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The Politics of Everyday Subversion: Crisis, COVID-19, and Coming-of-Age in Córdoba,
Argentina

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By Abby Flickinger

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the
Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies

Croft Institute for International Studies

Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

The University of Mississippi

University, Mississippi

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Approved:

Advisor: Dr. Marcos Mendoza

Reader: Dr. Oliver Dinius

Reader: Dr. Jesse Cromwell

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ABSTRACT

Abby Flickinger: The Politics of Everyday Subversion: Crisis, COVID-19, and Coming-of-Age in Córdoba, Argentina

This thesis seeks to explore the impact of converging political, economic, and public health crises in Córdoba, Argentina in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on youth and practices of protest and resistance. Utilizing interviews, participant observations and ethnographic data in addition to economic and public health statistics, media coverage, and government statements I establish the basis and context for this triple crisis, as well as the tactics appropriated to criticize the government and expression disillusionment — protests and subversion. Despite modifications to public health concerns, the Argentine democratic tradition of protesting returned against government wishes, and became a canvas of expression for new subversive meanings to enhance movement messages. Protests also became a place to express local culture and youth subculture, as young people appropriated private and public spaces to recreate cultural practices in an attempt to rebuild a sense of normalcy. Cognizant of the nuance and complexities of pandemic management, young people sought not to rebel and topple the government, but rather entered a state of self-governance, choosing to undermine government protocols they deemed unnecessary to return themselves to a sense of normalcy the government had failed to, and to reconstruct a semblance of the future that has been dismantled by the ensuing triple crisis.

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Introduction

On March 20th, 2020, as the Argentine government declared a nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Overnight the city of Córdoba, Argentina transformed into a ghost town; bars packed the night before sat empty, the loud morning commute silenced, and police stood guard on every corner. The lockdown quickly transformed from a two-week precautionary measure to an ongoing reality. Businesses were boarded up, tens of thousands lost their jobs, and lines grew outside of food banks. COVID-19 case numbers began to rise from tens to hundreds. This early self-induced paralysis was heralded, and set the tone for Latin America. However, this lockdown approach began to break down, cases skyrocketed, and Argentines faced a difficult situation of convergent political, economic, and public health crises.

Research Question

The onset of COVID-19 converged with a preexisting economic recession and a political transition from a center-right neoliberal administration to a center-left Peronist administration. Córdoba, the nation's second city, found itself in a multi-dimensional economic, political, and public health crisis that fundamentally restructured everyday life while calling the future into question as the result of state's failure to protect the population on these fronts. This begs the central research question: How have the people of Córdoba responded to this triple crisis catalyzed by COVID-19? This project explores this question through the analysis of federal government policies and protest practices in Córdoba in response to this triple crisis. This thesis specifically focuses on youth society in Córdoba and practices of protest and resistance.

To answer this question, this thesis concretely examines three key sub-questions. Firstly, what policies taken the Macri administration (2015-2019) and the current Fernández administration (2019-present) have contributed to political and economic turmoil that then intersected with and exacerbated the COVID-19 pandemic? Secondly, how did the people of Córdoba mobilize politically and organize protests in 2020 throughout the phases of lockdown to highlight these crises and denounce government responses? Thirdly, what was the response of youth society in Córdoba to this triple crisis and how did young adults cultivate new forms of interacting, socializing, and protesting in this situation? Each of these questions will be addressed in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Argument

This thesis argues that Cordobense youth became disillusioned by state failures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and adequately navigate the economic fallout of these failed approaches, and embraced a politics of everyday subversion. Rather than taking to the streets to topple the government or organize strikes, Cordobense youth expressed disenchantment with the government but understood the exceptionalism of the situation. Cordobense youth turned to practices of subversion that flouted the public health restrictions put in place by the government, and embraced a return to togetherness, dancing, music, and socializing—youth subcultural rebellion. This became a form of youth protest against the failures of the government and the sense that the future possibilities of the nation were being constrained. They sought to restore a sense

of normalcy to their lives, motivated not to combat the government, but rather to form a sense of solidarity and re-create a recognizable future for themselves.

Methodology and Overview

This thesis is a mixed-methods study of the political, economic, and public health crisis in Argentina, its impact on traditional social and cultural phenomena, and subsequent your responses in Córdoba, Argentina. To do this, I conducted IRB approved interviews with 10 young people from Córdoba, all middle class and in their early twenties, with a mixture of male and female participants. In addition to interviews, I gathered ethnographic data through participant observation. I lived in the city from March 1st until the end of December, 2020, experiencing normal life before lockdown in addition to COVID management measures. I conducted research in public spaces like cafes, bars, restaurants, and storefronts, as well as parks, plazas, and the street itself. I also witnessed numerous protests, youth practices, and had countless informal conversations covering topics from Argentina and politics to COVID-19 and how life has been fundamentally changed since the onset of the pandemic.

