the unemployed, and the middle classes would never materialize after December 19/20 (making December 13, 2001 the last instance in which they were simultaneous protests of all three groups). With the return of the PJ to power following de la Rúa's resignation, the CGT leadership would not reach out to the *piqueteros* as it had before. Later middle class demonstrations would include the union leaders in their list of figures who should "leave."

Unionized workers certainly joined the crowds on December 20, but they did so as private citizens, highlighting the "people vs. power" tenor of the Battle for Argentina.¹¹³ Many later accounts of that day emphasize the heterogeneous composition of the crowds, and many participants remember men in suits marching alongside poor women with babes in arms or masked *piqueteros*. This is unsurprising given the chaos of the day, and it lends credence to the idea that Argentina experienced a spontaneous "people's revolt," but it is not true to a degree. Many

¹¹² See Schuster et al. (2003); Zibechi (2003); Iñigo Carrera and Cotarelo (2003); Lobato and Suriano (2003).

¹¹³ An interesting exception is that of the *motoqueros*, mostly young men working as delivery persons in the "informal" economy in motorbikes and organized in an independent union. While the rigid decision-making bureaucracy of the CGT and CTA made it impossible to organize labor demonstrations, the *motoqueros* swiftly joined the crowds of December 20. In Plaza de Mayo, they lead protesters during the confrontations of that afternoon, helping the columns of people find ways to disperse when gas was thrown, or opening breaches among the ranks of security forces. They were later affectionally remembered as the "people's cavalry."

piquetero groups quickly assembled and marched towards the protests together. These last in many cases made a conscious decision not to go to the middle of the fray, for fear of attracting the wrath of the security forces. Without minimizing the horrific violence of December 19/20, it is reasonable to assume that the middle class protests helped decrease the level of repression on the “usual suspects” – the poor and the unemployed. Later accounts of the day by labor leaders, *piquetero* activists, and intellectuals agreed that the presence of the middle classes changed everything (Colectivo Situaciones 2002, pp. 111-120; see also Camparrós 2002). Nevertheless, the following days would show that groups from different social classes and affiliations “converged, but did not mix” during the largest protests (Fernández et al. 2002).

From the explosion of December 19/20 emerged from the middle class a new member of the “anti-status quo” coalition. Three more *cacerolazos* took place in a more or less spontaneous manner after December 19/20: on December 28 (against Rodríguez Saá’s), on January 1 (the day Duhalde took office), and on January 10 (demanding the resignation of all the members of the Supreme Court). They developed as the first, with small columns of protesters banging instruments and individuals joining them along the way, and reached the size of the first one – by some accounts over 100.000 people in the city of Buenos Aires alone. A significant number of these participated in the public assemblies (*asambleas barriales*), which began as attempts to make political debate accessible to “neighbors” across the country. By mid-January, the *cacerolazos* began to be organized either by the *asambleas*, business associations such as CAME, or by groups protesting the

corralito though uninterested in participating in the public assemblies – known as *ahorristas* (“savers”). The *ahorristas* quickly distanced themselves from *piquetero* and left-wing groups, and were active until February of 2002, when the banking system was systematically reopened.¹¹⁴ This marked a clear split among those in the middle classes that had chosen to resort to protest. The *cacerolazo* of January 10, according to media reports, was prompted by “a clear motive: money.”¹¹⁵

By then there were 200 *asambleas* across urban Argentina, well over three quarters in Gran Buenos Aires. Each one specified a meeting place and time (usually once a week), put out bulletins, created a website and a newsletter (many of which still exist). The following statement, which appears in the bulletin of the *asamblea popular* of San Cristóbal and Boedo, exemplifies their credo:

We met banging utensils and turning individual anger into a powerful collective being. In the streets we realized that we had passed by each other at the baker’s, at the square, but this time we decided to solve our problems together. From the neighborhood corners we marched to Plaza de Mayo in defiance of the state of siege: that’s how we got rid of de la Rúa and Cavallo [...] Our meetings bring together neighbors, students, unemployed, pensioners, ruined small businessmen, and workers [...] At each assembly, we discuss together what is going on: we said we didn’t believe in the rhetoric of Rodríguez Saá, that Duhalde’s plan is more of the same. After all, they were appointed by a congress and a Supreme Court that we have already rejected.

At the height of their visibility, and in contrast to the *piqueteros*, the *asambleas* enjoyed the sympathy of the population at large (about 80% according to polls in 2002¹¹⁶). This is not surprising, given that many of their members come from the educated, more affluent social strata, and their demonstrations were not as

¹¹⁴ One of Duhalde’s major initial problems was how to deal with the banking debacle. His plan to return savings in *pesos* rather than dollars (when devaluation was already under way) predictably met with widespread anger.

¹¹⁵ Rather than “*que se vayan todos*” reporter Sergio Kiernan notes that the most widely heard cries were of “thieves” (“*ladrones*”) and “this culture of stealing must end” (“*esta costumbre de robar se va a acabar*”) – “Otro *Cacerolazo* contra el *Corralito*” in *Página 12*, 11 January 2002.

¹¹⁶ In a study conducted by De Franco et al (2002), support for the *cacerolazos* was 88% in January 2002 and 78% in June of that year.

disruptive as the blocking of roads. Their meetings were planned beforehand only insofar as the order of speakers was to be. The venue, the food, and the electricity were all donated by local neighbors.¹¹⁷ In many of their meetings, the need to “do politics differently” (“*hacer política de otra forma*”) took center stage.

The irruption of the middle classes into the scene prompted a new type of social mobilization in Argentina. If before December 19/20 popular protest against the state was led by the large labor and unemployed organizations, for a few months in 2002 it would be by the *asambleas*, independent *piquetero* groups like the CTD-Verón, and human rights groups like Madres and HIJOS. To a large extent the “popular protest movement” was markedly different after December 20, when the various organizations that refused to rely on hierarchical leadership (and were thus less likely to be co-opted) began the type of public activity that many scholars saw as the advent of a new type of democratic citizenship (Bielsa et al 2002; Dinerstein 2003b; Zibechi 2003). Their actions were quite successful at first, prompting the resignation of three presidents in one week and tentative attempts at dialogue from government. Puerta, Rodríguez Saá, Camaño, and Duhalde all met with representatives from the unions, Madres and HIJOS, and business associations, though not with the *piqueteros*. Newly-inaugurated Duhalde would justify the middle-classes’ anger while trying to distinguish it from the actions of the unemployed:

[They are] absolutely legitimate. People put money in the bank and now they don’t understand why they can’t take it out. They are defending their interests. I do fear that *cacerolazos* get mixed with violent actions (quoted in Schuster et al, p. 61).

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., the outline of the meetings of the *asamblea* of Almagro, in Caparrós (2002), p. 193.

On January 16, middle class protesters mounted their own roadblocks for the first time. Seething over official predictions that the real value of their savings, once the ban on withdrawals was removed, would amount to a third of the original amount or less, businessmen and white-collar workers came up with the slogan “*piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola*”¹¹⁸ to express their anger and their identification with the former social outcasts. A national *piquetero* march on January 28 took an unexpected turn when the demonstrators were received in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Liniers by community leaders. The president of the Chamber of Commerce stated that “for us, neighbors and businesspeople, it is an honor to be able to join the unemployed and the *piqueteros* with the *caceroleros*, so that we will march together to build a new Argentina” (quoted in Zibechi 2003, p. 187). Though scenes such as this were unusual, there was a temporary sense of unity that transcended socio-economic class or immediate material needs.

Amidst *cacerolazos* and *piquetes*, the various groups assembled in public parks to hold open assemblies, the *interbarriales*. The first *asamblea interbarrial* took place at the Centenario Park in Buenos Aires on January 13, 2002. Thousands of representatives of neighborhood *asambleas*, “recovered” factories, *motoqueros*, and other activists debated the current situation. They agreed, among other points, to protest against extant privatization plans and the *corralito* with *apagones* and *cacerolazos*, to join in protests led by labor attorneys to demand the resignation of all the members of the Supreme Court, and to recognize that there were two “sides” to the struggle and that middle class *ahorristas* were in the same side as workers, unemployed, and all other “victims of the system” (Schuster et al 2002, p. 62). The

¹¹⁸ “*Piquete* and *cacerola*, the struggle is one and the same.”

interbarriales enjoyed their highest levels of participation between February and May 2002. A typical *interbarrial* during the first months of 2002 included the major dissident labor groups, *piqueteros*, over a dozen human rights' organizations, student federations, over fifty progressive non-profit organizations, and of course the *asambleas*. Each assembly produced a list of agreed-upon declarations, on economic, political, and social issues. In contrast to the few declarations of the first *interbarrial*, later ones would reflect the difficulty of attaining consensus on more specific issues.

One encounter on January 17 produced the following list of goals for the future:

- 1) To discuss with one's neighbors the fear generated by the current situation, so as to begin confronting it;
- 2) to organize community-level shopping ventures to distribute goods to the needy;
- 3) to create bulletins to communicate ideas, name businesses that charge too much for goods, combat the mainstream media's "distortions";
- 4) to organize *escraches* in front of banks;
- 5) to demand that revenues from privatization and taxes on industry go to the unemployed and not the banks;
- 6) to reverse all privatization measures;
- 7) to nationalize the banking system;
- 8) to make public the names and faces of executives, judges, and policymakers so as to begin "to control them;"
- 9) to demand the creation of a National Constituent Assembly;
- 10) to establish mechanisms through which neighborhood *asambleas* can give authority to their representatives;
- 11) to expropriate the goods and revenue of businesses that "cannot justify their windfalls;"
- 12) to name each *asamblea* after a victim of December 20;
- 13) to encourage massive withdrawals of memberships to unions to protest the corruption of syndicalist leaders;
- 14) to demand the government respect the "republican ideas of democracy" (de Mello 2002).

Suddenly, some of the expressed resolutions of the *interbarriales* began to steer away from the picture of peaceful democratic understanding that was originally intended. This was the case partly because socialist and communist parties played a major organizational role, and they sought to set a particular agenda (Brieger, n.d.; Petras 2003a and 2003b). This is noteworthy since the first middle class *cacerolazos* had explicitly rejected the presence of political parties, which they would not do after mid-January. Thus, despite an initial emphasis on horizontal communication, the

interbarriales were co-opted by traditional socialist and communist parties' attempting to create a more radical movement.

With strong labor unions and “syndicalist-oriented” *piquetero* organizations like the CCC and FTV on the one hand, and an increasingly combative tone to the declarations of the *interbarriales*, left-wing activists and intellectuals proclaimed the beginning of a revolutionary period (see esp. Sáenz and Cruz 2002). But this proved to be premature. The independent CTD-Verón, MTD-Solano, and MTR, as well as the participatory-minded *asambleistas* soundly rejected attempts to centralize the struggle. This caused a major ideological split, which was exacerbated by squabbles among left-wing groups competing for leadership, in addition to the usual squabbles among labor leaders (Petras 2003a and 2003b). In his inaugural address, Eduardo Duhalde declared an end to Argentina’s alliance with “the financial sector” and a newly strengthened one with the “productive sector,” thus renewing his courting of the large union organizations. On January 14, 2002, a large contingent of *piqueteros* arrived at the central market of Buenos Aires, demanding food and other goods. Porters and market workers blocked their entrance, prompting a violent confrontation that symbolized the end of the tenuous labor-*piquetero* alliance for good.¹¹⁹

Demobilization (2003-?)

As has been pointed out, the *piqueteros* and *asambleistas* were highly active during the first half of 2002. There were over 2000 roadblocks reported during that year, and that number includes only those that were initiated by *piqueteros*. A violent clash with police in Buenos Aires on June 26, leading to the deaths of two young

¹¹⁹ *Latin American Weekly Report*, January 2002.

piqueteros, prompted a massive march of repudiation with the participation of *asambleas*, Madres, HIJOS, the CTA and other union representatives (Moyano, the leader of the “dissident” CGT, was booed). It was one of the last large-scale joint mobilizations of the cycle of protests, though many groups commemorated together the first anniversary of December 19/20 in an act that still retained some hope for continued social struggle.

Ultimately, the cry of “*que se vayan todos*” was not replaced by a political project with which to challenge the status quo. Abandonment by many participants, cooptation of several important organizations by political actors, and government action directed at addressing a select few issues popular among protesters were all contributing factors in the decline of civil society involvement. Debate in several public assemblies came to be dominated by the most radical factions, who were both better organized and more motivated than the majority of attendees, whom were driven off by exhaustion and exasperation.¹²⁰ Independent *piquetero* groups and the *asambleas* were unable to maintain their initial momentum, and eventually lost most of their active membership. They were often criticized by more centralized groups, seemingly rightly, for their naiveté and lack of political savvy. Their grass-roots attempts to radically transform democracy were replaced by an unenthusiastic return to the ballot box. The decline of the CTD-Verón has been particularly steep; following years of continued struggle, the organization has been reduced to a few hundred members.

¹²⁰ Del Franco et al (2002) find that by mid-2002 there was a measurable decline in support for the *asambleas*, and in the amount of people who stated a willingness to participate either in assembly meetings or in *cacerolazos*.

Presidential election in 2003 reflected the difficulty of translating collective action into a political alternative. Established parties such as FREPASO and the UCR all but disappeared. Incredibly, Menem himself led in polls prior to the election (he withdrew from the race before the election due to new allegations of improprieties), a result of polarization and fragmentation in the opposition (Levitsky and Murillo 2003, p. 157). No anti-establishment candidate received significant electoral support. The PJ turned to internal power struggles and all-out attempts on the part of the major Peronist leaders, Duhalde and the governor of the Pampa province Néstor Kirchner, to expand their bases of support. During the Duhalde administration, the PJ reorganized itself and set about the task of incorporating the *piqueteros* into the traditional clientelist network of Argentine politics.

The election of Kirchner to the presidency in 2003 revealed well-defined divisions among the unemployed. Behind Duhalde, the so-called “hard” camp (“*duros*”) comprising the CCC, the MIJD, the *Polo Obrero*, the Coordinator of Neighborhood Unity (*Coordinadora de Unidad Barrial*) and the Combative Workers’ Front (*Frente de Trabajadores Combativos*). Kirchner’s “soft” camp (“*blandos*”) included the FTV and the large Standing Neighborhoods (*Barrios de Pie*) (Ponce 2005). Instead of forming a unified protest front, organized labor and the unemployed suddenly became competitors for political favors on the part of the PJ. On December 20, 2003, the second anniversary of de la Rúa’s resignation, three separate *piquetero* groups organized marches on Plaza de Mayo. Almost comically, their enmity was by then so clear that they split the day into three separate periods so as not to demonstrate together.

Kirchner successfully gained the support of human rights' organizations by re-opening the issue of human rights' abuses during the military period. On August 21, 2003, the Argentine Congress voted to repeal the amnesty laws enacted during Menem's tenure, to much popular acclaim. Although Madres and HIJOS by no means ceased their marches and other forms of collective protest, they are no longer spearheading a movement that equates the current political leadership to the military *juntas* of the past. Kirchner's focus on past crimes serves him in two ways: he is in friendlier terms with the influential human rights organizations than his predecessors, but he also has made their rhetoric more difficult to defend, as he has been able to make a distinction between crimes against the people and the effects of economic processes beyond a small group's control.

Seemingly more left-leaning than Duhalde, he has also succeeded in maintaining stability while continuing to negotiate with international financial institutions. The Argentine economy appears to have rebounded, recording steady growth in 2004 and 2005, though poverty and unemployment remain alarmingly high. In a widely covered announcement, Kirchner declared his intention to completely pay off Argentina's foreign debt to "gain control of the tools to build its independence."¹²¹ Beyond the expected rejection of the anti-system core within civil society – who believe the debt itself is illegitimate and should not be paid at all – most Argentines accepted the announcement as a good sign for the future.¹²² Hugo Moyano, formerly

¹²¹ "Argentina to Pay Off Debt Early" in *BBCNews*, 16 December 2005 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4533740.stm>

¹²² Interestingly, some *ahorrista* groups opposed the idea of paying the debt swiftly for fear of "a new *corralito*." An organization led by Nino Artaza convened a demonstration under the slogan "*el fondo puede esperar*" ("the Fund can wait") – "La Oposición Agudiza sus Críticas" in *Diario La Nación*, 16 December 2005.

a “dissident” leader, referred to it as “a historic day. Perón never asked for a cent [...] and Kirchner is doing the same.”¹²³ Once again, the move by Kirchner represents both an attempt to make macroeconomic changes while at the same time presenting himself as close to the values held dear by protesters in 2001 and 2002. Besides his ties with organized labor and some *piquetero* organizations, he is a less blatant target for other civil society groups still in the opposition.

The CGT and CTA continue to enjoy the largest number of affiliated members of any social organizations in Argentina (around three million members for the first and slightly less than one million for the other). They only represent about a quarter of Argentine workers, however. Despite Moyano’s warning that support for the overall program does not eliminate the “social debt,”¹²⁴ it remains to be seen whether the reunified CGT can put significant pressure on the government. Like the population at large, the rest of the workforce, the overwhelming majority of workers, rarely if ever participate in organized collective action. As the country has rebounded from its economic collapse, protest has returned to the steady activity of “the usual suspects.” Even if new actors continue to exist, Argentines have retreated to their homes to let their procedural democracy lead the country back to normalcy.

Conclusions: Civil Society and the State in Argentina

The preceding account identifies a period (1999-2002) in which Argentine civil society united in its opposition to the state. This unity was not the result of the creation of a national movement of opposition, as several social movements as well as

¹²³ “Coinciden en la CGT, pero No en la CTA” in *Diario La Nación*, 17 December 2005.

¹²⁴ “Moyano Advierte que Crecerán los Reclamos Salariales en el 2006” in *Diario La Nación*, 18 December 2005.

left-wing intellectuals hoped, but in the adoption of a shared attitude towards political figures in leadership positions. The critique of democratic politics in Argentina, what Auyero (2004) calls the “moral politics of the crowds,” was first articulated by Madres, HIJOS, and other social movements on the one hand, and by the *puebladas* in provincial towns in the early 1990’s. It was inspired by the previous struggles of organized labor in its support of Peronism from the 1940’s to the early 1970’s and those of human rights movements during the last authoritarian period, and came to equate the crimes of the military to the pilfering of national resources by Menem and his successors. The major failing of democracy in this view was the willful abandonment of political leaders of their responsibilities towards the people and the country. It was gradually adopted by “dissident” labor organizations (the CTA and the CGT-Moyano), the *piqueteros* in the late 1990’s, and by the “official” CGT and the middle classes during de la Rúa’s administration, and culminated in an outright repudiation of established elites.

The return to power of the PJ, and the support it received for the reunified CGT as well as several *piquetero* groups, however, shows that politics in Argentina continue to be dominated by political leaders and their ability to establish ties with social groups. While it is true that conventional political arrangements make it extremely difficult for outsider actors to gain power through elections at the local, provincial, and national levels (Levitsky and Murillo 2003), no civil society organization or social movement took advantage of the opportunity presented by broad popular discontent to become a political alternative (as has happened in several other countries in Latin America, which can be seen in the following chapters). The

popular uprising in Argentina, then, represented a warning for political leaders on the possible consequences of taking advantage of the citizenry, but also a deeply-rooted belief in the responsibility of leaders to take the people's needs into account.¹²⁵ The dominant themes of the protests through the 1990's up to December 19/20 and beyond were a rejection of political corruption, of violent repression of citizen protest, and of the "selling" of the country to the private sector (particularly foreigners). This does not translate into a vision of participatory democracy, though it reflects a deep ambivalence towards the path that democratic politics have taken in Argentina.

The popular mobilizations in Argetina in 2001 and 2002 offer compelling evidence in support of the main arguments of this dissertation. It is clear, first and foremost, that the "popular upsurges," particularly on and immediately after December 19/20, did in fact represent the formation of a social front emanating from a variety of social organizations, social movements, and ultimately individual citizens that, in O'Donnell and Schmitter's terms, "identified itself as the people." Initially, the opposition was composed of the separate struggles of the "dissident" labor unions and the human rights' organizations that represented a link to the military past during Menem's first administration. They subsequently (and independently from each other) established ties with the emerging unemployed movement. The primary demand of the *piqueteros* was for recognition of their status as unemployed and as victims of the social order. In this sense they found a clear parallel in the experiences of Madres de Palza de Mayo, who alsmot immediuately adopted the issue of unemployment as one of its causes. After 1999 the remainder faction of organized

¹²⁵ This point is made by Isidoro Cherenky (2006), in his analysis of the aftermath of the protest cycle.

labor adopted the language of the *piqueteros* as well, highlighting the injustice inherent in the loss of a way of life that had been the right and privilege of all.