This thesis contains four chapters. Chapter 1 is a literature review. This discusses the scholarship on: 1) the contemporary political economy of Argentina; 2) the public health situation in Argentina; 3) COVID-19 in Argentina; and 4) national protest culture. Chapter 2 examines the political, economic, and public health policies pursued by the Macri and Fernández administrations. This chapter draws upon economic statistics and public health data in addition to public government statements. Chapter 3 focuses on protests and activism in Córdoba as a response to the failures of the

government. This relies on participation observation conducted in Córdoba in 2020 and data collected from observations and encounters with protests, as well as photos, videos, and media accounts. Chapter 4 explores the political responses of youth society in Córdoba. The data for this chapter comes from participant observation and interview conducted with young Cordobenses.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In this literature review, I begin with an overview of the modern Argentine political economy focusing on events and policies essential to understanding the current landscape. Next, I examine the public health system, its political influencers, and the current health insurance system. The subsequent section offers background on COVID-19, and a brief overview of its impact in Argentina. Finally, I discuss Argentina's storied protest culture, highlighting key events and their lasting influence, as well as contributions to Argentina's democracy.

Political Economy

Carlos Menem served as the president of Argentina from 1989 until 1999 as a member of the Justicialist or Peronist Party. Menemism, the term coined to describe his political approach, is a conservative platform (Calvo 2012: 157), and defined by its neoliberal approach (Stefanoni 2019: 225), with an aggressive stance to tackling the hyperinflation and chronic instability. Four key principles that defined Menem's neoliberal approach included trade liberalization, privatization, labor reforms, and financialization. This led to the weakening of the social safety net and deregulation of the labor market, resulting in lower wages (Wylde 2016: 8-9). His actions rang true to his 1991 declaration that redirecting Argentina into stability would be "a tough, costly, and severe adjustment", requiring 'major surgery without anesthesia'" (Wylde 2016: 8). Menem's rise to power in the wake of an economic collapse gave him strategic negotiating powers that permitted him to achieve his desired economic goals to further the neoliberal agenda. Decentralization shifted many responsibilities to the provinces,

like education and healthcare, with an execution strategy that forced provinces to align with the national government in order to receive funding. Though ending hyperinflation, Menem's market reform strategy would backfire, resulting in growing unemployment, poverty, and income inequality. His administration set the stage for the largest economic collapse in Argentine history in 2001 (Levitsky 2003: 152).

The years 1999-2003 are an exceptional time marked by economic collapse and a revolving door of presidents — Fernando de la Rúa, Ramon Puerta, Eduardo Camaño, Adolfo Rodríguez Sa, and finally, Eduardo Duhalde, who arranged for the subsequent democratic election. Though recession began in 1998, it would not reach its height until the *convertibilidad*, an economic policy that pegged the Argentine peso to the US dollar, thus draining the national cash reserves, was undone and the peso decreased by nearly 70% (Levitsky 2003: 155) in a matter of weeks. This disastrous policy decision, along with the massive national debt accrued under Menem, and reduction in taxes resulted in a 25% unemployment rate, and more than half of all Argentinians living in poverty in 2002 (Levitsky 2003: 155). This legacy remains with the Argentine people, as many still look to foreign markets for wealth and savings security, constantly aware of the precariousness of hyperinflation and instability.

The 2003 election of center-left Peronist Néstor Kirchner pushed Argentina onto a new course. Kirchner was widely successful, economically and socially, brokering debt reduction with foreign creditors, putting policies in place that led to a 70% increase in real wages, and overhauling the Supreme Court. This led to the annulment of laws limiting persecution of human rights violations by the 1976-83 dictatorial regime

(Levitsky 2008: 17-18). Conversely, his presidency is also remembered for concentrating executive power. Kirchner issued 232 executive decrees during his tenure and established provincial reliance on federal fiscal transfers (Levitsky 2008: 19). The Kirchner administration put in place a new development approach called neo-developmentalism that rejected neoliberalism and embraced stronger state control of the economy and an emphasis on agricultural exports (Mendoza 2018).

Succeeded by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in 2007, Kirchnerism continued and grew into a distinct political tradition (Mendoza 2018). Whereas Nestor Kirchner's economic policies were supported by a global commodities boom that permitted the expansion of social programs, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was less successful. Her administration's attempt to raise agricultural export taxes in 2008 dramatically backfired, resulting in massive protests and a battle with the media. Midterm elections resulted in massive party losses (Calvo 2012: 155). However, the continued commodity boom and the lack of a true opposition front led to her reelection in 2011. The subsequent drop in commodity prices resulted in cuts to subsidy programs, and growing redistributionist policies. Inflation grew sharply but was intentionally manipulating downward by administration meddling in the INDEC economic statistics office of the federal government (Calvo 2012: 157-159). In 2015, Fernández de Kirchner's chosen candidate, Daniel Scioli, lost to the center-right candidate, Mauricio Macri. The struggling economy was then handed over to a non-Peronist candidate for the first time in decades.

Mauricio Macri appealed to conservatives and anti-Peronist voters, particularly the alienated middle class that did not reap equal benefits from social spending

programs implemented under Kirchnerism. His single term began with promise, before falling victim to economic forces — the peso waned, the comfortable middle class lost purchasing power, poverty and unemployment rose, and real wages declined. He was defeated in 2019 by the ‘Frente de Todos’ Peronist ticket that ran Alberto Fernández with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as his running mate. These two presidencies will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

Public Health

The Argentine healthcare system is the most fragmented in Latin America (Bernal 2019: 29), following a decentralization that took place largely under Menem in the 1990s. The transition was abrupt, poorly planned, underfunded, resulting in a massive variance from province to province as well as between municipalities across the country. The federalist political system affords each province with great powers of self-determination. However, many provinces shifted the burden of directing the healthcare sector onto municipalities. The healthcare infrastructure thus varies widely: poorer provinces and rural areas are faced with shortages of medical personnel, whereas richer zones and metropolitan areas have sufficient medical providers. The lack of adequate access to healthcare perpetuates an underestimation of existing health problems and overestimation of an individual’s overall health, reinforcing the correlation between poverty and morbidity (De Maio 2007: 287).

The public health system is shaped by political influence. Each province is regulated by a Minister of Health without national oversight or coordination, which, when paired with a system established on insufficient funding, leaves the healthcare

system reliant on governal leadership (Bernal 2019). However, a 2019 study reviewing mayoral alignments and healthcare provisions in the Conurbano — the densely populated municipalities surrounding the City of Buenos Aires — since the 1980s found that communities with mayors who did not align with the governor had superior health services compared to those in alignment (Garay 2019). Mayoral alignment resulted in weakened healthcare infrastructure and lower healthcare funding. Due to the automatic provincial transfers associated with providing healthcare services, non aligned mayors rely on these to build political coalitions through strong health services (Garay 2019). Those mayors who rely on the patronage networks that come from alignment tend to govern municipalities with higher poverty rates (Garay 2019: 107).

The health insurance system has three different types of coverage: [fill in the blank here]. Due to decentralization, underfunding, and the rise of private insurance, there are some groups with double coverage while others are insufficiently insured. The tri-part system is further subdivided, and varies between provinces, resulting in inefficient risk pooling and variable degrees of coverage. Publicly funded healthcare is primarily comprised of those not eligible for other programs, namely the impoverished or members of the informal sector. Social health insurance accounts for 54% of the population (Cavagnero 2010: 5). These plans—and what they cover—are negotiated by unions. Private insurance, viewed as the highest quality option, is made up of those who can afford to buy-in. Receiving subsidized healthcare is increasingly difficult, as healthcare services are underfunded and subsidization requests are denied at higher rates.

The current public health situation in Argentina is juggling the desire for private and universal options. The drastic changes from administration to administration has created policy inconsistencies in funding, access, and coverage.

COVID-19

SARS-CoV-2, better known as COVID-19, is a novel coronavirus that arose in Wuhan, China and became a global pandemic—this was declared by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020 (Tagliazucchi 2020: 1). It most commonly manifests as a respiratory syndrome, with many general symptoms overlapping with influenza; upon infection, the virus attacks the respiratory system causing general discomfort, cough, fever, difficulty breathing, and in advancing cases pneumonia, dyspnea, and even death (Russo 2020: 347). Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been more than 132,000,000 confirmed cases and over 2,880,000 deaths (WHO 2021: 1). Impact varies around the globe, but as the virus has progressively spread, the Americas have been hit the hardest, accounting for more than 57,000,000 confirmed cases and 1,384,000 confirmed deaths as of April 2021 (WHO 2021: 1). Myriad containment strategies have been implemented, from complete lockdowns in effected regions of China to virtual non-action in Brazil. Other nations have balanced quarantines, social distancing, and obligatory mask use. Success is impacted by political, social, economic, and public health factors, making a universal strategy impossible, and leaving higher-risk populations vulnerable to strategic failures within and across borders.