Admittedly, the development of the unified popular opposition in Argentina was tortuous. Certain actors, particularly the CGT, appeared to join in with the rest only when its traditional political partner was out of power, and retreated almost immediately following the return to power of PJ leaders. Among the middle classes there were those who responded positively to the demands of these groups, but public opinion was generally not accepting of the union leadership or of the *piqueteros'* tactics. Most middle-class Argentines appear to have changed their view (if only temporarily) due to the economic situation, the increasing reports of corruption and scandalous behavior of leaders, and the struggle of the employees of *Aerolíneas Argentinas*. Finally, the presence of lootings and other criminal acts, while justified by many participants in the protests as the unavoidable consequences of government policies, puts the capacity of Argentine society to remain “civil” in question. Nevertheless, to ignore the extraordinary alliance of the middle classes with the usually vilified *piqueteros* misses the opportunity to examine the ability of social movements to create dialogue and find agreements with other sectors of civil society.

As is shown in Chapter 3, the apparently spontaneous awakening of the poor residents of provincial towns such as Santiago del Estero and Cutral-Co in the early and mid 1990's – the prelude to the *piquetero* movement – shows striking parallels with that of the urban middle classes half a decade later. In both instances, the driving force was a sense of betrayal, of a government willfully raking steps to disenfranchise the people from what is rightfully theirs. The merging of new and original sources of

protests – *piquetes*, *escraches*, *cacerolazos* – with what is ultimately an attitude prevalent among Argentines – the longing for a golden past that meant a dignified existence for all – is what drove not only the protests of December 19/20, but the high level of collective mobilizations for the better part of 2002.

The events in Argentina present an instance of a popular movement explicitly supportive of an ideal of democracy that rejects a liberal model as insufficient but does not resort to the separation of society from the state (with some exemptions, as has been discussed). Participants in protests and demonstrations demanded accountability on the part of political leaders, and decried the unnecessary use of violence to quell legitimate complaints. Other than from a few isolated, and extremely small, revolutionary left-wing groups, there were no calls for the violent removal of established political institutions. The dominant understanding of democracy among the protests was one that relied on historical precedent: for Costa Rica, the “solidarity” state of the Second Republic; for Argentina, the Peronist promise of plenty and dignity for all and the fight against authoritarianism and state brutality. In contrast to theorists of civil society and social movements, who emphasize “the widening of ‘socio-political citizenship’” and “the transformation by the actors of the cultural field through their search for a collective identity and the affirmation of their difference and specificity” (Escobar and Alvarez 1992b, p. 4), the main goal of these protests was to insure that the democratic promise of a state that exists *for* its people was realized. Whether, as some critics claim, this is an unrealistic (at best) or

dangerous (at worst) attempt to return to the “failed policies of the past,”¹²⁶ it seems nevertheless to be a core element of Argentines’ understanding of democracy.

The Argentine case also shows that social consensus and solidarity among actors within civil society cannot be assumed to exist. Social movements – such as Madres and the *piqueteros* – articulated the language that was adopted by the popular movement as a whole, with the possible of exemption of the middle classes, which experienced their political awakening in the midst of an immediate crisis. This strongly recalls the role played by civil society and social movements elsewhere in the world. As has been pointed out in analyses of previous popular uprisings (see Chapter 1), collective action is maintained not only through particular goals but also through symbols – popular songs, national flags and hymns – and shared values. The presence of active social movements and opportunities for communication among civil society actors permit the formation of such consensus though, seemingly, only in very specific instances and for a short period of time. Solidarity appears to be no match for the difficulties of maintaining collective action, or for the entrenched belief that (rightly or not) politics is the business of political representatives, and that the state is responsible for providing certain good and services, *particularly* in times of hardship.

¹²⁶ The phrase is ubiquitous, see, e.g., Naím (2004).

Chapter 4: Costa Rica's New Critical Juncture

The protests in Costa Rica discussed in this chapter differ from the events in Argentina, and those in the countries analyzed in Chapter 5, in that they did not culminate in the ouster of a democratically-elected president. They are, nevertheless, similar to the Argentine case in that they represented a clear instance of short-lived social opposition not only to the sitting head of state and his party but to the political class in general. As in Argentina, hostility to government economic policy became intertwined with calls for a more representative democracy and against the corruption

of the nation's leaders, expressed in terms of longing for a lost and better past. The similarities between the two cases provide some clues as to the behavior of Latin American civil societies, which are paralleled in many ways in the less "pure" cases seen in other countries in the region.

Despite being the oldest and most stable democratic regime in Latin America, Costa Rica has been plagued by social unrest in response to a decades-long program of economic reform. In March of 2000, the country erupted in a period of nation-wide mobilizations that protested against a government initiative designed to open private participation in the electric and telecommunication industries – managed by the Costa Rican Electric Institute (*Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad* – ICE) – to market competition. The 'Law for the Betterment of Public Services of Electricity and Communication and of State Participation,'¹²⁷ which came to be known as the "Energy Combo," the "Combo ICE," or simply "the Combo,"¹²⁸ was designed to end the fifty-year old monopoly of the ICE over electricity and telecommunications.

Protests against the initiative, led mainly by ICE union members, university student leaders, and political activists, had been taking place for months, growing in intensity as the date of the first of three required votes in the Legislative Assembly, March 20, approached. On March 18, a march of workers and students "expanded like foam in the streets of [Costa Rican capital] San José,"¹²⁹ attracting citizens from all social sectors who responded with anger towards the government and its plans. On

¹²⁷ 'Ley para el Mejoramiento de los Servicios Públicos de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones y de la Participación del Estado.' A full draft of the proposed legislation is available at http://www.nacion.com/In_ee/2000/marzo/20/ultima1.html

¹²⁸ "Combo" refers to "value meals" at fast-food chains, and was colloquially ascribed to the law that combined both electricity and telecommunications.

¹²⁹ "Presión Se Fué a las Calles" in *La Nación*, 18 March 2000

March 20, in a closed session at close to ten in the evening, the first legislative vote approved the initiative after “five years of negotiations, two governments, and four days of marathon meetings.”¹³⁰ Supporters from both major political parties – the National Liberation Party (*Partido Liberación Nacional* – PLN) and the Social Christian Unity Party (*Partido Unidad Social Cristiana*) – PUSC) – and President Miguel Angel Rodríguez applauded the result.

Government officials intended to go ahead with the necessary subsequent votes and to enact the law as soon as it was in the books. Instead, they faced an escalation of social mobilization, so that by March 21 the streets of San Jose were filled by over 100,000 demonstrators, while protests and roadblocks sprang across the country. For the next three weeks the protests continued unabated. Marches, demonstrations, roadblocks, and, in isolated cases, vandalism of public property were reported in over forty points outside the capital. Roads that were forcibly opened to traffic by security personnel of the *Fuerza Pública* were closed again within hours. Important highways were blocked almost every day for two weeks. In some cases clashes between police and protesters led to arrests, injuries, and some even to isolated deaths. Stronger police responses only fueled the popular anger and were countered with bigger and more unruly crowds.

In the end, the government agreed to rescind the initiative in the face of popular opposition. It signed a “patriotic agreement” with leaders of groups involved in the protests designed to formulate possible reforms to the ICE that would be “consistent with the popular will.”¹³¹ This resulted in several months of frenetic

¹³⁰ “Pasó el Plan del ICE” in *La Nación*, 21 March 2000.

¹³¹ “Combo a Comisión Mixta” in *La Nación*, 5 April 2000.

activity by civil society: open debates, round tables, town-hall meetings, and reports prepared by dozens of social groups, including the universities and the Catholic Church. A “Special Mixed Commission of the ICE” (*Comisión Mixta Especial del ICE – CME-ICE*) was created to reshape future national debate on the issue. President Rodríguez acknowledged that the voice of the protesters had to be heard: “if Costa Ricans do not agree with the proposed solution, which I believe is the best, then we have to look for another option.”¹³² This, after long insisting that “the protests do not go beyond the same people that have attended many protests during this and other administrations.”¹³³ On April 17 the law was finally put to rest when the Sala IV (“fourth chamber”) of Costa Rica’s judiciary declared it unconstitutional.

The magnitude, intensity, and duration of the protests, as well as polling data which strongly suggested that they were supported by a majority of the population, led to the conclusion that rejection of the Combo initiative represented “the will of the people.” In its final report, based on careful analysis of the evidence and discussions among its members, the CME-ICE found that the three major causes for the protests were the “high esteem” in which the Costa Rican public held the ICE, both because of its history and because of its excellent service; the mistrust of the population towards politicians exacerbated by the fact that the process of negotiation and ratification of the Combo was done in a secretive manner; and a general dissatisfaction with the political process in general (CME-ICE 2001). The UNIMER research center similarly concluded that “[i]f one adds to the dissatisfaction with the politicians the desire of the population to be taken into account, the feeling of being badly represented, and

¹³² “Rodríguez Solicita Acuerdo sobre ICE” in *La Nación*, December 1, 2000

¹³³ “Rodríguez Defiende Reformas” in *La Nación*, March 26, 2000

distrust over the changes on a beloved institution, the result may be an ample and spontaneous protest capable to shake the country to its core.”¹³⁴ At the center of the debate over the Combo were concerns over possible negative outcomes of the initiative itself, but also the “selling of Costa Rica” to foreigners, and the insensitivity of policymakers in bringing this about. The protest movement revolved around a unified call: “*el ICE no se vende*” (“the ICE is not for sale”), and was held together by universally recognized symbols taken from the country’s past and present.

Although the intense protest period did not culminate in the resignation of president Rodríguez, the events in Costa Rica parallel those in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America in a number of ways. Firstly, and this is the central concern of this dissertation, it involved a multiplicity of groups that acted simultaneously to stand up to the state. Secondly, the rise in popular discontent and eventual mass mobilizations of the citizenry occurred in the midst of a process of “neoliberal” economic restructuring that, though appearing to yield positive results, was not always welcomed by the population at large. Thirdly, though many of the participants in the protests rejected the economic changes outright, the national protest movement did not share an explicitly anti-neoliberal agenda, but a series of complaints regarding the state’s behavior towards its citizenry and towards a historically-important national institution as well as a general sense that Costa Rica was no longer a state based on the principles of solidarity. The commonalities among the widely different groups were often overstated by anti-status quo individuals and groups, who longed for all out revolution. Finally, once the Combo had been removed from the legislative agenda, and despite the fact that most of the grievances that

¹³⁴ “‘Combo’ Detonó la Frustración” in *La Nación*, 25 June 2000

brought Costa Ricans out to the streets in the first place had not been addressed, the movement unraveled very soon after.

Costa Rica differs from most every other Latin American country in that it has been a stable democracy for almost six decades. The abolition of the armed forces in 1949 eliminated the possibility of the type of violent conflicts that prevailed in Latin America throughout the twentieth century. After major upheavals in 1948-1949, change in Costa Rica has been gradual, with constant attempts on the part of the state to find consensus with civil society. Why, then, was there such unexpected anger directed at the government in 2000? The following discussion elucidates the parallel historical development of the state and civil society in Costa Rica from the transition to democracy in 1949 to the present, paying special attention to protest and other contentious events. It becomes clear that the process of economic transformation begun in the early 1980's became intertwined in the debate over the nature of democracy in Costa Rica, leading to the chasm between the political elites and the citizenry that was highlighted during the several weeks of protests in March and April of 2000. At the same time, the behavior of those involved in these events negates the impression that Costa Rican civil society is united in its rejection of either "liberal" democracy or "neoliberal" economics, even if it is keenly aware of their limitations.

Political Transition: The Costa Rican Second Republic (1948-1978)

The basic structure of contemporary Costa Rican democracy was put in place in 1949 by the victors of the Civil War of 1948. In the decades preceding this "critical

junction” in the country’s history,¹³⁵ society was clearly stratified along economic lines and, despite repeated attempts to institute democratic procedures, politics was mainly an elite affair (Lehoucq 1996). It is true that Costa Rica did not have to deal with ethnic divisions during the Colonial period, having been an unimportant colony devoid of natural riches and fairly unpopulated at the time of its discovery by the Spanish (Monge 1966). Moreover, historians have shown that by the beginning of the twentieth century the population tended to prefer consensus and peaceful resolution of differences to conflict (Fischel 1987). Nevertheless, recent scholarly works have rejected the image of Costa Rica as headed inevitably towards democracy (Wilson 1998; Lehoucq and Molina 2002). In fact, the unique path that the country was to take was made possible by the intensification of conflict among political and economic elites, and the subsequent elite agreement on the desirability of procedural democracy.

The catalyst for the initial elite division was Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia. Originally the candidate of the conservative National Republican Party (*Partido Republicano Nacional* – PRN), Calderón sought to establish a separate electoral base among urban workers and rural *campesinos*. Calderón’s Presidency (1940-1944) was notable for a series of progressive and pro-labor reforms, as well as his alliance with important communist figures such as Manuel Mora and progressive Church leaders such as Archbishop Víctor Sanabria. Among the governmental reforms were a new

¹³⁵ I use the phrase “critical juncture” to refer to a break with past a “core narrative of national identity” and the successful creation of a new one by political elites. As will be discussed, the victorious camp following the 1948 war not only was able to reshape political institutions, but justified the new arrangements through an image of “what it means to be” a part of Costa Rica that was used to interpret the past, present, and future. Golob (2003) provides this definition, which is used in similar ways by Collier and Collier (1991) and Thelen (1999), as well as many other scholars.

Labor Code that offered a number of important protections for workers, as did the newly created Social Security Office (*Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social – CCSS*). The Calderón administration put special emphasis on improving public education and the availability of basic services to the population.

As elsewhere in the region, industrialization and economic growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had promoted the growth of the industrial proletariat and its rising importance in both economic and political life. Although Costa Rica remained primarily an agricultural country, organized labor became a major political force in the 1930's and 1940's. The most important labor organization was the Confederation of Costa Rican Workers (*Confederación de Trabajadores de Costa Rica – CTCR*), allied with the Costa Rican Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de Costa Rica – PCCR*). The communist led labor movement engaged in large-scale strike and protest activity against the largest commercial interests in the country, of which the banana-workers' strike in the province of Limón in 1934 was the most significant. Its main rival was the Costa Rican Confederation of Workers Rerum Novarum (*Confederación Costarricense de Trabajadores Rerum Novarum – CCTRN*), created by progressive members of the Catholic Church in an attempt to develop a non-Marxist labor movement (Wilson 1998, p. 68). The rise to power of Calderón heralded the glory days for organized labor, as the CTCR and CCTRN jointly supported his administration.

Yet, Calderón's tenure was also marred by allegations of corruption, which fueled the existing animosity of the traditional economic and political elites. After his

one term in office was over in 1944,¹³⁶ Calderón was replaced by his chosen successor, Teodoro Picado Michalski, amid suspicions of electoral fraud. Picado continued to pursue the policies supported by Calderón and his allies, but after the end of World War II the United States began to actively support the opposition, particularly the leader of the National Liberation Movement (*Movimiento Liberación Nacional* – MLN), José Figueres Ferrer. As the 1947 presidential elections approached, the government faced mass demonstrations of middle- and lower- class Costa Ricans that protested government corruption and the PRN's affiliation with the communists. The PRN candidate, Otilio Ulate Blanco, once again emerged victorious from an election tainted by allegations of fraud, but this time protests engulfed the country. Figueres' arrival to Costa Rica in March of 1948 marked the beginning of the Civil War, from which the MLN emerged victorious. Figueres and Ulate signed a pact in May of 1948 that marked the end of hostilities and officially handed power to a provisional *junta* led by Figueres. The Figueres-Ulate pact would symbolize the agreement among the major political actors in the country over the need to reform the country's political institutions (Wilson 1998).

In a puzzling move, and to the chagrin of his most conservative backers, Figueres chose to retain most of the social reforms created under Calderón and Picado's administrations, and use them as the base of the Costa Rican Second Republic. A 1949 Constitutional Assembly drafted a new constitution which substantially changed the institutional arrangements of national politics. These institutional reforms, along with the abolition of the armed forces in 1949

¹³⁶ Costa Rica's Constitution of 1871 did not allow for presidential reelection, a policy adopted by the 1949 Constitution as well and which remained in the books until 2004.

successfully laid the groundwork for an enduring democratic establishment (Salazar 1988; Lehoucq 1996; Yashar 1997; Wilson 1998; Lehoucq and Molina 2002).

Figueres' clear commitment to democracy was only marred by his staunch anti-communism, which led to the dismantling of the PCCR as well as the CTCR. Marxist activists and intellectuals were forced to go into hiding or exile, and barred from participation in politics for two decades.

As can be seen, the role Calderón played in Costa Rican history provides a parallel of sorts for Perón's in Argentina. Both established bases of support among the urban workers and the poor, and both were opposed by an increasingly broad alliance of traditional economic elites, conservative sectors of the Church, and many in the revolutionary left, whom both men ideologically rejected. The removal by force of these crucial Presidents brought about "critical junctures" in their respective country's histories. But while in Argentina the result was four decades of violence and military interventions, in Costa Rica the elites opted for peace and cooperation. This was partly the result of a tradition of peace and consensus (Monge 1966; Fishel 1987 and 1992), but also of the choices made by the PLN leadership in the midst of a critical juncture. The political institutions established by the 1949 Constitution were integral in protecting the subsequent democratic regime (Lehoucq 1996; Yashar 1997; Wilson 1998). With the exception of the exclusion of the far left until the 1970's, Costa Rican democracy was founded in 1949 on a widely accepted vision of a peaceful and socially conscious republic.

Along with political reform, Figueres and the MLN, renamed National Liberation Party (*Partido Liberación Nacional* – PLN), engineered a program for the

economic development of Costa Rica. The national banks were given the status of Autonomous Institutions, as were those in charge of guaranteeing social welfare, such as the CCSS, the National Insurance Agency, the National Learning Institute, the ICE, and many others. The goal of the “autonomous regime” was to allow for the growth of the administrative and technical power of the state while at the same time avoiding such participation to lead to a dangerous increase in the political authority of the executive power.¹³⁷ Through the 1950’s, the role of organized labor as an effective actor was further reduced by laws that encouraged the formation of “solidarity unions” that did not subscribe to class-based ideology or contentious methods of politics. Most unionized private-sector employees joined to solidarity rather than traditional unions, a trend that continues today. On the other hand, public-sector unions were, and still are, more traditionally class-based. The PLN also instituted a nationwide collective bargaining mechanism that gave unions little role in establishing wages (Wilson 1998, p. 69). The leaders of the CCTRN did not take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen the religious-based labor movement and chose instead to join the PLN (Regidor n.d.).

Over time, the resounding success of the government in achieving industrial development, economic growth, and unprecedented social well-being for most of the population continued to cement the values that were to become ingrained in the nation’s collective psyche. Between 1949 and 1978, Costa Rica enjoyed a largely uninterrupted period of economic growth and social progress. The lack of a military and the extensive social programs of the “golden age” of the 1960’s and 70’s not only

¹³⁷ Rodrigo Facio Brenes, quoted in Aguilar Bulgarelli (1991), p. 167.

placed Costa Rica among industrialized nations in terms of human development¹³⁸ but also contributed to its political stability and to the consolidation of democracy. Political conflict was relatively mild. The PLN held on to power, opposed by a variety of opposition groups that agreed only on their opposition to the hegemonic party. Only in the late 1970's were they able to consolidate into a social-Christian party, the National Unity Party (*Partido Unidad Nacional*), which would later become the Social Christian Unity Party (*Partido Unidad Social Cristiana* – PUSC).

Social opposition to the government was seen in protests against the centralization of water and electric services (which meant rate hikes) in the 1950's, complaints about lack of government-provided housing in the 1960's, and protests regarding public transportation costs in the 1970's (Booth 1998, pp. 117-118). Rural movements that fought for peasant rights also appeared (Edelman 1999). In general, though, protests against the government were concentrated on particular issues, and there was little sign of unified social blocs that opposed the status quo. This is partly due to the aforementioned weakness of the labor movement. Despite the fact that social organizations were encouraged by the government (Booth 1998, p. 95), they have historically not strived towards autonomy (MacDonald 1997). An important exception was the protest movement against a proposed government deal with the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) in 1970. Partly as a matter of national pride and partly out of suspicion of side-deals on the part of policymakers involved, labor unions, university students,¹³⁹ left-wing parties, and numerous other groups

¹³⁸ See, e.g., the Human Development Reports from the United Nations Development Programme - <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/>

¹³⁹ Political activism among university students in this period was quite low, a rarity in Latin America (Wilson 1998, pp. 67-68).

staged a large wave of protests hitherto unseen in Costa Rica, which successfully blocked the deal. The ALCOA victory sparked a short period of unity among diverse groups in the opposition – for instance, the three labor confederations that existed at the time marched together on Labor Day (May 1), 1971 for the first time (Regidor n.d., p. 30).¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Costa Rica would not experience nationwide social protests again until 2000.