The first case of COVID-19 in Argentina was confirmed on March 3rd in Buenos Aires, and a complete lockdown was declared, beginning at 0:00 on March 20th. The

national reaction was swift and aggressive, sealing the national and provincial borders, grounding all flights, closing all businesses except grocery stores and pharmacies, and restricting movement with police checkpoints on major thoroughfares and within metropolitan areas. The initial rise in cases slowly decreased with time, before the national quarantine mandate expired on April 26th, after which provinces with lower case numbers began to relax measures, and densely populated or highly infected areas remained under strict measures (Tagliazucchi 2020: 3). The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA), composed of the province of Buenos Aires and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, holds the lion-share of cases, in addition to the highest population density. Reported cases have risen steeply since reopening measures began, particularly accelerating through the months of August in September. In response, the government has reimplemented many lockdown measures in areas with declining hospital capacities.

The impacts of Argentina's stringent measures, which endured for more than 100 days in many places, range from drastic economic fallout to psychological effects related to lockdown. Business shutdowns led to thousands of permanent closures and loss of employment, disrupting both the formal and informal sectors, and leaving many in newfound or worsening poverty and mounting food and housing insecurity (Alzúa 2020). Social distancing and isolation led to widespread mental and physical health declines, as well as a rise in reports of domestic violence and resulting deaths (Polischuk 2020). Assistance services vary greatly from province to province, and between municipalities themselves, leaving many without options or relief. The psychological stress caused by fear-oriented media has also led to behavioral and social fallout, as

collective interest is exhausted, misinformation grows, and apathy takes over for some, leading to polarization (Bavel 2020).

Argentina's Protest Culture

A critical extension of the democratic system, protest culture in Argentina is built upon tradition and memory, as demonstrations utilize a wide array of tactics to invoke emotion, displaying intention, and incite change. Over the last thirty years, major protests present different sets of tactics—the political repertoire that is available to activists (Fuentes 2012: 463). Through collective action, political actors command national attention, influence the government, and transform their own social identities (Wolff 2007: 7). From the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo protesting the disappearance of their children under the dictatorship (1976-1983) to the protests against COVID-19 restrictions, protestors draw upon a diverse set of tactics to create national solidarity and work to change existing conditions (Wolff 2007:9; Fuentes 2012:452; Lapenga 2015:73).

One major protest form is the *cacerolazo*. *Cacerolazos* involve the banging of empty pots and pans in the streets. This is disruptive due to the noise, grabs public attention, and directs it to the symbolism of empty pots and pans. The first *cacerolazo* erupted spontaneously with the economic collapse in 2001, symbolic of the empty dishes of the people as their currency devalued due to the unpegging of the Argentine peso from the US dollar, and the *corralito* that limited the amount of money that could be withdrawn from banks (Epstein 2003: 6). The impact of this crisis was not just on the poor and working classes, but also on the middle class (Villalón 2002: 91). Since its

inception, the cacerolazo has been a tool utilized beyond the framework of a political party or union, expressing discontent. The simple protest tools (pots and pans) give it universal accessibility to all demographics. It also has a deep resonance and ingrained meaning associated with the banging of empty pots and pans because there is nothing to be put in them (Villalón 2002: 91).

Another key protest form is associated with the piqueteros. The piquetero phenomenon grew to prominence in the mid-1990s. Piqueteros are known for the ‘corta de ruta’ (Lapenga 2015: 2) in which participants organize and block roads to put pressure on the government and raise awareness for their particular issue (Wolff 2007: 7). These early actions against the neoliberal Menem administration involved drawing attention to unemployment and the failure of the center-right Peronist party politics at the time (Villalón 107, Lapenga 2015: 71, Epstein 2003: 4). Beginning with a blockade of National Route 22 following a layoff from a YPF oil facility, the piqueteros become synonymous with the unemployed and the workers’ movement (Epstein 2003: 2, Wolff 2007: 6). This protest style was so effective at paralyzing parts of the country that provincial and federal administrations attempted to incorporate the demands of activists into their platforms. The center-left Kirchner government developed social programs to address some their concerns.

A very different movement erupted in 2008 regarding export taxes on farming commodities. This movement of farmers—small, medium, and large—used the tactics of the piqueteros but had a different political orientation. In 2008, the global price of soy was high. The Fernández de Kirchner administration moed to raise the retenciones — export taxes on soy. A coalition of farmers utilized the roadblock strategies to protest the

tax increase (Lapenga 2015: 76). During this dispute, the historically fragmented agricultural sector united against government tax increases that were intended to be used to fund redistribution efforts related to social programs (Richardson 2009: 231; Mangonnet 2020: 1228). The movement was successful and forced President Fernández de Kirchner to retract the retenciones increase.

There is also the opportunity for symbolic performances that protest existing government policies. The Plaza del Maya protesters used white scarves during the harsh dictatorship-era. Mothers and grandmother silently walked around the Plaza de Mayo outside of the Casa Rosada protesting government violence against dissidents. These scarves then reappeared during the movement to legalize abortion. These ‘protest performances’ (Fuentes 2012: 450) use aesthetics and symbolism to create meaning among onlookers (Fuentes 2012: 459). Symbolic performances may also be semi-comedic or absurd, most notably an instance of a family taking their summer vacation to the bank, equipped with beach chairs, towels, and bathing suits, to express their discontent with the corralito. The family physically represented the invasion of their personal property by the bank (and government), which was felt by much of the middle class. This ‘active appropriation of space’ (Fuentes 2012: 456) reinforces the idea that protests and movements seek to inspire participation, disrupt specific patterns, or invoke memory (Villalón 2002: 42, Fuentes 2012: 451).

Conclusion

In this literature review I establish the foundation for the current triple crisis — politically, economically, and regarding public health. I also discuss traditional response

methods, namely protests, as a means of democratic participation and holding the government accountable. In this thesis I am to contribute the first study of youth protest and everyday subversion in Córdoba, Argentina during the pandemic based on participant observation and interviews.

Chapter 2: The Triple Crisis

Introduction

This chapter examines the emergences of a triple crisis with political, economic, and public health dimensions. It begins with a look at the Macri administration and the economic turmoil that ensued in the second half of his term, leading to a massive rise in inflation and an IMF emergency loan. It then examines the onset of the pandemic and the public health emergency this created. Finally, it investigates the Fernández government and the interaction between political, health, and economic problems. This chapter argues that the trifold scope of Argentina's current crisis — political legitimacy questioned following neoliberal failures under Macri and inherited by Fernández, a pre-existing recession further intensified by the impacts of COVID, and the pandemic induced public health crisis. This chapter offers context for disillusionment as mistrust was fostered on multiple fronts, each contributing to the worsening of the others. To do this, this chapter methodologically draws on data from INDEC, CAME, WHO, and the IMF, as well as government public health decrees and statements.

The Economy Under Macri (2015-2019)

Following the economic collapse at the turn of the millennium¹, the Argentine economy has remained on precarious footing, with investors wary and quick to panic. The administration of Mauricio Macri proved to be no different, unfolding as a tale of two halves. The first two years of his term — 2016 and 2017 — saw prosperity and signs

¹ Beginning in 1998, Argentina fell into an economic depression that would last until 2002, resulting in massive nationwide protests in 2001 following a default on \$132 million USD of debt which sent more than half of the population into poverty.

of growth under his ‘gradualistic’ (Sturzenegger 2019: 1) or slow transition back to a neoliberal economic model. The second two years—2018 and 2019—were marked by policy failure. Macri’s policies ultimately led to a deepening recession, the flight of investors, and the turn toward the IMF. The Argentine people too lost trust in the administration, visible in the primary presidential elections which opponent Alberto Fernández won handily, by nearly 16 percentage points (Gedan 2019: 1). This sparked an even larger investor exodus for fear of the return of Peronism to the Casa Rosada, which became a reality a few weeks later.