The period between 1949 and 1978 was one of relative political stability and economic growth. Costa Rica avoided social ills such as extreme poverty and income inequality, as well as the political violence that prevailed in the region throughout the century, through the primacy of a single political actor. The economic and social advances of the 1960's and 1970's allowed the PLN to solidify its position by creating a national narrative that emphasized peace, social welfare and hard work and connected them with the social-democratic system of the Second Republic (see below). This effort was so successful that, once the political leadership chose to modify its economic policies in the 1980's, it faced increasing social opposition stemming precisely from the values that had served it so well in the previous two decades.

Economic Transition (1979-2000)

The election of the first non-PLN president, Rodrigo Carazo Odio of the PUN in 1978, coincided with the economic crisis that beset it along with the rest of Latin

¹⁴⁰ Even after the CTCR was allowed to reform, labor confederations in Costa Rica have experience a continuous process of competition for adherents, reshuffling, renaming, and so on. See Regidor (n.d.) for an extensive discussion of the different labor organizations that have been crated at one point or another.

America.¹⁴¹ Costa Rica became the first Latin American country to default on its debt obligations in the 1980's and also one of the first in the region to initiate a World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment program (Edelman 1999). At first, executive control over state assets, especially the Autonomous Institutions, gradually increased. Originally, this was intended to tighten control over state expenditures, though during the 1980's and the 1990's successive administrations used it to reorient the economy away from the state-led model toward a more open and liberal one. The entrepreneurial state in Costa Rica was fundamentally reduced and many Autonomous Institutions privatized, though the welfare state remained largely intact.

Although Carazo took the first tentative steps towards structural reform, the economic transition in Costa Rica began in earnest with PLN president Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986), and was continued by the PLN administrations of Oscar Arias Sánchez (1986-1990) and José María Figueres Olsen (1994-1998) and PUSC presidents Rafael Angel Calderón Fournier (1990-1994) and Miguel Angel Rodríguez (1998-2002). Economic reform, then, was undertaken not only by the party that had created the social democratic system in the first place but, perhaps more strikingly, by the sons of its two main architects – José María Figueres (whose father was Figueres Ferrer) and Calderón Fournier (the son of Calderón Guardia). Neither party explicitly advocated outright neoliberal reform, but once in power both continued the process of structural adjustment.

Despite its about-face on economic policy, the PLN continued to enjoy electoral success (Wilson 1998; Stokes 2001). It was able to do so by using

¹⁴¹ See Rovira (1989) and Souma and Vargas (2001) for analyses on the causes of the crisis in Costa Rica.

“strategies that defrayed the direct costs of the economic and social adjustments for voters” and instituting “compensatory policies to protect the lower strata of society” (Wilson 1998, p. 114). The process of economic reform was undertaken slowly (as opposed to the rapid transition that occurred in Argentina under Menem), and governments continually sought input from civil society. The reforms seemed to work as well, bringing back economic growth without markedly reducing poverty or income inequality in the 1980’s and 1990’s.¹⁴² Many reforms met with public approval, such as the privatization of the national banking system in the mid 1990’s, since Costa Ricans were not happy with the service (Wilson 1998, p. 115). Additionally, the government repeatedly established processes of communication with civil society, termed “*concertación*,” to make the process of reform a concerted one between the state and the citizenry. The Arias, Calderón Fournier, Figueres Olsen, and Rodríguez administrations all organized this sort of meetings with social groups to consult on particular reforms (Arias and Jiménez 2005, p. 40).

There were some obstacles to the process, to be sure, mostly in the form of labor strikes against specific measures.¹⁴³ In 1983, a proposed freeze on wage increases during the Monge administration (designed to alleviate the crisis by reducing state expenditures) met with labor strikes that eventually persuaded the government to adopt a wage-indexing policy that would rise in accordance to the prices of basic goods (Wilson 1998, p. 116).¹⁴⁴ Strikes of ICE telephone and electric

¹⁴² Souma and Vargas’ (2001) data persuasively shows that this is the case. On the other hand Altmann (1998) argues the opposite, though her data includes only the 1980’s

¹⁴³ In a comparative study of protests against neoliberal reforms across Latin America in the 1980’s, Walton (2001) shows Costa Rica to have been relatively quiet.

¹⁴⁴ The “*canasta básica*” (“basic basket”) includes products that are deemed necessary for adequate living.

workers in 1988 derailed a program during the Arias administration to sell 60% of the phone company and 40% of the electric company to private corporations. The Calderón Fournier administration also faced strikes and labor protests against budget cuts and proposed dismissals of public employees in 1991. Finally, the Figueres Olsen administration had to deal with a month-long teachers' strike and opposition from ICE employees to an attempt to open the cellular communications market to the Millicom company,¹⁴⁵ both in 1995. In these early instances of popular protest there was a consistent message being expressed: that economic restructuring and the reduction of state resources would eventually lead to the dismantling of the welfare state created in the 1940's and 1950's. The plight of the public-sector workers was but an instance of the calamities that would befall the nation as a whole (Regidor, n.d.).¹⁴⁶ This position, however, would not attract enough support from the citizenry until the protests of 2000.

Overall, and despite some setbacks, the process of economic adjustment continued through the 1990's and beyond. As can be seen, most of the public opposition to reforms came from organized labor unions (with the exception of the 1970 ALCOA protests), and only regarding specific issues. There was not an organized anti-neoliberal movement of any significance in Costa Rica by the turn of the twenty-first century. Yet, the Combo protests in 2000 were not simply the actions of labor unions, but a concerted action on the part of a massive agglomeration of unions, civil society groups, student federations, and political parties. Given that Costa Ricans tend to eschew public expressions of discontent, that the country's

¹⁴⁵ See Monge (2000), p. 289.

¹⁴⁶ My personal experiences, growing up in Costa Rica, confirm this.

democratic institutions are strong and stable, and that there was public support for many of the reforms enacted in the two decades prior to the protests of 2000 (purportedly based on processes of national dialogue), it seems relevant to ask what sparked the popular fury that sent hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets in March and April of that year. A good starting point is the CME-ICE report (2001), which points to public dissatisfaction with the political class in general and the process of ratification of the Combo in particular, as well as the “public affection” for the ICE, as the main causes of the protests.

The Historical Significance of the ICE

Figueres and the other framers of the Costa Rican Second Republic were aware of the importance of ideological support from the public for the future of their political program. The post-civil war political transition was designed to symbolize both a new beginning and a return to the “roots” of the nation. It was essential that the values underlying the new political arrangement be understood as maintaining the core values of the Costa Rican people: peace, hard work, humility, the importance of education, and so on. Thus, for example, on December 1st 1949, a formal ceremony took place in which the keys of the military barracks were symbolically surrendered by the Minister of Public Security to the Minister of Education (Bird 1984). It did not hurt that the social guarantees put in place by Calderón and strengthened by successive PLN governments were seen as based on “Christian principles” rather than on dangerous Communist ideas (Campos Salas 2000).

The *liberacionista* camp put heavy emphasis on the importance of education for the development of Costa Rica’s future (Monge and Rivas 1978). Through the

1950's and 60's, the material construction of the new state was always complemented with patriotic rhetoric that connected the national interest with the national institutions and the political party that claimed to make it all possible. The very name of the PLN – the Party of National Liberation – was deliberately chosen in 1951 to keep in the mind of the electorate the memory of the heroic period of 1948 (Gutierrez 1986). The Autonomous Institutions were given a central place in this process, and the ICE soon became a symbol of the progress brought to every corner of the country. Figueres peppered his widely read popular writings with praise for the national institutions, especially the ICE. Statements such as “the ICE is an admirable institution” or “the ICE represents the ideology of the National Liberation Movement” (Figueres Ferrer 1979) are common. Not only was the ICE responsible for achieving by far the best electric and telephone infrastructure in Central America, but it was ICE employees who brought food and medicine to previously isolated areas of the country (Amador 2002).

In expressing their rejection of the Combo, civil society organizations would emphasize the historical importance of the ICE. The Civic Union of the Northern Zone (*Unión Cívica de la Zona Norte*), for instance, stated in a press communiqué that

The ICE is part of the national patrimony and has been built and developed with the economic resources of all Costa Ricans.[...] Electricity and telecommunications constitute fundamental public services to guarantee a high quality of life for the whole population, for which they should not and cannot be ruled by the laws of the market.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ 24 March 2000.

The National Association of Public and Private Employees (*Asociación Nacional de Empleados Públicos y Privados* – ANEP), one of the most active unions during the Combo protests asks:

What happened to the formerly glorious National Liberation Party, architect of a middle-class society that gave us peace and honor from all over the world? What will they do to show that they will defend the institution that symbolizes the work of Don Pepe Figueres?¹⁴⁸

Opposition to the initiative came to be expressed in the language of the labor unions in the 1990's. The privatization of the ICE indicated a desire on the part of political leaders to eliminate social protections. A public statement from representatives of the areas of San Carlos and Huétar Norte objected to the initiative on the grounds (among others) that:

The opening of the telecommunications and electric markets does not favor the Costa Rican people. The application of market laws in their pure form will not bring economic development for all Costa Ricans. The breaking up of the ICE by this law symbolizes the definitive destruction of the solidarity state that all Costa Ricans have built, and that in recent years has been dismantled, bringing poverty and unhappiness to many Costa Rican families, particularly in the rural areas. We know how to recognize very clearly the difference between democratic decisions and those that are made to satisfy avarice and inequity.¹⁴⁹

Such concordance in language is not coincidental. The ICE unions, in conjunction with ANEP and other public-workers' associations, launched an organized campaign to educate the public about the perils of the Combo. They organized round-table discussions, lectures in university settings, and in many areas were allowed to speak to high school students during class hours (by sympathetic teachers and administrators). University and high school students were particularly receptive to their message. Students from the night school of Santa Clara warned that

¹⁴⁸ "ICE: Hora de Definiciones," press release by ANEP, February 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Letter to the Legislative Assembly, signed by Edgardo Vargas, Francisco Rodríguez Barrientos, Ronny Rodríguez Barquero, Bernal Martínez, Antonio Gadea Baltodano, and Anthony Medina, 3 April 2000.

“if we sell telecommunications today, tomorrow it will be education and other services and benefits that all Costa Ricans enjoy.”¹⁵⁰ The Student Federation of the University of Costa Rica (FEUCR), a key instigator of protests from the very beginning, declared for instance on March 24:

In essence the “living forces of the nation,” this profuse and complex amalgam of sectors, social actors from the civil society, defend one of the public institutions that has contributed the most to the betterment of their living conditions, facilitating the coverage of electricity and communications services.¹⁵¹

In a telling summary of the public sentiment towards the current leadership, Luis Paulino Vargas recognizes the importance of the Golden era in the national memory:

Behind the crisis of legitimacy and credibility in the political system and the democratic institutions of Costa Rica, lies perhaps a problem of the absolute inability, on the part of the current leadership, to interpret the demands and needs of the Costa Rican people and society. There lies the substantive difference between a historical leader like [José] Figueres and these current politicians. In the context of Costa Rica from the forties to the seventies, Don Pepe [Figueres] knew how to read – even intuitively – the soul, still predominantly *campesina*, of this people (Vargas 2000).

The Decline of Public Trust in Politics

Throughout the 1990’s a number of irregularities in the management of public funds came to light through the mainstream media, as well as public office-holders allegedly taking advantage of their positions to benefit their private interests. A major scandal in 1994-1995 led to the closing of the Banco Anglo Costarricense (one of the largest banks in the country) amid corruption charges involving members of the Calderón Fournier and Figueres Olsen administrations. On April 28, 1995, the two men held a closed-door meeting from which they drafted a pact between the

¹⁵⁰ Letter to the Legislative Assembly, 30 March 2000.

¹⁵¹ Comunicado Oficial de la Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Costa Rica – San José, Costa Rica – Tuesday, March 24, 2000 - Translated by the author

government, the PLN and the PUSC. The stated goal of the pact was to “clean up” Costa Rican politics from corruption, but it was taken by many as evidence that both major parties had come to an agreement to “carve up” the country among themselves (Rojas 2003, p. 28).¹⁵²

It was clear by the late 1990's that the Costa Rican population was becoming disillusioned with their leadership. This was most evident in the growing absenteeism of voters in national elections, which had been consistently low from the 1950's until the early 1990's (about 18%) and had risen considerably so that by 1998 it reached 30% (Hernández 2002; Seligson 2002; IIS-UCR 2004; Raventós et al 2005). Though Costa Ricans' support for democracy has never been in doubt, numerous polls showed a considerable decline in public support for and trust in the major parties and political figures. In this political climate, President Rodríguez assumed power following an election with the largest level of absenteeism and the lowest percentage of actual votes for the victor since the 1960's. His attempt to reach out to the public through a program of *Concertación Nacional* was a direct result of the perception that he lacked a clear electoral mandate.

The Shaping of the Combo Initiative

Undeterred by the “Millicom strike” of late 1995, the Figueres Olsen administration endeavored to draft projects designed to “open” the electricity and telecommunications industries to private competition. Initially, the initiative was conceived as three separate proposed bills, which were presented to the Legislative Assembly in August of 1996 (Segura 1999). During the next two years, little progress

¹⁵² Rojas (2003) also notes the irony of the sons of the architects of Costa Rica's welfare state meeting to find the best way to continue the process of dismantling it.

was made in advancing the projects due to major disagreements between members of the PLN and the PUSC. In 1998, newly-elected President Rodríguez and his cabinet made the “modernization” of the ICE a top priority, and hence one of the primary topics of *Concertación Nacional* (PNUD and CONARE 1999). Yet, although *Concertación* proved successful in attracting support for the reform of the national pensions system, the same did not occur with reforms of the ICE (Arias and Jiménez 2005).

The government believed that, through *Concertación* and a campaign to educate the public regarding the details of the electric and telecommunication initiatives (unified in a single bill, the Combo, in December of 1999), it would avoid significant opposition to the initiative. As a result, it persuaded the majority of Legislative Assembly members to “fast track” voting on the initiative (Rodríguez 2000). The first small demonstrations against the Combo took place in the last days of December of that year, and continued through January and February of 2000. Convinced that the protests were simply the work of ICE unions looking to retain their traditional position of power within the institution and of a few “extremists,” the legislature kept the initiative on the fast track. This proved to be a major miscalculation, as ICE workers and, increasingly, university students began not only publicly protesting the Combo but organizing a campaign to “educate the public” regarding its dangers. The more agreement there was between PLN and PUSC legislators, the more effective with the public were the warnings that the two major parties intended to “sell off” the ICE and divide the spoils among themselves. Media reports that President Figueres Olsen had attempted to sell off ICE assets in order to

benefit financial enterprises linked to his family only fueled this sentiment. In a typical statement, the Alajuela Pastoral Community demanded:

Enough lies and tricks, enough false promises. Do not abuse any longer the patience of this people, lover of peace. Enough corruption and stealing with impunity. Enough under-the-table dealings with the patrimony of all the people of Costa Rica. Costa Rica is for its people, not for politicians to divide it like a piñata.¹⁵³

While the Legislative Assembly debated on the Combo behind closed doors, the public opposition maintained that the government intended to leave the ICE at the mercy of foreign interests, which would lead to the weakening of the institution and eventually to privatization of the electric and telecommunications sectors, as well as directly benefit some of the political figures involved in drafting and gathering support for the initiative. Célimo Guido, a Legislative Assembly member from the left wing Democratic Force Party (*Partido Fuerza Democrática* – PFD), accused the Rodríguez administration of nepotism for giving important posts to powerful interests. The relationship of the Combo to economic interests of individual politicians was a constant theme during this period. For instance, ICE sources supplied Guido with information regarding the links between certain politically-influential families and the industry. In the report, dated 1994,¹⁵⁴ family names such as Figueres Olsen, Figueres Boggs, Arias Sánchez, Sánchez Benavides and Sánchez Marín, all part of the traditional economic and political elite were conspicuous. Then president of the Legislative Assembly, and vocal advocate of the Combo, Carlos Vargas Pagán, was linked to at least one project. The Rodríguez administration thoroughly failed in providing an alternative explanation, either because it believed

¹⁵³ Press communiqué, 30 March 2000.

¹⁵⁴ See http://semueve.net/firms.com/doc_combo/combo_millonario.htm

there was tacit support for the initiative or because it counted on most of the public doing nothing about it one way or the other.¹⁵⁵

The Popular Movement against the Combo

The first demonstrations against the Combo were composed of ICE employees, led by unions such as the Union of ICE Employees (*Sindicato de Empleados del ICE –ASEDEICE*) and the Union of ICE Engineers and Professionals (*Sindicato de Ingenieros y Profesionales del ICE – SIICE*), university students, and private citizens from neighborhoods that would be directly affected by changes within the institution (such as Sarapiquí and Perez Zeledón). Formal meetings between ASDEICE representatives and government officials had yielded no results (to no one's surprise, as their positions were diametrically opposed), so by January of 2000 protest marches and street demonstrations were reported almost every week.

As PLN and PUSC officials came ever closer to a final agreement on the initiative, other civil society groups began to make their opposition public. Environmental organizations also made their voices heard at around this time. Members of the Costa Rican Federation for the Conservation of the Environment (*Federación Costarricense por la Conservación de la Ecología – FECON*) and the National Front for Forests (*Frente Nacional por los Bosques*), which represent over thirty environmental groups claimed the law would bring a “degradation of the

¹⁵⁵ Astrid Fischel Volio, Vice-President during the Rodríguez administration, admitted that the government completely failed to recognize the growing anger against the government. She also recognized that the opposition was much more effective than the administration in making its position available to the public (Interview with the author, January 22, 2004). Former economy minister Leonardo Garnier pointed out that “the information in the mainstream media did not allow for the formation of an informed opinion” – “Se Aprobó el Combo ¿Y Ahora Qué?” available at <http://www.leonardogarnier.com/preview/content/view/328/49/>

environment” and called for all ecology-minded citizens to join the fight against it.¹⁵⁶

Labor unions not affiliated with the ICE began to express solidarity with the institution’s employees. On January 27 of 2000, a National Civic Front (*Frente Cívico Nacional* – FCN) was formed with the express goal of keeping the Combo from being passed into law. At its head was former President Carazo (who could legitimately claim to be the last head of the executive of the old social democratic Costa Rica), joined by the CTCRN, and several other unions and civil society groups opposed to the Combo or to privatization of state industries in general. Protests actions remained small but constant through the end of February.

On March 13, the ICE unions called for an indefinite strike, and were joined the next day by ANEP, a large and traditionally activist union. This seems to be the beginning of a second stage of the protest period, as university student federations began to join in the protests. A separate protest of farmers of the National Union of Medium and Small Farmers (*Unión Nacional de Pequeños y Medianos Productores Agropecuarios* – UPANACIONAL) and other groups raised roadblocks in the Ochomogo area (province of Cartago) on March 16, originally demanding a raise in tariffs of potato and onion imports, opted to demand the removal of the Combo initiative as well.¹⁵⁷ The leadership of UPANACIONAL knowingly put the principal interest of the *campesinos* aside for a while in order to support the fight against the Combo: “We are sure that this proposal will only benefit a few, with resources that

¹⁵⁶ “Tema Ambiental Enciende Pugna” in *La Nación*, 26 January 2000. In a press release (21 March 2000), FECON clarified that it opposed the Combo both for its possible environmental effects but also because “at every moment a national debate or referendum, so that the whole population can express itself on the Energy Combo has been avoided by the administration.”

¹⁵⁷ The adoption of the rejection of the initiative on the part of the farmers took place in a matter of 24 hours. See the different lists of demands outlined in “Difícil Acuerdo entre Gobierno y el Agro” in *La Nación*, 17 March 2000 and “Bloqueos y Protestas” in *La Nación*, 18 March 2000. See also “Se Caldea Ambiente Social. ‘Combo’ Revive” in *Semanario Universidad*, 24 March 2000.

belong to all of us. [...] We wish to tell those who are fighting to count on our unconditional support.”¹⁵⁸ Whether they did so based on strategic thinking (they expected help in future struggles against the government) or out of a sense of solidarity, the opposition movement was bolstered all of a sudden by a combative and well organized social sector that had its own scores to settle with the government.

Over the next week, dozens of protest marches would take place, as well as a growing number of roadblocks in diverse parts of the country (at least 20 separate roads were blocked on March 17, for example). Among the groups that joined the actions were taxi and truck drivers’ unions in the province of Alajuela, dock workers in the province of Limón, high school and university students, teachers, and administrators, feminist movements, and a growing number of unions. Héctor Monestel, head of the Union of University Employees (*Sindicato de Empleados Universitarios – SINDEU*) expressed the general sentiment of the protesters: “It is time to put a stop to this criminal government and to the country-sellers (*vendepatrias*) in the Assembly.”¹⁵⁹

Despite some instances of petty crime and vandalism related to protests, the government did not respond with force, ordering police forces to open blocked highways but not to disband peaceful marches. However, the Legislative Assembly announced on March 18 that discussions on the Combo would be held behind closed doors due to protests in front of the Legislative building, including acts of vandalism. With the vote scheduled for March 20, a large march of unions and students headed to the Assembly building and was met with police barricades. Several public-sector

¹⁵⁸ Letter to Carlos Vargas Pagán, president of the Legislative Assembly, 20 March 2000.

¹⁵⁹ “Presión contra el Combo ICE” in *La Nación*, 17 March 2000.

unions announced strikes beginning on that day and the two of the largest public universities – the University of Costa Rica (*Universidad de Costa Rica* – UCR) and the Technical Institute of Costa Rica (*Instituto Técnico de Costa Rica* – ITCR) announced that classes would be cancelled for the coming days. That night, the initiative was approved in the first of three required votes, with a comfortable majority of forty five votes in favor to ten against. Though the major media outlets proclaimed it a victory,¹⁶⁰ the public response was immediate and unexpectedly strong.

Marches and demonstrations engulfed the country. Over thirty five roadblocks were reported on March 21 alone, and the intensity of the protests only grew in the following days. Over the next three weeks, more than two hundred organizations expressed their disapproval of the Combo and participated in protests of one form or another. High-school teachers and administrators marched along with students, some of which set of roadblocks in front of their schools, in busy intersections, or in front of government offices. Local media outlets, such as *Radio Sinaí* and *Radio Cultura* supplied venues for discussing the issues and communicated future meeting points for demonstrations.

It is clear that there was some communication among groups, and that the public-sector unions along with the university student federations were instrumental in these interactions. A report by the FEUCR communication commission points to the importance of contacts with “ICE unions, research committees in the UCR, some

¹⁶⁰ The editors of *La Nación*, for instance, lauded “the effort of the two majority parties to overcome the demagogues and push forward a modification of the corporate structure of the ICE.[...] It is a step forward. The government and the Congress have shown the way by negotiating in good conscience the way to get there. The silent majority in Costa Rica recognizes – and longs for –such leadership.” – “El País Ganará” in *La Nación*, 22 March 2000.

political parties and NGO's."¹⁶¹ Albino Vargas, secretary general of ANEP, refused to outline for the media the specific organization, but stated that:

We have developed a structure to guarantee fluid and efficient communications. We coordinate with the links of various groups, and each one knows who to address, but we respect the autonomy of the popular protests.¹⁶²

At the same time, most of the demonstrations were the work of individual organizations. Even though most of them had the same purpose, in most cases (over 80%) there was no explicit or "official" connection between groups (Mora 2004, pp, 5-6). UCR researcher Sindy Mora points out that although alliances in instances of collective action tend to be "unregistered," the best indicator is usually joint participation in an action, which was not prevalent either (Mora 2004, p. 5). This suggests that beyond a common target and shared symbols, the level of direct communication among the various civil society organizations was relatively weak.¹⁶³

The police's use of tear gas to disperse the protests (first reported on March 21¹⁶⁴) only fueled popular anger and, as the days passed, the crowds grew bigger. Church organizations and, most prominently, UCR Chancellor Gabriel Macaya denounced the forceful official response to the protests. There were several accounts of "private citizens" or "neighbors" joining the protests spontaneously. Though there is no systematic data on how many "unaffiliated" individuals participated in the protests, and though government officials insisted on dismissing the protests as the

¹⁶¹ Distributed by email and photocopies on 15 May 2000.

¹⁶² "Comando Atiende Crisis" in *La Nación*, 22 March 2000.

¹⁶³ Some groups, such as the "alternative front" of the National Front for Struggle (*Frente Nacional de Lucha*) and the University Action Front (*Frente de Acción Universitario*) attempted to organize a "General Meeting of Organizations" so as to "elect a national coordinating body and build a united front that will allow for the organization and strengthening of the movement based on a single battle plan" (from a flier distributed by the organizations). Such a move towards unified organization never took place.

¹⁶⁴ "Surgen Choques en Protestas" in *La Nación*, 22 March 2001.

work of “the usual suspects,” it is clear that public opinion stood overwhelmingly against the Combo. A survey made public on March 28 of that year calculated that 12.4% of respondents had actively taken part in some form of protest action, and almost 70% supported them.¹⁶⁵ A Cid-Gallup poll likewise found that opponents of the initiative outnumbered supporters by three to one,¹⁶⁶ and a number of polls taken in the following months confirmed these results (PENDHS 2001 and 2002).

As has been mentioned, the fact that the Rodríguez government eventually chose to remove the initiative “pending further national dialogue” was in itself not unusual, as previous administrations had done the same in light of more limited protests. The central question here is why the proposed privatization of the electric and communication industries provoked such a unified response on the part of Costa Rican civil society. Other than small entrepreneurial organizations and Chambers of Commerce, which supported the initiative as part of their vision of a Costa Rican economy integrated to the global market,¹⁶⁷ government officials, scholars and mainstream media accounts all agreed that the public overwhelmingly rejected the Combo. The large set of organizations that made their presence known included many that had explicitly opposed neoliberal reform for years prior – political parties such as PFD and the Workers’ Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores*), labor unions, and civil society groups opposed to privatizations and free-trade agreements – but also a large number that had not – environmental,

¹⁶⁵ Telephonic survey on “Costa Rican public opinion regarding the Combo ICE,” conducted on March 24 and 25 by the Institute of Social Research and the Institute of Psychological Research, UCR.

¹⁶⁶ “Piden Posponer Instauración” in *La Nación*, 13 April 2000

¹⁶⁷ These include the Costa Rican Union of Private Enterprise Chambers and Associations (*Unión Costarricense de Cámaras y Asociaciones de la Empresa Privada*), the Chamber of Costa Rica-North America Commerce (*Cámara de Comercio Costarricense-Norteamericana*) and the Promoter of External Commerce (*Promotora de Comercio Exterior*).

feminist, ecumenical, and advocacy groups, university and high school students, and organizations targeting corruption and looking for transparency and accountability.

Although the focus of the fight was a proposed economic policy, to a large extent the language used by protest leaders and organizations emphasized the disillusionment of the population, the symbolic importance of the ICE as a “national institution,” and the fact that the negotiations involving the Combo “*olían a chorizo*” (smelled like corrupt dealings). Most organizations expressed themselves publicly using such language. Though some presented alternative plans to modernize and transform the ICE, they did not expect these to have an effect on popular mobilizations. The most popular signs and songs seen and heard during the demonstrations read: “*El ICE es nuestro*” (“the ICE is ours”) or “*el ICE no se vende*” (“the ICE is not for sale”), as well as many unprintable popular expressions about the politicians involved. The “theme” of the marches reflected more a concern about the institution than a sense that there was any chance to change national politics. Researchers noted the constant use of patriotic songs and symbols, “pointing to the importance that the historically-created institutionalization in the definition of cultural entities has on the identities of Costa Rican culture” (Garita 2001, p. 71). The national anthem as well as well-known patriotic and popular songs often accompanied the marches and gatherings.

Regarding the spontaneous joining of unaffiliated individuals to the marches, some government officials and academics suggest that after the first, smaller wave of protests, media reports of police brutality against protesters – and especially their very public denunciation by Macaya – only served to fan the flames of anger among

the public. One poll reports that almost 75% of Costa Ricans believed the police's use of force as excessive (PIEOP 2000). The media may have also impacted the national mood with reports on the occurrence of anti-government protests during the same period in other Latin American countries (Ecuador's in January, for example), which could have helped the option of protesting become more legitimate in the eyes of Costa Ricans, and of laws similar to the Combo being passed in other Central American countries, contributing to the feeling that the ICE would be handed over to foreign hands. The growing mistrust in politicians, reflected in declining electoral participation and exacerbated by corruption scandals, lead the population to suspect a priori any action of politicians, based on their past behavior, to be mainly designed to benefit the rich and powerful few.¹⁶⁸

As is clear by the declarations of organized groups as well as the slogans and chants of the massive demonstrations, the government "attack on the ICE" was seen as a betrayal of the principles that all Costa Rican's had been taught in school – the legacy of an education system created and supported by the founding members of the PLN. At the same time, to claim that this was enough to mobilize the population at large would be an overstatement. As has been pointed out, government initiatives to privatize the banks and the national pensions system did not meet with broad opposition, highlighting both the symbolic importance of the ICE and the miscalculations of the Rodríguez administration in "selling" the Combo to the public. At issue here is not an attempt to establish causal mechanisms for the outbreak of

¹⁶⁸ This point was brought up by a number of Costa Rican scholars, such as sociologist José Alberto Rodríguez, statistician Carlos Paniagua, political scientist Rodolfo Cerdas, and economists Ottón Solís, in interviews in *La Nación*.

protests, but to emphasize the way in which specific government actions were framed by organized civil society entities in order to attract popular support.

The protection of the ICE in 2000 became the universal demand – the “empty signifier,” as Laclau (2005) puts it – that came to encompass all the different groups in Costa Rican civil society. This is shown, for instance, by the decision of an important feminist organization, Women for Democracy (*Mujeres por la Democracia*), to change its name to Women against the Combo (*Mujeres contra el Combo*). The fight against the initiative was seen as one that concerned “the people” as a whole, even those that had more pressing concerns (such as the farmers) or those that would not necessarily be adversely affected by privatization. As is seen with the addition of the CGT to the protest movement in Argentina after the election of de la Rúa to the presidency, some groups may have chosen to participate in the protests in the hopes that their interests, though not directly at issue, would come to be in the future. Nevertheless, even if this strategic mindset was prevalent, the adoption of the language and goals of the larger movement allowed for the impact of the national popular uprising.

Demobilization

Following the removal of the initiative from the public agenda – first, by the government’s admission that the public was against it and later by its being declared unconstitutional by the judiciary – the government endeavored to open a dialogue between the state and civil society. The catalyst for this process was indubitably the CME-ICE, composed of members of the PLN, PUSC, and PFD, as well as representatives from student, Church, and other civil society organizations. The

commission organized a number of debates and round tables to acquire feedback from civil society and the population at large, and came up with a long list of suggestions for reforming the ICE while essentially maintaining its monopoly on electricity and communications and its status as a publicly-owned autonomous institution. It is notable that Costa Ricans generally supported the creation of the CME-ICE, but had no illusions that it would solve the debate, or even that it represented a change in attitude on the part of the government.¹⁶⁹

The future of the ICE remains uncertain. During 2002 and 2003, international pressures to go ahead with privatization, principally from the United States, in relation to the Central American Free-Trade Agreement (CAFTA), forced the issue to return to the public agenda. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick warned the government that Costa Rica would be left out of CAFTA if it did not open the telecommunications industry to private competition.¹⁷⁰ In 2005, Costa Rica became a signatory of CAFTA, which prompted some protests from the “usual suspects” but nothing approaching the intensity or magnitude of 2000.¹⁷¹ Having learned from its failed attempts, the administration of President Abel Pacheco (Rodríguez’s successor), with the support of the leadership of the PLN and private industry organizations, launched an extended campaign promoting CAFTA as beneficial for

¹⁶⁹ 59% of respondents in the UNIMER poll of June 2000 believed that the creation of the commission was mainly “a way to stop the protests” rather than “an appropriate way to attend to the demands of protesters” - “‘Combo’ Detonó la Frustración” in *La Nación*, 25 June 2000.

¹⁷⁰ *La Nación*, August 1, 2003

¹⁷¹ The FCN, an umbrella of organizations opposed to the Combo and to privatizations, argued in a letter to George W. Bush that “we do not understand why your government attempts to impose on us a free trade agreement, which destroys our development model, the basis of our national culture and democratic institutions” – “Al Presidente de los Estados Unidos de América, De Las Organizaciones Agrupadas En El Movimiento Cívico Nacional y en la Plataforma Sindical Común Centroamericana (PSSC-COSTA RICA), sobre el Denominado Tratado de ‘Libre’ Comercio (TLC),” 17 February 2005 - <http://anep.or.cr/Tlc%20con%20EE%20UU/cartabush.html>

the Costa Rican people. It is quite likely that an altered version of the Combo will return to the legislature for debate, and it is not at all clear that the popular response will resemble the one discussed here.

After April 2000 the popular movement was greatly reduced. The organizations at the center of the protests continued to organize public actions, some quite large, but lacking the impact of the Combo protests. Research has shown that communication among civil society organizations is better, and attribute it to the strong ties developed during their shared experience in 2000 (Franceschi 2002, p. 16; 2003, p. 24). Several groups that were active in 2000, after the relatively quiet years of 2001 and 2002,¹⁷² intensified collective actions with negotiations and the impending signing of CAFTA in 2003 and 2004. Among these were public-sector workers (ANEP, SINDEU, the ICE unions), agricultural unions (UPANACIONAL and others) and neighborhood associations. By contrast, university students, environmental organizations, and retired workers, all visible actors in 2000, did not (Mora 2004).¹⁷³ The impending signing of CAFTA once again provoked resistance from civil society, but circumstances favorable to a nation-wide movement were absent.¹⁷⁴ The demands of protests in 2003 and 2004 were a lot more varied and overlapped much less than in 2000 (Mora 2004, p. 9). While in the earlier year over

¹⁷² In 2002 there was a period of active protests and roadblocks by agrarian workers who owned machinery, truck drivers, and certain community organizations against a deal between the government and the Spanish company RITEVE regarding inspections of vehicles (Franceschi 2003, p. 9).

¹⁷³ Mora (2004) also notes that about 26% of the protests in 2000 were the work of “non-registered or “unidentified groups,” and these have not reappeared in later years (p. 4).

¹⁷⁴ A Cid-Gallup poll conducted in July 2000 found that the only measurable impacts of the Combo protests were the low approval ratings of President Rodríguez, the Legislative Assembly, and other governmental institutions. Respondents had high assessments of other political figures indirectly involved, such as former President Arias and PUSC political hopeful Abel Pacheco. Though 45% stated that they would consider voting for a “minority” party, only 11% said they were “very interested” in political matters. See, Cid Gallup (2000).

60% of all protests were directed at the government, the targets of protesters were subsequently much more diverse as well (Mora 2004, p. 14). Moreover, many organizations fell victim to internal leadership struggles (most notably, the PFD), and quickly lost the “political capital” they had accumulated during the 2000 protests.

Although still very much unresolved, the national dispute over the Combo has, by all accounts, deeply affected Costa Rican politics. The political leadership has become more careful in its dealings with the public, and calls for national unity and dialogue are part and parcel of political rhetoric. For the first time in decades, a strong third party, the Citizen Action Party (*Partido Acción Ciudadana* – PAC) led by former PLN member and Combo-opponent Ottón Solís,¹⁷⁵ presented a serious challenge to the two dominant powers in the 2002 elections, capturing a respectable portion of legislative seats and forcing an unprecedented runoff round in the presidential race. The 2002 victor, PUSC candidate Abel Pacheco, a popular former television personality, saw his popularity plummet once in power. In October 2004, only weeks after former President Rodríguez was voted as head of the Organization of American States (OAS), he was forced to resign his post and return to Costa Rica to face corruption charges. Former Presidents Calderón Fournier and Figueres Olsen were also indicted, the latter choosing to remain outside of Costa Rica (see Lehoucq 2005). The attorney general, Francisco Dall’Anesse, was praised by political figures

¹⁷⁵ The PAC was officially founded in December 2000 with the motto “we, the people, decided to change” – see “Partido Acción Ciudadana – Visión, Misión y Valores” available at http://www.pac.or.cr/sitio1/paginas/docs_PAC/Vision_Mision_Valores.pdf

and the general public for helping restore the trust of Costa Ricans in their justice system.¹⁷⁶

To remind the political class that the “voice of the people” was not completely silent, the four major national universities organized a March against Corruption on October 11, 2004. They received the support of the FCN, the unions, and the NGO’s, and the march was attended by tens of thousands of people. President Pacheco, who had benefited in the polls following the Combo protests, attempted to join the marching crowds but was booed and heckled until he was forced to leave. “The people’s reaction is incredible,” was the only available quote from the President.¹⁷⁷

In the February 2006 elections, former President Oscar Arias (one of the architects of the neoliberal turn and the current leader of the PLN) was allowed to run for a second term in office after a Constitutional amendment. His victory seemed assured, but PAC candidate Solís took advantage of Pacheco’s dismal approval ratings at the end of his tenure and of Arias’ support for CAFTA to provoke a virtual tie in the Presidential race. Although Arias ultimately emerged victorious, the PUSC was badly damaged, making the PAC (a party that grew out of the Combo events) the second strongest force in Costa Rican politics.

Conclusions – Civil Society and the State in Costa Rica

The historical development of civil society in Costa Rica through the twentieth century parallels that of Argentina in some respects. In the early part of the century, Calderón Guardia became the center of political conflict, establishing strong ties with organized labor and other sectors of society but strongly opposed by established

¹⁷⁶ “Políticos y Ciudadanos Manifiestan Confinaza en la Justicia tras Arresto de Expresidentes Calderón y Rodríguez” in *La Nación*, 23 October 2004.

¹⁷⁷ “Miles Marcharon contra Corrupción y Abuchearon a Pacheco” in *La Nación*, 12 October 2004.

elites. Once Calderón's party was removed from power, Figueres and the PLN retained many aspects of his socio-economic reform program and successfully created a new "core national narrative" that attained hegemonic status in Costa Rica. Thus, while Argentina continued to suffer the consequences of the conflict between Perón and his enemies, Figueres was able to secure support from organized labor and most important civil society actors through co-optation and a proven record of success in terms of economic growth and social development. The decision to turn to neoliberal economic policies, as in Argentina, meant not the rise of new political elites but the continued dominance of the major political forces. In both countries, the direction the country was to take on economic policy came to conflict with the core narrative that had been present in the country for so long, and this was instrumental in the ability of a variety of civil society groups to see themselves as being engaged in essentially the same fight.

The popular movement of resistance against the state in 2000 arose out of the multiplicity of groups within civil society finding a common demand – the removal of the Combo initiative – and acting in concert for a relatively short period of time. In contrast to Argentina, where "*que se vayan todos*" was more an expression of frustration than a specific demand, victory for the Costa Rican mobilizations was embodied in a clear objective. Yet, a number of other grievances brought these groups together: public anger at the political class, the perception of corrupt dealings underlying the Combo negotiations, the government's ignoring of public opinion, the symbolic significance of the ICE as the representative of a welfare state based on solidarity, and the purported "selling" of the nation to the highest bidder. The glue

that held the popular coalition together was not a vision of radical democracy or an outright rejection of neoliberal policy – though several of organizations espouse the latter and a few the former – but a combination of concerns over an uncertain economic future, disillusionment with the political system, and a nostalgic recollection of the country’s “golden age.”

The process of growth of the movement fits the general features seen in the Argentina case as well. A core of established organizations, mostly labor unions and left-wing parties, engaged in a prolonged struggle against the economic adjustment program, decided to concentrate their efforts on opposing the Combo. Joined by university student federations, which proved extremely receptive to the message that the ICE should be protected, they initiated a cycle of protests against the initiative. They were subsequently joined by other active organizations that abandoned their primary demands in favor of the immediate goal of defeating the Combo, a large number of other civil society groups (additional unions, NGO’s, feminist and environmental organizations, and so forth), and eventually by an important portion of the public at large. This heterogeneous set of groups from Costa Rican civil society never formed an institutionalized social movement, but over the course of several weeks acted together in pursuit of a common aim. Once the battle was won, however, it was followed by a rapid demobilization on the part of the great majority of participants, who either abandoned collective struggle altogether or directed it towards support of an emerging electoral alternative.