Macri’s economic plan began by enacting several policy changes that served as central tenants of his administration on the campaign trail, particularly involving taxation. Key pillars include “Workers are not going to pay income taxes²” and the “Reduction and elimination of export duties, opening of exports and elimination of ROE (Registry of Sworn Declarations of Foreign Sales), general reduction of the levels of effective tax pressure and creation of the Ministry of Agroindustry³”. The administration immediately sought out income, corporate, and export tax cuts, all key pieces to market liberalization. A platform that garnered support in the agrarian provinces, Macri rolled back retenciones — export taxes, in this case specifically for agricultural products — to fractions of those imposed under the previous Peronist administration. Wheat, corn, and sunflower retenciones were eliminated, and soy, the nation’s most profitable

² “Los trabajadores no van a pagar [el] impuesto a las Ganancias” (“Las 20 Promesas De Campana De Mauricio Macri.” Clarín)

³ Reducción y eliminación de los derechos de exportación, apertura de las exportaciones y eliminaciones de los ROE (Registro de Declaraciones Juradas de Ventas al Exterior), reducción general de los niveles de presión tributaria efectiva y creación del Ministerio de Agroindustria (“Macri prometió “eliminar las retenciones a las exportaciones” si gana las elecciones en 2015.” Infobae)

agricultural product, saw a drop in retenciones from 35% to 30% (Slipczuk 2020). These retenciones had long been used to manage fiscal deficits, particularly during the soy boom in 2008, in which higher global market prices allowed soy production to fund the expansion of many social programs under Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Wylde 2010: 11). Finally, Macri lifted currency controls to create a ‘floating currency’, based on market supply and demand rather than a set government exchange rate. This led to the devaluation of the peso, making Argentine products, especially agricultural goods, more competitive in the global market.

These tax cut and liberalization policies expanded the fiscal deficit. Macri took steps to remedy the shortfall through austerity measures. First, there were cuts to government subsidies for energy and transportation, which greatly contributed to the deficit — which reached 6.3% of the national GDP by 2017 (IMF 2017), but had helped protect real wages for the lower and working classes. To meet fiscal shortfalls, Macri turned to borrowing while the Argentine economy went through the process of liberalization. To attract foreign capital, the Argentine government had to deal with holdout vulture funds that had refused to restructure bonds related to the debt default of 2001. Macri decided to pay off the vulture funds to the tune of \$4.65 billion (Blitzer 2016: 1). Macri’s strategies showed success initially: inflation dropped to 17% by 2017 after spending a decade fluctuating between 25% and 40% (Kovalski 2019: 4) and his party secured sweeping midterm election wins in the legislature.

The Macri administration’s neoliberal reforms seemed to be achieving the desired goals of decreasing inflation, diminishing public spending, improving GDP, shrinking poverty, and restructuring the economy toward financialization. According to

Sturzenegger (2019), a former central banker (2015-2018) in Argentina, the Macri administration was too successful. Feeling secure in his post-midterm power, Macri sided with the Treasury to pressure the Central Bank into increasing inflation targets: keeping inflation from lowering as quickly as projected by lowering interest rates. This aimed to reduced government spending on pensions, which were a significant contributor to the deficit and could only be readjusted with respect to inflation every three months⁴. However, the Central Bank is understood to be an entity autonomous from the government, despite this not being legally defined. Though investors knew that the former Kirchnerist administrations had influenced the Central Bank, the credibility of the Macri administration—as a neoliberal—turned on maintaining the institution’s neutrality. Macri’s move created a legitimacy crisis for the institution. This incited investor panic and led to a massive reduction in foreign investment. As investors and dollars fled Argentine markets, the peso rapidly devalued, and inflation increased (Sturzenegger 2019). By linking growth to foreign investment attracted by liberalization, the Macri administration was put in a difficult spot once foreign investors fled. To head off default, the government once again—like the previous neoliberal administration of Menem—turned to the IMF, this time for a \$57 billion loan, the largest in the organization’s history. It also increased austerity measures, reintroduced retenciones, and raising interest rates to 60% — the highest in the world at the time, during the second half of 2018 (IMF 2019).

⁴ Pensions make up a significant government expenditure — 7.4% of GDP and 35% of total government spending in 2015. Macri enacted a law in which every 3 months pensions would be modified based on the inflation rate. By slowing the disinflation rate, he would improve the condition of the growing fiscal deficit (MECON 2015) (Dudine 2016).