The long-maintained claim of the state workers' unions – that the wave of privatizations and structural transformations of the economy would mean the end of the national welfare system – finally found receptive ears among a population enraged by political corruption and secrecy, and disenchanted with the political system. In a duel of conflicting messages the political leadership was defeated; partially due to lack of effort in presenting a case which it assumed tacit consent for, but also to the energetic and committed actions of their opponents. By early April, hundreds of columns of university and high school students and teachers would join large marches of workers and political activists, while across the country roads were blocked and commerce paralyzed. Again, the call was for leaders to respect the true meaning of democracy, understood as the basis of the “solidary” state, and not as the retreat of the state from social and economic affairs. Discussions of the impossibility of creating real change in a state-centered society (central to some *piqueteros* and *asambleas* in Argentina, as well as to a number of theorists) were limited in Costa Rica to academic circles, fringe organizations, and internet forums.

Yet, as in Argentina, the energy required to form a popular front of opposition reliant on active participation of the citizenry at large proved to dissipate quickly. Some conditions that favored the return to normalcy were the widely praised criminal investigations against former presidents involved in corrupt dealings, as well as government attempts to clearly communicate its position regarding CAFTA to the citizenry and to allow for more open debates on the issue, which suggest an understanding of the need for more transparency. The surprisingly strong showing of Otton Solís in the last presidential elections suggests the possibility of breaking a

monopoly on political power, which should be taken as a good sign for Costa Rican democracy, but which also helps defuse the notion that non-institutional action is either urgent or necessary.

The strong presence of protest and other forms of collective protest in Costa Rica since 2000, however, seems to indicate that while such protest movements are hard to maintain, they may arise again in the future. As Albert Hirschman (1988) has pointed out, citizens are more likely to participate in collective action if they have done so in the past (p. 8). The national governments in both Argentina and Costa Rica seem aware that, as surprising as they were, the fact that popular movements of the magnitude seen in recent years arose in their countries probably means that they could again. The potential for such responses represents an insurance policy of sorts in case of serious breaches of legitimacy or accountability, which are so fundamental for democratic governance. December 19/20 and the Combo protests, like other historical examples of popular rebellion, are in the process of taking their place in the continuing narrative of their respective countries. Whether they will be the first of many instances of conflict between states and societies in the coming years, as they have been in the cases discussed in the next chapter, remains to be seen.

Chapter 5: Fragile Democracy in the Andes

Hirschman's (1988) observation that previous participation in collective action is an important contributor to mass mobilization is demonstrated clearly in the Andean nations of Ecuador and Bolivia, which have experienced a series of popular insurrections over the past decade. In contrast to Argentina or Costa Rica, which have historically enjoyed the presence of large middle-classes and a lack of ethno-cultural conflicts, both of these countries are characterized by the presence of large indigenous populations (a majority in Bolivia), intense distrust among different geographic regions, and military conflicts with their neighbors. Predictably, the common ills of Latin American politics – corruption, an unwillingness of elites to open up politics to new actors, lack of legitimacy, and general discontent with the political system – are also very much present.

Although their historical development, as well as the current social and political conditions in Bolivia and Ecuador are so at variance with the Argentine and Costa Rican cases, it seems appropriate to include them in this study. Its primary goal is not to find direct parallels between the cases or the formation of their respective popular movements, but to examine a fundamental aspect of the relationship between a mobilized civil society and the state. While some of the main actors in the present two cases are concerned with cultural, as well as socio-economic and political, issues, they also engaged in processes of framing or articulation of demands and grievances that would elicit a response from the population at large. In doing so, they tapped into conceptions of democracy, social welfare, and national purpose that cannot be

reduced to reactionary attempts to return to a pre-modern existence. What is more, the fact that some similarities do exist in the ways in which the general popular dissatisfaction with the state and political leaders between Bolivia and Ecuador, on the one hand, and Argentina and Costa Rica reveals some important aspects of contemporary politics in Latin America as a whole.

Even more so than in Argentina, the economic transitions towards neoliberal economic models were intimately linked to the advent of democracy in the 1980's in both Andean nations. As a result, socio-economic grievances have not been wholly separate from debates about the nature of democracy, particularly following the appearance of indigenous and peasant social movements that highlighted the plights of those excluded by traditional political and economic arrangements. Military governments, in fact, have often seemed more concerned for the broad promotion of social welfare than democratic ones in both Ecuador and Bolivia, placing support for democracy in these two nations among the lowest in the region (Latinobarómetro 2005). Comprehensive welfare states such as Costa Rica's were also never assembled, leaving a large portion of the population (particularly Indians) with little assistance from the state. There is seemingly less reason to expect the type of generalized nostalgia for the past that was evident in protests in Argentina and Costa Rica, particularly among peasant and indigenous movements. Yet, as studies of indigenous movements have shown, this tendency to look back is evident in them as well.

The process of formation and growth of the indigenous movement in Ecuador and Bolivia before 1990 is complex and cannot be discussed at length here. Some of

the main driving forces behind it were the economic crisis of the 1980's, the rise of indigenous candidates to local positions of power, and the switch of the political discourse of popular leaders from class-based Marxism to ethnic-centered calls for restitution and inclusion (Beck and Mijeski 2001; Ospina 2000, pp. 132-133; Zamosc 1994). Deborah Yashar (2005) argues that these movements were mobilized as a response to changes in "citizen regimes." Instead of looking at the changes of the early 1980's as purely economic, she refers to "corporatist citizen regimes" and "neoliberal citizen regimes." While the former allowed for relatively autonomous indigenous spaces, the latter denied them and hence provide the motive for mobilization. The creation of community networks and the opening of political spaces due to the transitions to democracy provided the means and opportunity (see esp. Ch. 2, pp. 59-60). This argument supports the idea that indigenous groups shared with many others during broad civil society mobilizations certain "nostalgia" for the corporatist past.

Given the success of these movements in extracting concessions from local and national governments – considerably more than Madres or the *piqueteros* in Argentina, for example – and the visibility of "Indian faces in media depictions" of protests in Bolivia and Ecuador (Postero 2004) it is commonly assumed that the repeated confrontations between civil society and the state signal primarily a rift among competing ethnic groups. This, as is seen below, is not the case. The popular uprisings against a series of presidents in Ecuador and Bolivia have encompassed the type of cross-class and cross-groups alliances seen in the previous cases. In examining how the identities of different groups come to be absorbed into national

movements it is possible to identify processes similar to those seen in Argentina and Costa Rica. While many groups formed from the grass-roots take leading roles in mass mobilizations, their demands for recognition of specific cultural rights take a back seat to concerns about national sovereignty and states “selling” important resources to foreign interests. The paradoxical goals of encouraging pluralistic civil societies and unifying to confront the state are highlighted in these expressions of national unity. Despite very different historical contexts and paths of development, the protest cycles in Ecuador and Bolivia provide an opportunity to expand the inquiry of the relationship between civil societies and states in contemporary Latin America.

Ecuador: Democracy in the ‘Post-Liberal’ Age

Unlike the authoritarian regimes in countries like Argentina and Chile, the military government that ruled Ecuador between 1972 and 1979 designed an economic plan of domestic industrialization, land reform, and subsidies for the urban poor based on the profits brought by the country’s oil exports. It was also much less repressive in its dealings with political opposition than its counterparts in other countries and less resistant to democratic change. Immediately after the transition to democratic rule in 1979 (the first “third-wave” transition in South America), the country’s leaders attempted to expand this economic program, but were hit hard by the end of the oil boom and the debt crisis. In 1982 Ecuador signed its first preliminary agreement with the IMF, the beginning of a long process towards liberalization that would be slowed by instability in both institutional and non-institutional politics. Electoral competition would be dominated by four political

parties: Popular Democracy (*Democracia Popular* – DP), Democratic Left (*Izquierda Democrática* – ID), Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristiano* – PSC) and Ecuadorian Roldocist Party (*Partido Roldocista Ecuatoriano* – PRE). None of these four is strongly institutionalized (Peeler 2004, p. 82), and they reflect historical regional animosities in Ecuador, as the first two are supported mostly in the capital of Quito and the second in the coastal city of Guayaquil (the country's largest). As will be seen below, the unstable political climate would prove fertile for the growth of strong grass-roots social movements.

As elsewhere in Latin America, economic instability provoked popular anger and protests during the 1980's (Walton 2001). But in 1990 the confrontations between society and the state shifted dramatically, with the abrupt entrance to the political arena of indigenous social movements. In what came to be known as the Inti Raymi uprising, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* – CONAIE) adopted the mantle of leadership of many of Ecuador's indigenous communities¹⁷⁸ and led marches of thousands of indigenous Ecuadorians to Quito demanding land for their communities as well as cultural and citizenship rights that, they felt, had never been truly available in a purportedly *mestizo* country (Lucero 2001, Zibeche 2004; Yashar 2005). Their demands were explicitly articulated in a list of "16 points" which, as Yashar (2005) notes, included ethnic, citizenship, and class (or economic) issues:

In Ecuador, the "problem of the Indian" is not simply pedagogical, ecclesiastical or administrative, as the dominant sectors would have it: it is fundamentally an

¹⁷⁸ CONAIE was created in 1986 with the merging of the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana* – CONFENIAE) and Ecuador Runacunapac Riccharimui (ECUARUNARI).

economic, socio-political, and ethno-cultural problem; it is a national problem that can only be solved with the participation of society as a whole.¹⁷⁹

A second mobilization was launched to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival to the Americas, in 1992, and a third took place in June of 1994, prompted by government attempts to introduce a new agrarian law. In the latter event, CONAIE called for the formation of an Agrarian Front (*Coordiadora Agraria*) along with two other major ethnic organizations, the National Federation of Farmer, Indigenous, and Black Organizations (*Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras* – FENOCIN) and the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indians (*Federación Ecuatoriana de Indígenas Evangélicos* – FEINE). The movements proved well-organized, capable of mobilizing large numbers of people, and showed a clear political program, and in all three occasions successfully pressured the national government to negotiate compromises. Not only were they able to force the government to rescind the proposed law in 1994, they were intimately involved in the drafting of its alternative (Ospina 2000, p. 136; Yashar 2005, pp. 147-148).¹⁸⁰

Almost from the start, therefore, indigenous organizations proved capable of working together in the pursuit of common goals. In this early period, they already opposed economic liberalization, but concentrated on policy issues regarding Indian ownership of land, political representation, and respect for traditional cultural practices, despite the fact that the movements represented different religious

¹⁷⁹ “Proyecto Político de la Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE)” – available at <http://www.llacta.org/organiz/coms/com862.htm>

¹⁸⁰ The government, in an apparent attempt to break the coalition, directed its attention solely to CONAIE, prompting some tension between the movements (Ospina 2000, p.146).

affiliations. Those early successes would place the indigenous front, and most especially CONAIE, in a position of influence among other social movements not unlike that of Madres in Argentina.

Other organizations also made their presence felt in the early 1990's. Though the traditionally-influential United Front of Workers (*Frente Unido de Trabajadores* – FUT) was on the decline (general strikes had proven ineffective in the 1980's and the number of labor protests had diminished considerable – see Zamosc 2004, p. 134), some labor unions had success when opposing the government. The National Union of Educators (*Unión Nacional de Educadores* – UNE) developed ties with parents and students and called for national strikes, road blockages, and demonstrations against proposed cuts in public education and pension plans for educators. They were supported by unions and peasant organizations and, despite a strong repressive response from the government (particularly in 1993), emerged with significant concessions (Miranda 2003, pp. 10-11). In 1994 and 1995 peasants from the National Federation of Affiliates to the Farmers Social Security (*Federación Unica Nacional de Afiliados al Seguro Social Campesino* – FEUNASC) organized protests against an attempt to eliminate the social security program for farmers, and were bolstered by support from CONAIE (Zamosc 2004, p. 135). University and high school students began to mobilize as well and took to the streets in large numbers in late 1994 and early 1995 to protest budget cuts aimed at public education (Miranda 2003, p. 11).

By the middle of the decade there was an identifiable core of movements and organizations that opposed structural adjustment that, as in Argentina, consistently supported each other's causes and made use of similar complaints against

privatizations and budget-slashing austerity measures. Although its statement of basic principles revolves around advocating for the rights of indigenous communities, the unification of these communities in a common struggle, and the eventual creation of a “plurinational state,”¹⁸¹ CONAIE developed alliances with unions of state industries slated for privatization and other groups opposed to economic liberalization. Their efforts saw little success in terms of curbing economic change, however, for a number of reasons. First, CONAIE and the rest of the indigenous movements still focused on their primary agenda. Despite indigenous peoples comprising less than half of the total population of Ecuador,¹⁸² CONAIE and its allies were able to achieve the establishment of a national bilingual education program, and a number of protections on indigenous land and cultural rights.¹⁸³ As long as they received concessions on that front, these groups were not ready to antagonize the government completely. A second obstacle for the opposition movement was its inability to overcome the historical animosities between regions in the country, which often took center stage. As the four dominant parties moved closer to each other in terms of their economic platforms, it became increasingly difficult to find a conduit to express demands on those issues. Finally, the impetus of social mobilizations was reduced by the outbreak of military conflict between Ecuador and its neighbor Peru over territorial

¹⁸¹ See “Constitución de la CONAIE,” at <http://conaie.org/?q=node/52> and “Proyecto Político de la Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE),” at <http://www.llacta.org/organiz/coms/com862.htm>. Yashar (2005) refers to CONAIE’s basic struggle as “contesting citizenship.”

¹⁸² Assessments vary on the exact portion of Ecuadorians who should be considered Indians. Yashar (2005, p. 21) accepts a 30-38% estimate, although some scholars assume around 10% (Zamosc 2004, p. 135) but concede that the total could be much higher.

¹⁸³ León Zamosc points out that CONAIE routinely stood behind causes that did not directly apply to indigenous claims, but that the organization was very good at taking advantage of the instability provoked by widespread protests to negotiate deals that affected its main interests (Zamosc 2004, p. 146).

disagreements and the subsequent government call for patriotic union in the face of an external threat (Beck and Mijeski 2001).¹⁸⁴ Much like in the cases seen in previous chapters, these limiting factors on mobilization were gradually overcome as the decade progressed.

The structural adjustment program begun timidly in 1982 was at the center of President Sixto Durán-Ballén's presidency (1992-1996), and continued to be for all of his successors. CONAIE supported protests against the increasingly inflexible neoliberal direction of successive governments, and encouraged the formation of a Social Movement Front (*Coordinadora de Movimientos Sociales* – CSM) – though CONAIE never officially joined it (Tamayo 1996; Beck and Mijeski 2001). The potential influence of the social movements on society at large was not fully understood until Durán-Ballén, counting in part on the nationalistic fervor raised by the border-war, proposed a number of economic adjustments to be voted by national referendum in the form of eleven separate initiatives. The CSM, CONAIE, and the unions began a frenetic “popular education” campaign under the slogan “*once veces NO*” (“eleven times NO”), and all of the initiatives were voted down, sending a strong message to the political leadership (Miranda 2003, p. 12; Zamosc 2004, p. 136).

Still, the success of the opposition showed a marked division among social sectors in the country, given that the middle and upper classes for the most part supported the economic restructuring. Not coincidentally, Durán-Ballén has the distinction of being the last Ecuadorian president, so far, to serve an entire term in office. The victory of CONAIE and the CSM over his referendum would mark the

¹⁸⁴ CONAIE openly refused to support the government in its border war, which helped it solidify its leadership position among Ecuadorian social movements.

beginning of an unprecedented period of social protest and conflict, as well as severe political instability, which has yet to end. But rather than showing that the popular sectors could, if organized, defeat policy proposals they perceived as harmful, the popular opposition against national elected officials in the late 1990's and early 2000's would bring together poor Ecuadorians with their traditional counterparts.

Durán-Ballén's successor was Abdalá Bucaram, a former Olympic sprinter and mayor of Guayaquil. Known as "*el Loco*" ("the madman"), Bucaram combined a flamboyant oratory style, a penchant for attention-grabbing stunts, an image as a sports magnate,¹⁸⁵ and the local support of the coastal areas to eek out a victory in a closely contested election.¹⁸⁶ He immediately set to weaken the indigenous movement by creating a Ministry of Indian Affairs (Zamosc 2004, p. 137), but was unsuccessful in this effort given the respect CONAIE already commanded across the spectrum of social organizations. He was also unable to secure support in Congress. His clownish public style and his image as corrupt were enough to prompt demonstrations against him only months after he assumed the presidency. In a risky maneuver, Bucaram nevertheless unveiled an economic modernization program less than six months into his administration. Protests against corruption quickly turned to a movement against the new economic policies, of which Bucaram's political adversaries took full advantage. In a bizarre episode, Congress declared Bucaram unfit to fulfill his

¹⁸⁵ He was president of Ecuador and of the Guayaquil soccer team Barcelona Sporting Club simultaneously.

¹⁸⁶ Bucaram, of the PRE, actually came second in total votes in the first round of the election. He defeated PSC candidate Jaime Nebot in a second-round runoff, apparently with strong support from indigenous areas (Beck and Mijeski 2001).

responsibilities due to “mental defect,” and replaced him with Speaker of Congress Fabián Alarcón, bypassing Vice-President Rosalia Arteaga.¹⁸⁷

The demonstrations against Bucaram would prove mild when compared with the massive uprisings that would plague his successors, but they do provide some signs of the general shape the conflict between state and civil society in Ecuador would adopt. As Pablo Miranda (2003) has noted, the protests were not class-based. The Socialist Party was an ally of the Bucaram government, and there were several middle-class demonstrations against his policies. The content of the protests was not radical in its demands for change, particularly economic change (Zamosc 2004, p. 144). Under the leadership of CONAIE, protesting groups instead extracted a promise from Congress to call for a Constituent Assembly soon after Bucaram was deposed. Moreover, the continued success of the social movements to pressure the state this time was bolstered by the presence of the Pachakutik Party, created by CONAIE and other groups to compete in the 1996 elections. The Plurinational Unity Movement Pachakutik – New Country (*Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik-Nuevo País*) was the result of a turn in CONAIE’s ideological position. After explicitly rejecting representative liberal democratic politics as sufficient for the advancement of the indigenous cause, the movement’s leadership decided to actively participate in the electoral game.¹⁸⁸ In the 1996 elections, Pachakutik placed eight indigenous individuals in Congress, 10% of the total seats. Its presidential candidate, Freddy Ehlers, received about 17% of the presidential ballots.

¹⁸⁷ Arteaga was actually president for two days, between February 9 and February 11, 1997, after challenging the constitutionality of Alarcón’s appointment. The Supreme Court eventually rejected her appeal and Alarcón took the presidential seat once more.

¹⁸⁸ See Beck and Mijeski (2001) for a discussion of the significance of COPEI’s about face.

The period between the fall of Bucaram and the next presidential election in 1998 saw the drafting of a new National Constitution that, among other changes, aimed to decentralize national politics (including raising the number of seats in Congress and the role of regional functionaries). This, in addition to previous victories by CONAIE and the social movements, should have translated into political gains for Pachakutik, but it did not. In the 1998 elections, Ehlers received only about 12% of the vote, and the percentage of Pachakutik members of Congress dropped to 6% (Beck and Mijeski 2001). The temporary support on the part of many indigenous voters for a particular wave of protests did not lead to gains for the political groups that supposedly embodied them. Then again, the very foundation of Pachakutik might have been a strategic mistake in a country with one of the lowest levels of support for democratic institutions in the region.¹⁸⁹

Jamil Mahuad's tenure as President of Ecuador resembles de la Rúa's in Argentina in a number of ways. As a candidate of the center-left DP, Mahuad had been defeated in previous presidential elections, so in 1998 he formed an alliance with the more conservative PSC, and defeated Alvaro Noboa of the PRE in a second round vote.¹⁹⁰ Mahuad's campaign promises included signing a peace agreement with Peru, the reduction of the federal deficit and tempering of the economic crisis, and an ambitious program to reduce poverty. Though he succeeded in doing the first, the economy's precipitous decline eliminated all possibility of a comprehensive welfare package.

¹⁸⁹ Poll data from 1999 shows only 6% of Ecuadorians have trust in the political parties and only 11% in the Congress. Only 28% of Ecuadorians believe that "democracy can solve their problems" (data quoted in Lucero 2001, p. 60).

¹⁹⁰ The results of the 1998 election, including Pachakutik's disappointing performance, reflect a political system divided by regional rather than socio-economic cleavages.

Like de la Rúa, Mahuad was encouraged by economic advisors and by the IMF to design an economic austerity plan, which he unveiled initially on September 1998 and was immediately decried in massive protests by the unions, the indigenous organization (including CONAIE), and their usual allies on the left. In an increasingly unstable environment Mahuad's second proposed package of reforms coincided with a precipitous devaluation of the Sucre (the national currency) against the dollar in March of 1999, leading to a temporary closing of banks so as to prevent the massive withdrawal of dollar accounts. The usual coalition of movements in protest was joined by angry small and mid-sized businessmen and other middle-class groups (Zamosc 2004, p. 139). In July of that year, supporters and leaders of the right-wing PSC marched alongside CONAIE and their allies to protest sharp increases in fuel prices; they also demanded the government reduce its subsidies for healthcare. PSC leaders León Febres Cordero and Jaime Nebot proclaimed that "the resignation, impeachment, removal, or revocation of [the President's] mandate are the means to bolster democracy and respect the Constitution."¹⁹¹ Mahuad (again, like de la Rúa) elected to appoint an economy minister with "emergency powers," Guillermo Lasso, to restructure the national economy. The subsequent Mahuad-Lasso plan, based on the dollarization of the Sucre (inspired by the Menem-Cavallo convertibility plan) provided the spark that ignited the next wave of protests.

CONAIE and a large net of social movements proved the strength of their camp by creating a Parliament of Peoples (*Parlamento de los Pueblos*), to re-create democratic decision-making from below. This "parliamentary" body called for

¹⁹¹ *Latin America Weekly Report* – WR-99-28 – 20 July 1999 – p. 326

continued civil disobedience against Mahuad's policies (Lucero 2001, p. 63). In a press release, CONAIE declared that:

The National Parliament of the Peoples of Ecuador, democratically constituted by twenty one provincial parliaments, innumerable community, cantonal, and neighborhood parliaments has assumed the direct exercise of national sovereignty to save the Republic of Ecuador from national dissolution brought about by Jamil Mahuad's decision to renounce monetary sovereignty by substituting the *sucre*, our historic monetary symbol, with the dollar.¹⁹²

That the "historic monetary symbol" was part of the historic regime that excluded indigenous populations that CONAIE was created to oppose points to the ability of this movement to adopt a situation-specific language. Opposition to the Mahuad plan and the attempt to join other organizations seemingly superseded the need for a consistent message on CONAIE's part. The strategy proved successful: the coalition against Mahuad came to include many traditional opponents of CONAIE, and brought the country to a standstill.

Between January 13 and 21, 2000, the type of festive/combatative climate of social protest that would occur in Costa Rica in March of that year and in Argentina in late 2001 took over the streets of all the major cities in Ecuador. Hundreds of mobilizations, roadblocks, and middle- and upper- class demonstrations were reported, though this insurrection would have a different conclusion. A segment of the armed forces, led by Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, had been rumored to be plotting to remove Mahuad from power. In a maneuver that would later earn it criticism from several allies,¹⁹³ CONAIE joined Gutiérrez's forces and on January 21 executed a

¹⁹² Bulletin for the International Press - La Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, CONAIE – Quito, 16 January 2000

¹⁹³ A large part of the criticism came from the established elites, who took CONAIE's involvement in a coup as proof that the movement did not truly have democratic aims. There were also intellectuals on the left, who argued that by taking part in the coup CONAIE had abandoned the goal of grassroots democracy and plurinationality and adopted "the logic of power" (see Davalós 2004; Zibechi 2004).

bloodless coup d'état. A *Junta* of National Salvation, composed of Gutiérrez, CONAIE president Antonio Vargas, and former Supreme Court Chief Justice Carlos Solórzano assumed power, though Gutiérrez ceded his seat to General Carlos Mendoza, once the brass of the Armed Forces officially withdrew its support for Mahuad. Hours later, facing strong international pressure, Mendoza allowed Gustavo Noboa, Mahuad's Vice-President, to assume power.

Although CONAIE proclaims the events of January 21 as a victory for the popular movement,¹⁹⁴ the leaders of some left-leaning organizations charged that they had been deliberately excluded as part of an agreement between CONAIE and the military (Lucero 2001, pp. 67-68). The broader response from the population was one of relief at the return to institutional democratic norms (Zamosc 2004). Despite the fact that CONAIE attained the most visibility, it would be a mistake to interpret the protests of January 2000 as an "indigenous uprising." As can be seen, they signaled the temporary convergence of indigenous groups, poor-people's organizations, the middle-classes, and the conservative elites against Mahuad's dollarization plan and the fuel price-hike specifically, and against Mahuad personally more generally. In fact, almost exactly a year later, CONAIE and the rest of the "popular front" organized yet another uprising against Noboa's economic package. This time, however, Noboa had the support of DP (his own party), of the PSC, and of the business community (Lucero 2001, p. 68). Furthermore, polls showed the general public to be more receptive to the idea of dollarization.¹⁹⁵ Without middle- and upper-class participation, it was easier for the government to paint the protests as the acts of

¹⁹⁴ See "Historia del Movimiento," available at www.conaie.org

¹⁹⁵ Reported in *Latin American Weekly Report*, WR-00-24 – 29 June 2000

criminals and dangerous groups, to apply more violent forms of control (several deaths were reported in late January and early February of 2001), and to achieve a more favorable deal for the government from negotiations with protesting groups. On the other hand, Noboa, like Bucaram, was the target of increasing allegations of corruption. But it appears that the angry masses did not go as far in the January 2001 protest wave as they had a year earlier because of the presence of a viable electoral alternative for the 2002 elections: none other than former Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez and his newly formed Patriotic Society January 21 Party (*Sociedad Patriótica 21 de Enero*).

Behind the support of CONAIE, Pachakutik, and other social movements, as well as those parts of the citizenry impressed with his willingness to give up power peacefully in 2000, Gutiérrez won the presidency convincingly, with over 55% of the total vote. Gutiérrez had also supported prosecuting former presidents Bucaram and Noboa, both of whom were in exile, for corruption during his campaign. Given his military background and the support he received from the social movements, he was compared to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Unlike Chávez, however, Gutiérrez backed a plan to move ahead with austerity measures and privatizations; popular opposition was soon to follow. There was a consistent opposition front led by CONAIE and the CMS, despite the presence of Pachakutik representatives in high post in the national government. Yet, data shows that the number and intensity of protests in Ecuador actually went down between 2003 and 2004, at the same time as the opposition movement restarted its offensive “though with little receptivity from the population” (CAAP 2004).

Once again, the opposition came to be joined by various sectors of civil society when particular events galvanized public displeasure. The tide began to turn in earnest against Gutiérrez after municipal elections in October of 2004 (Unda 2005). Disappointing results for his party led to the formation of a coalition between Gutiérrez's party and the conservative faction of Abdalá Bucaram's PRE. In exchange for PRE's support, Gutiérrez substituted most 27 out of 31 members of the Supreme Court in December.

It was this political move, rather than the economic proposals, that provoked the rapid increase in popular protests and the gradual unification of various protesting groups during the first months of 2005. The realignment of the Supreme Court was decried as a dictatorial move by the PSC, ID, and Pachakutik, as the indigenous party was welcomed by the opposition and an inter-class alliance was created. The chant of "*fuera Lucio*" ("out with Lucio") became predominant, along with "*que se vayan todos*," a deliberate nod to the Argentine uprising of 2001. On March 31, the president of the Supreme Court announced that corruption charges against three ex-presidents – Bucaram, Gustavo Noboa, and Alberto Dahik – were to be dropped. The Gutiérrez government was condemned not only as dictatorial, but as complicit with systemic corruption and hypocritical to boot, given his anti-corruption rhetoric during the presidential campaign. Bucaram's return to the country days later prompted an explosion of protests, which paralyzed the country.¹⁹⁶ On April 20, Congress voted to

¹⁹⁶ Some quite interesting and original forms of protests were seen in the last days of the Gutiérrez administration. On April 14, a crowd estimated at 10,000 of mostly private citizens ("housewives, pensioners, and children") organized a "*reventón*" ("blow-up") in which they exploded balloons in unison and then marched to the Supreme Court. Two days later, another crowd of thousands covered cars, buildings, and streets with toiled paper, an action termed "*el rollazo*," as a symbol of their desire to clean up the political class (OSAL 2005a, pp. 162-163).

remove Gutiérrez from the Presidency for willfully violating the separation of powers. Like in 2003, the police had forcefully confronted protestors, particularly in the week of April 13-20. On the 20 the chief of police resigned and the Chief of Staff of the armed forces announced that they no longer supported the President. Bucaram, Noboa, and Dahik, now joined by Gutiérrez, fled into exile as Alfredo Palacios assumed the Presidency with a new promise of constitutional reform.

Demobilization has never truly occurred in Ecuador, as many of the participants in the previous waves of protest continue to be active in pursuit of political and socio-economic goals. Rather, while CONAIE and others have attempted to continue forcing the state's hand by paralyzing the country through further "invasions" of the capital city (as in March 2006), they have not received the type of support necessary for a shakeup at the highest reaches of government. In part, this is due to a wait-and-see attitude among Ecuadorians, in expectations of new Presidential elections in late 2006. As interim President, Palacios has publicly considered the possibility of nationalizing parts of Ecuador's energy resources, a key demand of a large number of actors in the protests. With the outcome of elections uncertain, it is a distinct possibility that Ecuador has not seen the last of its current struggles with political instability.

The three cases of "interrupted presidencies" caused by nation-wide protests in Ecuador in recent years are similar to those discussed in more detail in the previous two chapters, though with certain crucial differences. Even though social protest in Ecuador is, as a rule, dominated by CONAIE and its allies, the events that brought about the ouster of three presidents in eight years reflected a temporary rise

of concerted action by very dissimilar actors within civil society. Each group certainly had its own agenda, but the choice to demonstrate jointly among normally antagonistic groups points to some commonalities across class, ethnic, and regional differences. Crucially, the three interrupted presidencies strongly suggest that the presence of a significant core group of anti-neoliberal organizations and movements was not enough to constitute a popular uprising. Instead, Bucaram's corrupt practices and his bizarre governing style allowed opponents in Congress and the Supreme Court to act against him. Mahuad was perceived as acting undemocratically given his rapid enactment of stringent austerity measures and a *corralito*-like limit on bank accounts, which directly affected businesses and the middle classes. The deep financial crisis and opposition by important sectors of the military precipitated his demise. Mahuad's expulsion through a military-led coup provoked worries in the international community, and breaks the pattern of respect for institutional rules seen in the previous cases, but the military brass' decision to return to democratic rule almost immediately reflects broad support for democratic rules. The insurrection against Gutiérrez, after all, was prompted by his dismissal of the courts rather than his economic policies alone.

The ability of CONAIE and the CSM to galvanize public opposition to these presidents through their ability to mobilize large numbers of people and through their experience in recognizing and stating their grievances clearly was fundamental for the development of public opposition. At the same time, it appears that in agreeing to join with congressional opponents of the successive presidents the social movements were playing into the hands of conservative elites. Because of the highly competitive

nature of the Ecuadorian electoral environment, social opposition against a particular candidate served the purposes of other established parties. This pattern changed with the rise in popularity of Gutiérrez, who was believed to continue the trend of left-wing presidents initiated by the election of Chávez in Venezuela. Instead, Gutiérrez alienated the social movements, suggesting that the rise in massive popular opposition is just as likely to occur against formerly popular figures.

The case of Ecuador shows that changes in the political environment also affect the mobilizing capacity of social movements. Before 2002, the poorer sectors (Indians, peasants, and blue-collar urban workers) found themselves in a position similar to their counterparts in Argentina and Costa Rica: faced with economic policies that seemed to exacerbate their material troubles, they had no electoral alternative and were forced to choose among competing elites (Pachakutik, the indigenous party, was never a viable alternative, since its platform attracted mostly activists Indians intent on changing the Constitution). This explains, in part, the massive participation in collective action against Bucaram and Mahuad. The lack of a similar response to Noboa's equally drastic economic measures was due partly to the absence of a particular event to spark public anger, but also of the presence of an electoral alternative in Gutiérrez, the ally of the people. The fears of elites within and outside of Ecuador that Gutiérrez would turn Ecuador into a copy of Chávez's Venezuela were allayed by the rapid turn of the established social movements against their former partner. That this last popular insurrection revolved around the protection of political institutions (specifically the courts) should dissuade critics from the

assumption that Latin American social movements wish to engage in an all-out attack on liberal democracy.

Bolivia's Popular Wars

Perhaps in no other country in the region were the transitions to democracy and to neoliberal economic policies as intimately linked as in Bolivia. Hernán Siles Zuazo was democratically elected as President in 1982, but inherited a deep economic crisis (met with widespread protests, of course) and a military that still was dubious about its desire to completely relinquish power. It was the “governability pact” of 1985 between the traditional political parties – the centre-right Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* – MNR), the right wing National Democratic Action (*Acción Democrática Nacional* - ADN), led by former dictator Hugo Bánzer, and the center left (despite its name) Revolutionary Left Movement (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* – MIR) headed by Jaime Paz Zamora – that established the rules of the democratic game for the following two decades (Domingo 2005, pp. 1730-1731). The leaders of all the major political blocs supported the New Economic Policy Law, or Decree 21060, which was passed in 1985 and quickly put an end to hyperinflation.

Between 1985 and 2003 the governability pact worked well enough, with Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1985-1989) of the MNR, Paz Zamora (1989-1993) of the MIR, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997) of the MNR, and Bánzer (1997-2002) able to complete their constitutionally-allowed tenures.¹⁹⁷ As can be expected, this

¹⁹⁷ Bánzer was the first President elected for a five-year term, following a constitutional amendment. He resigned the presidency due to health problems and his term was completed by his Vice-President Jorge Quiroga Ramírez.

did not preclude social and political conflicts. While the elite-led parties competed for power, labor unions led by the Bolivian Workers' Central (*Central Obrera Boliviana* – COB) consistently mobilized to protest the successive administrations' economic policies, joined by left-wing parties and groups.¹⁹⁸ New populist parties, supported by the urban poor and informal-sector workers, attempted to enter the electoral fray, though with little success.¹⁹⁹ As in Ecuador, indigenous organizations flourished in the 1980's and 1990's, putting aside historical animosities to form a coalition designed to protect tribal lands and indigenous rights (about 60% of the Bolivian population is considered to be Indian, the highest proportion in Latin America – see Yashar 2005, p. 21). The Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of the Orient of Bolivia (*Confederación de Indígenas del Oriente de Bolivia* – CIDOB) was formed in 1982, with land protection as its primary goal. It organized a March for Territory in 1990 and protests in 1992, which led Paz Zamora to establish seven exclusive indigenous territories by presidential decree (Postero 2004, pp. 195-196).²⁰⁰ In addition, the late 1990's saw an increase in protests by *coca* farmers (*cocaleros*), many though not all of them Indians, for economic rights and against Plan Colombia – the American initiative to eradicate the sources of cocaine in Colombia and Bolivia.

Sánchez de Lozada, known in Bolivia as “Goni,” came to power in 1993 with support from elites and indigenous groups alike. Along with his Aymara Indian Vice-

¹⁹⁸ While the COB has remained a constant presence in the Bolivian protest scene to this day, the labor movement as a whole is not as influential as in the past, giving rise to alternative forms of popular organization (see Ortega 2000).

¹⁹⁹ The most important ones are National Conscience (*Conciencia de Patria* – CONDEPA), the Solidarity Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Solidaridad* – USC), and, later, New Republican Force (*Nueva Fuerza Republicana* – NFR).

²⁰⁰ Space does not allow a discussion of the various indigenous groups that have appeared in Bolivian politics and society in the last two decades. Yashar (2005) analyzes at length the “first generation” Katarista indigenous movement of the 1970's (pp. 154-181) and the contemporary “second generation movements,” including CIDOB and the *cocaleros* (pp. 181-218).

President, Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, Goni pursued a strategy that combined increasing indigenous rights with a stronger push towards economic liberalization. During his administration Bolivia amended its Constitution to declare itself a “multi-ethnic” and “pluri-cultural” society, instituted bilingual education programs nationally, ceded more lands to indigenous tribes, and developed a Law of Popular Participation (*Ley de Participación Popular*) designed to decentralize the management of resources towards municipal and regional governments (Postero 2004, p. 189; Domingo 2005, p. 1733). Not surprisingly, he found less popular pressure in restructuring the economy, though his policies would not lead to significant changes in the overall levels of poverty in the country, for which he would later be blamed. Bánzer, his successor, concentrated more on economic reform than on continuing to advance the indigenous cause. It was during his tenure that Bolivia would see its first major popular uprising.

In September 1999, the government awarded a 40-year exclusive concession to provide water services to the city of Cochabamba and surrounding areas to the company Aguas del Tunari (AdT). During the preceding negotiations, a large coalition of civil society organizations had formed the Front for Water and Life (*Coordinadora del Agua y la Vida – CAV*), which strongly opposed the concession. The CAV’s demands were immediately dismissed by the government, but the organization began a thorough popular education campaign and gained broad legitimacy amongst the public (Nickson and Vargas 2002, p. 114). It was often joined in demonstrations by *cocaleros* led by Aymara leader Evo Morales, and later by small business-owners once a 35% increase in water tariffs was announced. Anger over the

raise in water fees, combined with an apparent possibility of extra charges for small farmers, as well as the exclusive nature of the contract fueled a massive wave of protests that lasted until April 2000, when the contract was annulled. The so-called “water war” (“*guerra del agua*”) was widely celebrated by popular groups and left-wing intellectuals as a defeat of neoliberalism (Assies 2003; Tapia 2005), but Andrew Nickson and Claudia Vargas (2002) persuasively show that the price hike was the detonator of protests by many groups not opposed to this type of economic reforms outright.

The national government attempted to appease discontented sectors of civil society by promising political reform. Bánzer, tired of the “repression-concession dynamic,” proposed a constitutional reform that would give more voice to popular sectors.²⁰¹ Future events would prove this initiative to be unsuccessful, though he had correctly predicted the appearance of new actors to the institutional political arena. After *cocaleros* set a new round of protests against fumigation of *coca* plots in 2001, and riding on his popularity from the Cochabamba events, Evo Morales founded the Movement towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo* – MAS), an alliance of “*cocaleros*, the old Left, an influential leftist lawyers’ group, current leaders of *campesino* and workers’ unions, members of the new Bolivian MST, and some lowland indigenous leaders, presenting a varied popular front” (Postero 2004, p. 205). Another indigenous leader, Felipe Quispe, founded the Pachakutik Indigenous Movement (*Movimiento Indígena Pachakutik* – MIP), patterned after the Ecuadorian

²⁰¹ See *Latin American Weekly Report* – WR-01-08 – 20 February 2001 – p. 92. After Bánzer stepped down from his post, Congress continued to pursue constitutional reform, inspired by the Bolivarian Constitution enacted in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (see below). The major innovation was the introduction of referenda as regular mechanisms for popular consultation on national policy, and extended to the general citizenry the rights to propose legislation.

party, and with many of the same expressed goals. However, Quispe has alienated many of his potential supporters through his aggressive speaking style, his perceived sexism, and his radical politics – even when compared to Morales (Postero 2004, p. 206; Alenda 2004). Besides representing peasants and Indians, MAS and MIP presented themselves from the start as an alternative to the corruption of the “oligarchic” traditional parties. At the same time, the indigenous movement was weakened by internal leadership struggles (not least between Morales and Quispe), financial difficulties, and cooptation of certain sectors (Alenda 2004).

In the 2002 presidential elections, Morales lost to Sánchez de Lozada by a margin of about 1.5% of the total vote. The unexpected showing of MAS signaled a diminished net of support for Goni, emboldening other opposition groups and political parties to stand against him as well (even though he enjoyed the backing of a parliamentary coalition). In February of 2003, the government announced a significant hike in income taxes, which provoked protests among the middle classes, unions, and popular organizations. In this particular instance, the violence escalated when protesting police officers demanding wage and pension concessions clashed with the military, leaving thirty-one dead and hundreds of injured (Domigo 2005, p. 1739; Postero 2005, p. 74). Though the government reneged on the proposed measures, the general mood was tense, in the expectation of a new packet of austerity measures that was seen as sure to come.

Protests and labor strikes were common throughout 2003. But it was the announcement of the construction of a natural gas pipeline through Chile, in order to export the country’s natural resource to the United States, that provoked an

unexpected explosion of outrage. In the city of El Alto, Aymara organizations such as the MIP vocally protested against the measure.²⁰² Starting on September 17, the COB declared a national strike. University students took to the streets soon after in La Paz, and the CAV in Cochabamba organized massive demonstration under the call “*el gas es nuestro*” (“the gas is ours”). Groups opposed to Goni’s economic policies were joined by citizens angered by the selling of the country’s resources to foreigners and through Chile, Bolivia’s historical enemy, no less (Seoane and Taddei 2003; Postero 2004 and 2005; Shifter 2004). Thus, nationalist sentiments took center stage in the “gas war,” and were crucial in eroding Goni’s political support.²⁰³ The fact that there had been talk since the previous government of not allowing such measures to be taken without public consultation also contributed to the general sense of indignation. Facing more violence and an unraveling political coalition, Sánchez de Lozada resigned on October 17, to be replaced by his Vice-President Carlos Mesa.