Figure 1 -Argentine Economic Data from World Development Indicator

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Use of IMF credit (DOD, current US\$)	2,799,231,196.70	2,715,603,927.60	2,876,808,116.40	30,922,512,047.70	46,924,457,621.20
Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$)	11,758,994,011.30	3,260,164,341.80	11,516,861,462.30	11,872,856,662.80	6,663,062,112.00
GDP (current US\$)	594,749,285,413.20	557,531,376,218.00	642,695,864,756.40	519,871,519,807.80	449,663,446,954.10
GDP growth (annual %)	2.7	-2.1	2.7	-2.5	-2.2
GDP per capita (current US\$)	13,789.10	12,790.20	14,591.90	11,683.90	10,006.10

The final nail in the administration's coffin came in 2019's primary elections, essentially a mock run of the presidential election shortly after, in which competitor Alberto Fernández handily defeated Macri. Economic hardships are not uncommon, but the severity of the situation forced Macri to backslide on major campaign promises, namely on retenciones, which weakened support among his voting base. His policies alienated lower and working class Argentines; retenciones were crucial to keeping domestic food prices low and subsidy cuts to basic necessities like utilities led to growing struggles for lower-income brackets. Additionally, food insecurity grew and the cost of living increased⁵. Finally, Argentine skepticism towards the IMF is well known following the organization's perceived role in the 2001-2002 economic crisis that forced millions into poverty and left nearly 1 in 5 unemployed (MacEwan 2014). In addition to these shortcomings, the Peronists united behind the Frente de Todos ticket of Alberto Fernández, as the presidential candidate, with former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, as vice presidential candidate. The Fernández-Fernández ticket ultimately won and ushered in a new era in Argentina politics. The neoliberal experiment ended

⁵ Export oriented populism, utilities from somewhere

after just one term, with a 3.4% decrease in GDP, inflation rates between 240 and 300%, a 10% decrease in per capita income, and rising poverty rates from 2015 to 2019 (Kovalski 2019).

Coronavirus in Argentina

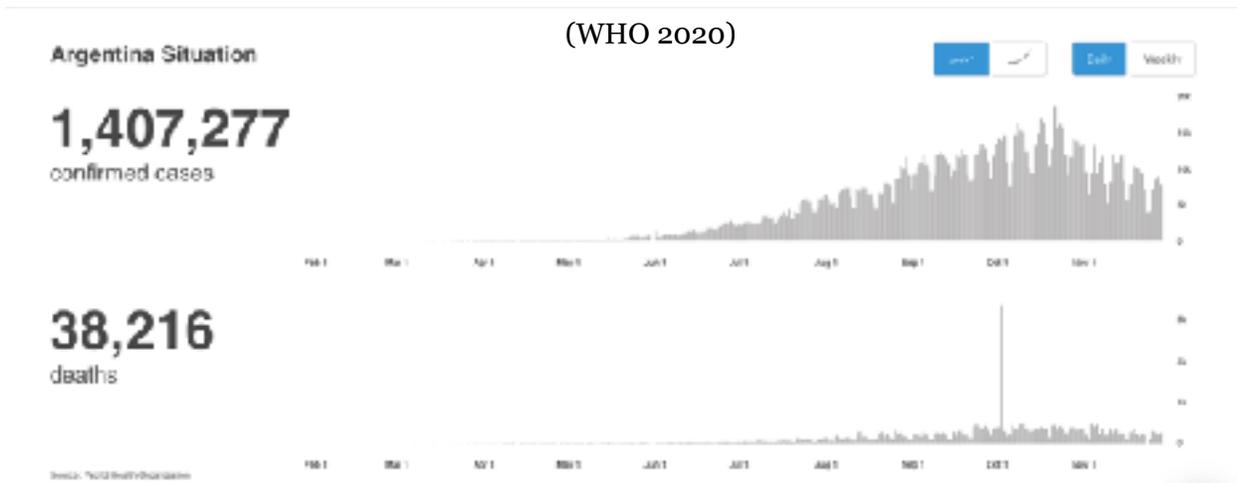
Argentina has been in a recession since 2018 and entering 2020 the IMF forecast an 11.8% contraction in the national GDP (Iglesias 2020). The arrival of the COVID-19 virus turned an already bleak economic outlook into an emergency, as government-mandated closures and restrictions led to the closure of businesses and ground the economy, and life, to a screeching halt.

The first case of COVID-19, a middle-aged man returning from Milan, Italy, was reported on March 3rd in Buenos Aires. Over the next few days, more cases appeared in the capital and other cities around the country. On March 11th, a 14-day mandatory quarantine was enacted for all people entering the country from highly affected regions, including China, the United States, and all of Europe. As reports of community transmission began, President Fernández declared a nationwide lockdown commencing on March 20th ('Argentina: Prioritizing Health...' 2020). The aggressive response was widely heralded, particularly as case numbers were skyrocketing in other parts of the world. All non-essential movement was restricted: all flights were grounded, national and provincial borders were closed, movement within provinces and cities was monitored by police checkpoints, all non-essential businesses were shuttered, masks were made mandatory, and the population was only permitted to leave their homes for necessities. Other than small exceptions for essential employees, these restrictions were

applied universally and would endure until mid-April when slight regional flexibilities, like leaving the home for walks and exercise, would commence in sparsely populated areas ('Argentina: Prioritizing Health...' 2020).