Mesa’s short-lived administration seemed doomed from the start. Not only did it have to face an almost constant environment of social unrest revolving around the nationalization of hydrocarbons and natural gas (including important waves of protest in Cochabamba, El Alto, and La Paz in April of 2004), but it lacked the congressional support that Goni had relied on initially during his presidency. Sure enough, after a new upsurge of protests encompassing all of the groups discussed above in May and June of 2005, Mesa resigned his presidency. Yet, the dynamics of this latest conflict demonstrate the complex relationship between civil society and the political class, as

²⁰² El Alto is the symbolic center of the indigenous struggle in Bolivia and the stage of many social confrontations, particularly since the 1990’s (Mamani 2003).

²⁰³ It is one thing, after all, to support painful economic reform seen as necessary but quite another to be seen as collaborating with the “enemy” (be it Chile or the U.S.)

well as conflicts based on regional interests. Through the end of 2003 and most of 2004, the conflict around the future of the hydrocarbons and natural gas industries remained at the forefront, following a referendum in April of 2004 that was taken to mean that hydrocarbons would be nationalized. Simultaneously attempts from Mesa's economic team to increase the price of fuel sparked additional protests around the country.

In the gas-rich province of Santa Cruz, hunger strikes and protests against the fuel-rate increase gave way to an attempt by the Civic Committee Pro Santa Cruz (*Comité Cívico Pro Santa Cruz – CCPSC*), a business-led organization, to establish a regional referendum designed to award autonomy to the region. On January 28, 2005, around 200,000 *santacruceños* participated in a rally to demand regional autonomy. During the following days, MAS, Aymara organizations, the COB and several other unions declared themselves against Santa Cruz's separation from the rest of the country. On March 6, President Mesa announced his resignation, citing political and social pressures surrounding the hydrocarbons legislation as well as roadblocks organized by the CCPSC in Santa Cruz. In an extraordinary gesture, thousands of citizens and organizations, including MAS, marched *in support of* Mesa. On March 8, Congress voted against accepting the President's resignation. With this support, Mesa launches a public denunciation of protest groups, calling roadblocks an "attack on democracy" (OSAL 2005b, p. 158). On May 5, a new hydrocarbons law that fell far short of nationalization was passed by Congress, sparking a renewed outburst of protests that led to Mesa's resignation on June 6. Behind the support of MAS, MIP, MIR, and MNR, Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé became provisional president, with the

promise of calling for national elections as rapidly as possible. In the December 2005 elections, Evo Morales was elected President with almost 54% of the total vote, an unexpectedly-strong result.

The Bolivian “wars” against the state between 2000 and 2005 – against the privatization of water in Cochabamba, against the building of the natural gas pipeline in Chile, and for the nationalization of hydrocarbons – show that the economic debate over the failure of neoliberal reforms to reduce poverty and economic inequalities was at the forefront of social demands, relegating indigenous “cultural” issues to the background. The national and international media referred to these uprisings as “indigenous revolutions” – which is understandable given that many of the participants were Aymara, and many of the protests used “ethnic tropes and metaphors to make their arguments, referring to the strength of the Andean warrior people, etc.” (Postero 2004, p. 207) – but they were not. The size and intensity of the protest cycles were made possible, as Nancy Postero (2004 and 2005) correctly notes, because indigenous groups eschewed purely ethnic and territorial demands in order to find common ground with other organizations. More than in any of the other countries discussed previously, the debate revolved around national economic policy almost always conflated with notions of nationalist pride. Civil society organizations, as has been seen, were able to mobilize against attempts to split the country (on the part of the opportunistic CCPSC) or to allow some segments of the political elites to take advantage of the crisis created by the protests themselves.

It would appear that the electoral victory of Morales signals a triumph of the organized protest movement arising out of Bolivia’s civil society. The rise to power

of an outsider candidate, and one of Aymara descent at that, has been widely celebrated by supporters of the fight against neoliberal capitalism around the world. It is not at all clear, however, that Morales' election means a radical turn for Bolivian politics. Despite Morales' much-publicized ties with Hugo Chávez, he has never espoused a particularly anti-capitalist stance. Although he has denounced neoliberalism as "the culprit responsible for so many deeds, and also responsible for the uprising of the Bolivian people" (quoted in Postero 204, p. 208), Morales has shown a willingness to negotiate with other political actors, supporting Sánchez de Lozada and Mesa at different points.²⁰⁴ It remains unclear whether he will attempt to govern through broad alliances of different classes or if, like Chávez, his presidency will exacerbate the class polarization that has dominated politics in Bolivia for over two decades.

Conclusions – Civil Society and the State in Ecuador and Bolivia

Political conflicts between social actors and the state in these two Andean nations usually revolve around either material issues or demands for recognition of indigenous cultural traditions and their right to their original lands. Given the complexities of party competition in these countries, on top of regional and ethnic conflicts, it is perhaps even more surprising that their civil societies have been able to unify repeatedly in pursuit of common goals. They have been able to do so by temporarily abandoning group-level demands and appealing to, of all things, national unity and pride. This has sometimes benefited established elites, which can for a time stop worrying about the anti-systemic stance of social movements like CONAIE or

²⁰⁴ James Petras (2005) notes accusingly that Morales happened to be overseas during the height of both the 2003 and 2005 protests.

political parties like the MIR and join social protests against individual political figures. It has also brought benefits to individual movements, as their capacity to mobilize masses of citizens functions as leverage for governments to attend to their demands.

Although, as has been pointed out, the particular shapes that the popular uprisings in these countries have taken lend little support to the idea that they represent a growing anti-capitalist (or at least anti-neoliberal) movement, they nevertheless appear to have been most successful in mounting a counter-hegemonic challenge within their societies. By this I mean their indisputable success in bringing issues of indigenous recognition and participation in politics to the front, forcing change in the legal frameworks of their countries to accommodate their demands, and finally placing indigenous candidates at the highest levels of national government, culminating in the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia. That this was achieved through the parallel use of mythical “originarian” indigenous traditions and the participation in broader alliances of movements and organizations that pursued nationalistic aims only serves to underscore the paradoxes inherent in their civil societies. It becomes clear, for instance, that the values and ideas that come to encapsulate a particular struggle of “the people” – what Laclau (2004 and 2005) calls the “empty signifier” – may leave out some important concerns for many participants, and in fact even contradict them.

It is a mistake to confuse the preeminence of indigenous symbols and rhetoric with the cultural wars some left-wing activists claim to be witnessing in the Andean region. Despite the large indigenous populations in these nations, the mobilizations of

civil society expressed quite clearly as their principal concern the reform of governmental institutions so as to insure the well being of the countries' populations. Debates on autonomy for native tribes or local-level decision-making were of minimal importance in the most explosive periods of popular protest. Should the future Presidential administration in Ecuador, like that of Morales in Bolivia, continue to take steps towards the strengthening of state control over natural resources, the problematic of supporting such a turn while advocating for autonomy within civil society is likely to come to the fore.

It seems reasonable to expect, in contrast to Argentina and Costa Rica, future periods of social instability in the Andean cases. Both Ecuador and Bolivia contain a larger core of active social movements than Costa Rica or Argentina, particularly since in both of the latter the middle classes were late additions to the opposition, and promptly returned to inactivity. In Bolivia and Ecuador smaller and weaker middle classes were not as crucial elements of the mass movements, and much of the original population could be more easily pushed to action once again. The process of framing the collective grievances and demands of large segments of the populations in these countries, which came to be adopted by the larger movements, took place over a longer period of time: among the indigenous organizations of both nations, for instance, or among the tin miners and *cocaleros* in Bolivia. The continuity of popular protest in Bolivia and Ecuador attests to the effect such framing had on the formation of strong, active civil societies that spearheaded national debates on the meaning of democracy, and arrived at conclusions not in vogue among theorists in the most developed areas of the world. Whether such a state of affairs has a negative effect on

the health of democracy in these nations will contribute to an evaluation of the desirability of popular mobilization more generally.

Chapter 6: General Conclusions

The popular protest mobilizations that have taken place in Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Bolivia since 2000 exemplify the need for students of civil society to reevaluate the impact a mobilized citizenry can have on the promotion of democracy. Scholarly critiques of a “tame” or “limited” conception of the relationship between civil society and democracy (in Habermas 1991; Touraine 1981, 1982, 1987, and 1989; Melucci 1989 and 1992; but especially Keane 1988a and 1988b; Cohen and Arato 1992; Baker 2002) – which focuses solely on the role of civil society in the consolidation of liberal democratic institutions – are warranted, since such a view excludes the potential for alternative forms of democratic governance. However, such critiques usually commit the same mistake as their targets. They replace a rigid and reified view of this relationship with another one, which, in turn, limits the possible goals of civil society to the establishment of radical or participatory “self-limiting utopias” based primarily on the struggle against state colonization of the public sphere.

Throughout, I have used the term “civil society” broadly, referring to collective actors voluntarily formed by individuals that actively pursue particular goals. I have backed away from definitional matters as much as possible, choosing instead to adopt the usage of the term common to the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2. The mass mobilizations examined here fit nicely with O’Donnell and Schmitter’s characterization of “popular upsurges” in the 1970’s and 1980’s, for instance, which they see as bringing together “trade unions, grass-roots movements,

religious groups, intellectuals, artists, clergymen, defenders of human rights, and professional associations.” The protests in Costa Rica in March and April of 2000, in Argentina in December 2001 and early 2002, in Ecuador in 2000 and 2005, and in Bolivia in 2003 and 2005 all included a broad range of social organizations and movements, unions, student and ecclesiastical organizations, and a multitude of others. They were all, moreover, initiated by these groups, though often they were joined by political leaders and parties with agendas of their own. Even in cases where elite actors had a hand in prompting social unrest – as with Peronist *punteros* encouraging lootings in Argentina or opposition parties seeking to remove sitting presidents in accordance to the wishes of social movements, such as Carlos Mesa in Bolivia and Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador – the organized social groups at the heads of the protests were never led or directed by elite actors. They are as clear examples of the expression of “people power” as their more celebrated counterparts across the globe.

A number of scholarly analysts of the renewed impetus of social protest in Latin America (Mattini 2000 and 2003; Vargas 2000; Colectivo Situaciones 2001 and 2002; Houtart 2001; Sader 2001; Negri and Cocco 2002; Assies 2003; Dinerstein 2003a and 2003b; Ferrara 2003; Mamani 2003; Miranda 2003; Seoane and Taddei 2003; Zibechi 2003 and 2004; Barbetta and Bidaseca 2004; Hardt and Negri 2004; Tapia 2005; Unda 2005) have mistakenly taken the appearance of social movements espousing new identities and intent on radically transforming their societies as signs that such a goal was the driving force behind the protests, missing the proverbial forest for the trees. These thinkers, like the theorists of civil society, neglect to

address the issue of the framing and articulation of goals, ideals, and values, which is crucial to the formation of mass movements in civil societies composed of large and heterogeneous multiplicities of collective associations and movements.

The importance of framing has been widely discussed in the recent literature on social movements (Klandermans 1988; Snow and Benford 1988; Tarrow 1994; Benford and Snow 2000), in theoretical critiques of orthodox Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2004 and 2005), and in in-depth analyses of the democratic revolutions led by civil society in Eastern Europe (Kubik 1994). Even if the existence in the public sphere of common values rooted in tradition or “political culture” is granted, the connection between values and particular conditions and events is almost never obvious and is therefore articulated in competing political discourses. As Gramsci recognized, the struggle for hegemony – that is, the dominant cultural discourse – is constantly at work between the state and civil society, but that is partly because civil society itself is rife with disagreement and conflict among its members. In order to turn civil society into a social movement, such disagreement must be overcome by the framing of competing claims and goals into a commonality of purpose. The usefulness of the notion of hegemony is that it recognizes that the framing and articulation of values and ideas is contingent, though not necessarily arbitrary. Thus, in order to understand a particular case of political conflict, it is important to identify the way in which that conflict is understood by its protagonists.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation outline three theoretical difficulties with the extant theoretical accounts of mobilized civil societies derived from the experiences of resistance movements in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the

1970's and 1980's. First, I argue that the goal of these dissident organizations in the past was to free themselves from state domination, as the theorists of civil society claim, but that this was the result of particular political and social conditions (as well as of the choice, both on the part of dissident intellectuals and of their analysts, to minimize the importance of economic factors in their accounts). The claim that the goal of civil society in contemporary politics is necessarily such a separation between the public sphere and the political arena does not necessarily hold under a different set of conditions. Second, the aforementioned claim is further complicated by the need to explain how the different collective entities within civil society come to accept the same goals and values. In democratic polities the obstacles to free association and expression are presumably absent, yet the very freedoms that democracy provides, as well as the ability of individuals and organizations to engage in direct negotiations with political officials without fear of violent reprisal, make it less likely that competing social groups will reach common ground. Hence the fundamental importance of the notion of framing. Finally, I question whether the commonalities of values and purpose that are sometimes seen in civil society are necessarily the product of horizontal communication in the public sphere, or whether they might come from above; that is, from political elites in the past or present. In the cases I discuss in this work, I suggest that accepted norms of what constitutes democracy, social justice, and political legitimacy might have been inherited from elite notions adopted by society as a "core narrative of identity" in the respective nations' pasts.

In the case-study chapters, I show that in each of the Latin American nations examined the major conflicts between civil society and the state were framed in terms of the limitations of liberal democracy, though not with the goal of securing the freedom of society from the state. The economic projects of economic liberalization, which presumably reduced state intervention in society, left civil society open to the unpredictable whims of the global economy and the behavior of corrupt public figures trying to gain from the processes of structural adjustment. The public reactions against them reflected a rejection of both, not in terms of a preferred radical political program, but instead rooted in a shared sense of national pride and identity. Thus, the distinction between civil, political, and economic societies, originally delineated by Gramsci and adopted by Keane, Baker, Cohen and Arato, and others, proves useful in analyzing the Latin American cases. However, while these theorists concentrate on the relations between political and civil societies, they fail to realize that the protection of society from the effects of economic change may require more rather than less state intervention.

The case studies demonstrate that large popular movements growing out of the fusion of the struggles of a variety of collective entities in civil society may take alternative forms. While in all four cases mobilized civil societies stood in opposition to state policies and political leaders, they did so not in order to pressure for the radical transformation of governmental institutions, but instead to demand more state intervention in order to insure standards of social justice deemed fundamental to democratic life. As is clearly seen in previous chapters, some participants – perhaps even some leading organizations – in the mobilizations in all four cases did pursue

radical change, but the processes through which the popular opposition took shape tended to favor the goals and demands of the moderate majority of citizens, who do not usually participate in contestatory collective action. What social movements accomplished in the cases examined was the framing of political scandals and unpopular economic policies into a betrayal of an idealized past rather than the promise of a utopian future. This is extremely important since it shows Latin American societies to be supportive of elite-centered politics, and state intervention in society, as long as it delivers the goods, even in cases in which no major elite group joins the popular mobilizations in word or deed.

This work is based on an empirically-based analysis of the behavior of civil society grounded in a detailed look at the beliefs espoused and the language used by social movements and other social actors but also a historical analysis of the core narratives on which such language and beliefs are based. The influence of elites in the hegemonic core narrative of a nation is instrumental in shaping the views and values of civil society, and it is far from coincidental that such past figures as Jose Figueres in Costa Rica or Juan Perón in Argentina were constantly referred to by critics of these governments. The belief, or at least the hope, that social movements may be in the process of overcoming these narratives and replacing them with something new is widespread among Latin American left-wing intellectuals, but the articulation of common social demands in each of these countries leads away from that conclusion.

This is most clearly seen in Costa Rica, where the various social organizations involved in the protests unfavorably compared the leadership in 2000 to the architects of the Costa Rican Second Republic, universally understood to be founded on a

notion of social welfare hand in hand with a healthy democracy. That the “golden age” of Costa Rican progress coincided with the virtual monopoly on power of a single political faction, the persecution of certain political groups, and the deliberate decimation of organized labor movements seemed not to worry the general public in the face of the destruction of that legacy. More than in any other country in the region, there seems to be a consensus across the social spectrum over the need to maintain the principles of solidarity and social welfare inherent in the discourse of Figueres and the PLN, the core narrative of national identity that dominated Costa Rica for three decades, and evidently still has a stronghold on the national psyche. That this did not make itself apparent in the nearly two-decade long process of structural adjustment already under way is a function of several factors: the lack of an organized social opposition rooted in civil society, including a strong labor movement; the deftly managed process of reform, undertaken slowly, with popular input, and using mechanisms of spreading the costs across various social classes; the overall health of the national economy; and the continuity of established political parties. Chapter 4 shows how some effects of the reforms had begun to become unpalatable to the population by the late 1990’s, but it was mostly the combination of a precipitous decline of public trust in their leaders and what was perceived as an attack on a beloved national institution that provided the opportunity for critics to frame the issue such that they received massive support.

The events in Argentina, though precipitated by the prospect and then the reality of economic collapse, showed a similar pattern. The first instances of social mobilization came from the already existing network of social movements –

particularly the human rights organizations – and then by the hardest hit social sectors, first in town-level *puebladas* and later in the shape of the unemployed movement. It took the established labor organizations some time to incorporate themselves to the social opposition, given their historical ties to the PJ, as seen by the internal splits of the CGT into rival factions and their unification following the ascension to power of Fernando de la Rúa. It is notable that the rapid process of structural adjustment did not at first lead to the unification of civil society, but to its splintering. The labor movement experienced an unprecedented internal shakeup, and the *piqueteros* grew out of separate factions divided by ideological values and strategic goals. As in Costa Rica, the opposition began to gain traction by responding to the experiences of most Argentines, not only the unemployed but also the impoverished middle classes, and framing them as the result of a deliberate campaign of the political class and foreign investors to dispossess the country of its rightful patrimony. De la Rúa's imprudent choice to declare a state of siege to respond to lootings and early protests also tapped into the national narrative in a negative way, providing evidence for the opposition's claim that neoliberal democratic government was essentially as dangerous and immoral the defunct military dictatorship. The subsequent popularity of Néstor Kirchner reflects the willingness of Argentines to allow for strong political leadership and an interventionist state, as long as these are considered legitimate.

In Bolivia and Ecuador, ethnic conflicts and class disparities were put aside in order to give birth to mass popular movements that decried corruption of politicians as well as economic measures that affected the nation as a whole. The conviction that

national problems require national solutions led by the state was evident in protests against the campaign by groups in the Bolivian province of Santa Cruz pursuing autonomy for the region. It was also clear in CONAIE's appeals against the dollarization of the *sucre*, and in its willingness to abjure power shortly after successfully deposing President Jamil Mahuad. Despite the prominent role played by indigenous organizations in both countries, and of the ubiquitous use of "indigenist" symbols and rhetoric, the main engine of the largest instances of popular protest was not what Yahar has called an effort to overcome the "post-liberal challenge," but a demand for insuring that the riches of these countries be used by the state to benefit its citizens. The recent moves towards increased state control of natural gas and oil, to the supposed detriment of transnational corporations, is a direct reflection of this drive.

The triggers of the protests were not dysfunctional political systems or corrupt leaders, at least not directly, but specific economic initiatives – the freezing of bank accounts in Argentina in order to stop investment flight, the privatization of the ICE in Costa Rica, dollarization and austerity measures in Ecuador, the natural gas pipeline in Bolivia.²⁰⁵ Demands for political reform lost some of their priority when other, more urgent matters were at stake, precisely as social protest ceased to be the purview of a few active social movements and became "the people's cause." This points to a major limitation in many contemporary theories of civil society and new social movements (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992; Escobar and Alvarez 1992a; Baker 2002; Yashar 2003), which focus solely on political and cultural conflicts at the

²⁰⁵ The protests against Gutiérrez in Ecuador in 2005 represent the only instance that arguably does not fit this pattern.

expense of socio-economic ones. In contemporary Latin America, the debate on the meaning of democracy is intimately linked to how states respond to the material needs of the citizenry, to their behavior towards natural resources, and to their willingness to engage in politics based on the “moral politics” of the population at large. In essence, the relationship between civil and economic societies affects that between civil and political societies. In the Latin American case, the citizenry came to see the economic transformations underway as a retreat of the state from its previous paternalistic role, leaving large segments of society (and by no means only the poor, the peasantry, or the indigenous communities) unprotected in the face of amoral market processes and immoral practices on the part of political leaders.

The content of the values that motivate the actions of civil society groups is contingent on a number of factors. The case studies in this dissertation have attempted to illustrate how material and historical conditions contribute to what amounts to the “construction” of a common identity across a multiplicity of heterogeneous groups. This articulation, however, is almost invariably reactive, in that it responds to political or economic crisis or to the actions of ruling elites. The articulation of demands shared by heterogeneous actors refers to specific issues and, given the difficulty to maintain collective action, does not usually endure beyond the “resolution” of those issues. This would appear to be the case in recent protest movements in Ukraine, Lebanon, and elsewhere, and the evidence collected here strongly supports this view.

General opposition, the “voice of the people,” was only heard when the economic situation was particularly dire and/or when a specific issue captured the

attention of the population as a whole. That the catalyst for mobilization in all four countries was an issue of national sovereignty and/or national pride is, it seems to me, extraordinarily important. When it came to act together with others, social movements held on to the symbols and language prevalent in a core national narrative that would be accepted by the population at large. Collective action may come from “below,” but symbols more often than not come from “above,” from elites establishing hegemonic visions of national pride that have effectively captured the imagination of the popular classes. How indigenous movements, which purport to represent the “originarian” (*originarias*) identities of American aboriginal cultures, deal with the pull of national identity as opposed to more “traditional” nationalities is a question that cannot yet be answered. So far, however, indigenous confederations such as CONAIE and political figures such as Evo Morales have had no qualms in adopting nationalistic stances to further their aims.

Not only were the national anthem and flag very prominent among protesters in all four countries (mixed with indigenous symbols in Ecuador and Bolivia, to be sure), but the main goals of the protests themselves referred to national rather than regional or ethnic interests. “The gas is ours!,” cried the Bolivian protesters, just like the demonstrations in Costa Rica declared that “the ICE is ours.” The abandonment of the national currency was seen as a further betrayal of the trust of the people of Ecuador on its leaders, but so was Lucio Gutiérrez “about-face” on his electoral promises. Like Fernando de la Rúa in Argentina, Gutiérrez quickly went from a self-described alternative to the pervasive economic and political model to a continuation

of the same policies. Not coincidentally, the response of Ecuadorians was the same as that of Argentines in 2001; “out with Lucio,” but also “they should all go.”

The processes of formation and gradual growth of the opposition movements, as well as their rapid fragmentation following the end of the crises, illustrate the relevance of the second critique elaborated in Chapter 2. In Costa Rica, the struggle against the Combo initiative was undertaken for years prior to 2000 by a stable, though relatively small, core of organizations, led by public-sector unions, university student federations, and left-wing political parties. As the date for the first legislative vote approached (more rapidly than anticipated, due to the “fast-tracking” of the initiative) the opposition block was joined in rapid succession by farmers, several labor organizations, non-profits, high school students and teachers, all of whom put aside their priorities in order to combat a government policy that was by then understood to signify a betrayal of the principles that had held the nation together thus far. This was the product both of a far-reaching information campaign on the part of the opposition and by the unwillingness of state officials to present their position clearly to the public. The latter proved to be a costly political miscalculation that may have seriously affected the subsequent course of events. The growth of the coalition was achieved primarily by the ability of the original core of movements’ ability to tap into the significance of the “solidarity state” of which the ICE was indubitably a symbol, though strategic considerations on the part of some participants (in order to secure support for later battles) cannot be discounted.

Once the initiative had been rescinded, and the victorious opposition had celebrated its success, it became clear that its secondary goals would not receive such

public support. In the presidential elections immediately following the protests voter turnout was ominously low (a sign that direct collective action does not necessarily translate into political commitment) and the winning candidate belonged to the PUSC, the same party as President Rodríguez. The government seemed to learn its lesson as well, beginning a well-funded campaign to sway public opinion in favor of CAFTA, which could eventually result in a renewed drive to privatize electricity and telecommunications. Ottón Solís' surprising showing in the 2006 election can be attributed to the general disillusionment expressed in the 2000 protests, but also on the disastrous performance of Abel Pacheco, Rodríguez's successor.

In Argentina, the development of social opposition to the economic reforms and political corruption that culminated in the economic collapse of 2001 was seriously hindered by the debilitated civil society that emerged from the military period and to the initial popularity of Carlos Menem and his packet of economic reforms. Even as, in the late 1990's, it became clear that there were serious social consequences to the structural adjustment program, the diverse segments of the opposition failed to unite. The labor movement was engaged in deep internal struggles, as were the unemployed *piqueteros*, whose main instrument of struggle gained them animosity from the middle and upper classes. The unification of civil society was the product of the deepening economic crisis, public outrage at a series of political scandals, and the election of the UCR candidate de la Rúa, which eliminated the problematic allegiance between the CGT and the PJ. Yet, even as the opposition gained force, the more articulate discourses of opposition –particularly coming from social movements such as Madres and HIJOS and the more theoretically minded

piquetero organizations – never quite grabbed hold of the population with the same strength as it did in Costa Rica. The more diffuse common ground centered on the conviction that political leaders had stolen the country’s wealth and deliberately deprived its people of the social guarantees that (supposedly) all enjoyed in the past. Thus the ambiguous and open-ended “*que se vayan todos.*”

As is related in chapter 3, the period of unity between the unions, the *piqueteros*, and the middle classes was short, if indubitably intense, and the new forms of sociability so lauded by observers did not last. The middle classes diverged into *asambleistas* and *ahorristas*, the labor movement returned to its own squabbles, the *piqueteros* were largely co-opted by PJ leaders and likewise continued to concentrate in their differences rather than their similarities, the neighborhood assemblies and *interbarriales* were hijacked by far-left political parties with no real popular support, and the human rights organizations were placated by government action on behalf of their original goals of justice and punishment for military violators (particularly after Kirchner’s election in 2003).

Bolivia and Ecuador’s opposition movements have shown more of an ability to repeatedly engage in large-scale popular mobilization. This is surprising, given the existence of ethnic, cultural, and geographic divisions as well of a lack of large middle classes, which often are the standard bearers for “national identity.” It bears repeating that the nationwide protests seen in these countries were not purely the work of indigenous, peasant, or poor-people’s movements but wide alliances encompassing the middle classes, white collar unions, NGOs, and moderate political actors. Without a doubt, the success of CONAIE in Ecuador and of the tin mining and

cocalero movements in Ecuador provide stable leadership within civil society, such that when these organizations choose to mobilize, they can often count on a certain amount of support. At the same time, the unsuccessful protests led by CONAIE in March of 2006 show that the emergence of coalitions across civil society is not automatic and cannot be taken for granted. It is clear that the continuous ability to mobilize multitudes of citizens is partly the result of the successful organization of indigenous communities in both countries (Zamosc 2004; Yashar 2005) and of peasants and miners in Bolivia. Nevertheless, in both nations the major demands of the protest movements have been towards increasing the abilities of states to control national resources and distribute wealth more equally, not towards dispersing political power among competing worldviews, and certainly not towards radically changing the structure of liberal democratic institutions.

The attempts on the part of several social movements in Latin America to create new types of politics, to demand recognition for cultural or ethnic traditions long ignored by national elites and state institutions, and to form new identities based on shared life experiences at the local level are indubitably important. Since many in Latin America remain impoverished, ignored and often actively discriminated against by national and local governments, the development of communal forms of organization can be crucial for the provision of vital necessities to people across the region. Social movements such as Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the *Zapatistas* in Mexico, and the Landless Peasant Movement in Brazil have synthesized daily communal interactions with political action. This has prompted some theorists in Latin America to propose the possibility that systemic political change is possible

through these communal identities (e.g., Mattini 2000 and 2003; Colectivo Situaciones 2001 and 2002, Zibechi 2003). Some maintain a structuralist understanding of society and emphasize that change most common from “the civil society from below” (Houtart 2001, p. 66), but this is coupled, as Gideon Baker (1998a) has noted with a renewed hope in “voluntarism” – the ability of collectives to understand their inferior social position and act in order to change it.

These authors neglect to notice the incompatibility, in Hudson Meadwell’s (1995) terms, of pre-modern forms of organization with the trappings of modernity: national states, globalized communications, and so forth. In an attempt to combat what they see the no-exit nature of modernity, they offer a “post-modern” revolution grounded on pre-modern communal ties that is as theoretically problematic as it is divorced from actual political practice. This somewhat eclectic mix is evident in Luis Mattini’s (2003) contention that:

Today nobody can claim “scientifically” that we are headed towards a new and real emancipation or we continue our long march to highly technological barbarism. We do perceive that we are experiencing a formidable civilizational rupture and [...] we assume that liberty is not a state, but an act, independent of final results. This “expression of desires,” this ontological exigency, is a part of concrete social practices (p. 229).

Ana Dinerstein (2003b) approaches this challenge through the lens of civil society:

Whereas the concept of civil society produces identification with the state through the notion of separation and independence, the negative concept allows a critique of the state since it overcomes the political abstraction and the violence of the homogenization implicit in the general category of citizen. It implies a struggle to transform civil society into a subject (p. 195).

The problem which Meadwell identifies in theories such as Cohen and Arato’s – that their conception of civil society assumes homogeneity when none exists – is

exacerbated by these theorists' *rejection* of homogeneity, making it the actual unification of different groups and different identities almost self-contradictory. It seems more useful to acknowledge, as Bert Klandermans (1994) puts it, that the construction of identities within social movements involve "a plurality of ideas and significations that followers attribute to their movement and the problems that motivate it" (p. 175). In fact, as is clearly seen in the Latin American protests, social movements have no intention of abandoning those elements of modernity on which theorists such as Mattini, Dinerstein, Zibechi, or the members of Colectivo Situaciones place the blame for current social ills due to their "totalizing" efforts. As with works on civil society and social movements that emphasize the need to avoid the colonization of the social on the part of the state and emphasize "cultural politics" – i.e., "when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other" (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998, p. 7) – this perspective fails to acknowledge that for a large part of Latin Americans the theoretically obsolete notions of nationality and the welfare state remain very much legitimate. They are too concerned about poverty, hunger, disease, corruption, and all the other matters that directly affect their daily lives. For better or for worse, the disillusionment felt in many countries over the failure of democracy and neoliberal reforms to solve these problems has precipitated at least an attempt to find a different alternative, but one that embraces national pride and demands more state involvement in society rather than less.

A national-level shared identity is, according to liberal thinkers such as Ernest Gellner (1983 and 1994) and Liah Greenfeld (1992), necessary to maintain a strong

civil society. Yet, the Latin American cases show that, as constructivist scholars have argued, this identity is mutable and particularly vulnerable during “critical junctures” in national history (Collier and Collier 1993; Golob 2003). The adoption of neoliberal economic programs, and the necessary structural transformations that they imply, represented critical junctures in the countries under discussion, particularly when they occurred hand-in-hand with political transitions. The appearance of mass protest movements reflected not only difficult economic outcomes but also the unwillingness or inability of sitting elites to create a new national narrative to legitimize national policy. This is plainest in the case of Costa Rica, where the dominant PLN and PUSC continue to insist (quite incongruously, at times) that freer markets are the best way to continue the social-democratic legacy of the country, but also can be seen in the mixture of populism and neoliberalism of the PJ under Menem, as well as of purportedly “center-left” leaders such as Abdala Bucaram and later Gutiérrez in Ecuador, and Jaime Paz Zamora in Bolivia.

It is not possible to conclude from the case studies that the ideas and goals identified here are the dominant ones in each of the four countries. The claim here is that they were the preeminent ones expressed in nationwide mobilizations of civil society. Whether such mobilizations necessarily have longer-term repercussions in national politics is an issue for further study, but their impact is apparent in the cases discussed here. In all four countries, national elections immediately following the mobilizations showed healthy national dialogues on issues of economic development, social welfare, and the need to reform political institutions to reduce improper behavior at the highest levels of government. Ecuador’s Lucio Gutierrez, a former

military officer and supported of the protests against Mahuad, was elected President with strong backing from CONAIE and activist social organizations. Evo Morales similarly gained the presidency in Bolivia, his program of social reform reinforced by his indigenous roots and lower-class background. Argentina's Kirchner, though a leading figure of the long-ruling PJ, was widely seen as more left-leaning than his rivals, and one of his first acts in office was directed at insuring the prosecution of human rights' abusers before 1983, an issue of significant appeal to social movements. In Costa Rica, Ottón Solís almost defeated the supposedly invincible Oscar Arias, in an election that revolved around the looming Central American Free-Trade Agreement.

It may be the case that the demands of protesters across the Latin American region – as I understand them, for the return to state policies based on welfare-state principles and for respect of national sovereignty – are unrealistic, or that they will hinder future economic growth. For many critics, the increased activity of social movements in Latin America during the 1990's and the explosion of protests in the current decade represent an unwillingness to understand the undesirability of returning to – to use a ubiquitous phrase – “the failed policies of the past.” This is an empirical question, perhaps the most divisive one in Latin America today, since it is clear that the economic programs instituted to replace the “failed policies” have fallen far short of their original promise. In this work, I have attempted to demystify the presence of “the voice of the people” in the uprisings in Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Bolivia, in order to place them in the context of dominant elite conflicts in each country and to reject premature statements of a coming revolution.

Nevertheless, the popular mobilizations discussed in this work expressed explicit demands on the part of immense popular actors. To ignore them altogether, in favor of abstract economic models and established orthodoxy among experts, seems an abandonment of one of the fundamental tenets of the democracy that everyone claims to value so greatly.

As indicated previously, it would seem that the lack of enthusiasm for this new wave of mass protest in Latin America stems from concerns over its deleterious effects on the region's democracy. Yet, every one of these movements expressed itself in democratic terms. Not only in the sense that democracy (understood as the will of the majority) and social movements are conceptually connected – as Charles Tilly (2003) aptly puts it, the message inherent in social mobilization is: “We are here, we support this cause, there are lots of us, we know how to act together, and we could cause trouble if we wanted to” (p. 24) – but they explicitly saw their demands as part of a broader conception of democracy. In addition, all of the cases discussed show a significant amount of restraint on the part of the opposition movement, which had opportunities to reject established political practices but chose not to do so. This can be gleaned from the immediate abdication of power by the impromptu *junta* that took over in Ecuador in January of 2000, but also by demonstrations in Bolivia initially supporting President Mesa and by the willingness of social movements to meet in negotiations with Fernando de la Rúa's successors in Argentina. The popular opposition always demanded the establishment of improved channels of communication between society and the state rather than replacing political institutions (even in Argentina, despite the call for “all of them to go”).

It should be noted, however, that unbridled enthusiasm for the type of mass mobilizations seen here potentially ignores some troubling issues. To begin with, as has been noted by several analysts (e.g., Naím 2004; Peeler 2004; Valenzuela 2004), such overwhelming popular reactions cause severe instability – social, political, and economic. Particularly in still-fragile democracies such as Bolivia and Ecuador, the risk of an outright return to authoritarianism may be small, but it is not to be discounted altogether. Attempts on the part of national governments to control the protests often led to fierce clashes between demonstrators and security forces, and although some blame must fall on political leaders for resorting to violence to quell dissent, every one of the cases saw radical opposition groups or angry mobs attacking individuals and destroying public and private property. The images of individuals in lower-middle-class and working-class neighborhoods in Argentina wielding firearms in order to protect their homes and families from mobs, of small-business owners crying over the loss of their livelihoods, are reminders of the dark side of popular action, which can all too easily turn to wanton vandalism.

Perhaps most importantly, given the importance of framing and articulation in the creation and maintenance of popular movements, is the very real danger of populist and semi-authoritarian leaders taking advantage of the energy of the mass mobilizations in order to solidify their power at the expense of democracy, even if they do so *in the name of* democracy. The most prominent warning sign is the career of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who did not come to power following civil society mobilizations, but has been shown to enjoy the support of large sections of his country's citizenry, often expressed in mass demonstrations. Despite gaining power

behind legitimate criticisms of Venezuela's democratic regime and widespread discontent with established political elites, and despite drafting and effecting a National Constitution that opens up governance to citizen input, Chávez has solidified political power around himself and his close political allies and created a cult of personality reminiscent of far darker times (see McCoy and Meyers 2004). Some critics have argued that Kirchner and Evo Morales have abused their newfound popularity to the detriment of democratic institutions in similar ways (see, e.g., Castañeda 2006), but regardless of the veracity of these charges the potential for such regression is very real precisely by virtue of the characteristics of civil society at the core of this study.

Unified and mobilized civil societies, I have argued here, are products of necessary simplifications of a vast array of problems, conflicts, demands, and goals into articulated narratives. Given that the citizens of Latin America are all too often faced with such dire challenges that they have little or no time to worry about abstract issues such as democratic consolidation, and given that the cases discussed above and the history of the region in general show a propensity for strong leaders supported from the grassroots to arise, the danger of charismatic figures establishing themselves as national saviors is all too real. The specter of populism has made appearances in the recent past, with Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru, for example, and the disappointments of democratic governance in the last two decades may lead the hardest hit Latin Americans, who polls continuously show to be supportive of democracy in theory, to put it aside for the sake of more tangible

rewards. As Mafalda, a beloved Latin American cartoon character puts it, “what is urgent almost always distracts away from what is important.”

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- ***Unions and Professional Organizations:*** Asociación de Profesores de Segunda Enseñanza; Asociación Nacional de Educadores; Asociación Nacional de Empleados Públicos y Privados; Asociación Nacional de Técnicos en Telecomunicaciones; Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores de Telefonía y Telecomunicaciones; Asociación Sindical de Trabajadores de Acueductos y Alcantarillados; Central de Trabajadores de Costa Rica; Central del Movimiento de los Trabajadores Costarricenses; Central General de Trabajadores; Confederación de Trabajadores RERUM Novarum; Federación de Trabajadores de Limón; Mesa Nacional Campesina; Movimiento de Trabajadores y Campesinos; Sindicato de Trabajadores de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones; Sindicato de Educadores Costarricenses; Sindicato de Empleados de la Universidad de Costa Rica; Sindicato de Empleados del Banco Nacional; Sindicato de Empleados del Banco Popular; Sindicato de Empleados del ICE; Sindicato de Empleados del Ministerio de Hacienda ; Sindicato de Empleados del Patronato Nacional de la Infancia; Sindicato de Empleados Universitarios; Sindicato de Ingenieros y Profesionales del ICE; Sindicato de la Universidad Nacional; Sindicato de Trabajadores de JAPDEVA; Sindicato de Trabajadores Agrícolas y de Plantaciones; Sindicato de Trabajadores del Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía; Sindicato de Trabajadores Muelleros, Ferroviarios y Marítimos; Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros, Químicos, y Afines; Sindicato del Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje; Sindicato Patriótico de la Educación; Taxistas de Alajuela, Heredia, y Zona Atlántica; Unión de Empleados de la Caja; Unión de Empleados de la UNED; Unión del Personal del Instituto Nacional de Seguros; Unión Nacional de Trabajadores de Obras Públicas y Transportes; UPANACIONAL.

Print Media

- *La Nación* (daily)
- *La República* (daily)
- *Diario Extra* (daily)
- *The Tico Times* (daily)
- *Semanario Universidad* (weekly)

Radio and Televisión

- *Radio Monumental*
- *Radio Sinaí*
- *Radio Cultural*
- *Radio América*
- *Noticias Repretel – Canal 6*
- *Televisión Canal 7*
- *Canal 13*
- *Combo Callejero* – documentary by Pablo Cárdenas

Internet sites

http://semueve.netfirms.com/arch_combo/combo_ice.htm
<http://www.kasandra.org>
http://www.geocities.com/andresmora/costa_rica.htm
<http://www.cqweb.com>
<http://escalix/freepage/combo>

Email addresses used to disseminate information:

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Interviews

Arias, Ana – Dean of the School of Anthropology and Sociology, UCR – April 2001
Interviewed by Laura Fuentes Belgrave (Semueve.com)

Carranza, Carlos – Dean of the School of Sociology, UNA – June 6, 2003
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Chaverri, Danilo – Minsiter of the Presidency (in 2000) – March 21, 2000
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Cortés, Alberto – Student activist leader (in 2000) and current head of Master in
Political Science, UCR – March 17, 2005
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De la Cruz, Vladimir – Leader of *Fuerza Democrática* (in 2000) – January 23, 2004
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Fischel Volio, Astrid – Vice President of Costa Rica (in 2000) – January 22, 2004
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Vargas, William – Journalist and representative in the Mixed Commission for the
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