The relaxation of national restrictions was slow-moving, and provinces were afforded the power to reinstate regulations to manage specific outbreaks. The city and province of Buenos Aires remained under the strictest restrictions, suffering from the overwhelming majority of cases for much of the pandemic. The metropolitan area faced several periods of increased restriction for growing case numbers.

Government decisions have been perceived as inconsistent in some cases. The lockdown was initially to last until March 31st but was extended in two-week increments multiple times. In Córdoba, the businesses allowed to reopen under limited capacities and social distancing requirements seemed to occur at random. For example, bars and restaurants were opened for in-person indoor and outdoor seating until midnight on July 7th, whereas gyms were not allowed to reopen at any capacity until mid-August (Viola 2020)('Reabren...' 2020). Moreover, locations with few to no cases were subject to strict lockdowns identical to those in the most impacted cities for weeks on end. This began to generate popular beliefs that lockdown measures were an unnecessary strategy and destroyed local economies. With each lockdown extension, the economic calamity compounded ('Argentina: Prioritizing Health...' 2020). This facilitated massive anti-lockdown and anti-government protests in major cities across the country, Córdoba being no exception, particularly as case numbers continued to rise in spite of preventative measures.



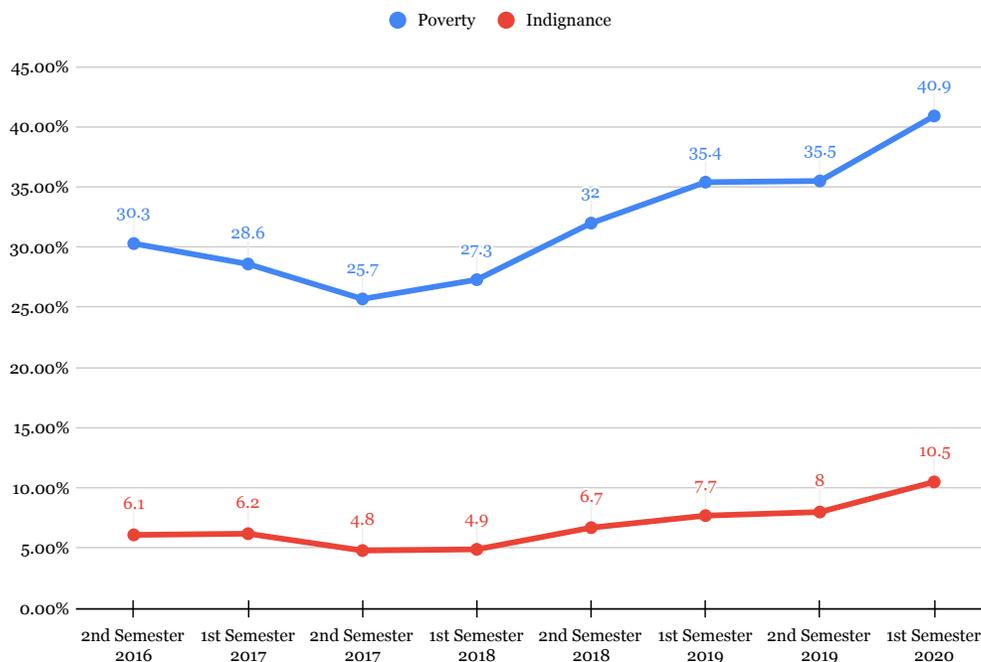
Despite the initial promise under strict lockdown, case numbers began to grow with the loosened restrictions. Case numbers closed in on 1.5 million by the end of November 2020 (WHO 2020), making the outbreak in Argentina one of the worst in the world. Many families could no longer stay at home due to the declining peso and rising unemployment, homelessness, and food insecurity. Economically precarious households were forced to brave health risks in order to survive, particularly relying on the unregulated informal sector to make ends meet.

The situation was bleak by the middle of 2020. By the height of the austral winter, Argentina's national GDP was projected to contract by 9.9% within the year (IMF 2020), 40.9% of the country was in poverty, and 10.5% were considered indignant (INDEC 2020). An estimated 60,000 small to medium-sized businesses have closed, leaving anywhere from 600,000 to 800,000 people without jobs, contributing to a 16-year high unemployment rate of 13.1% reported following the 2nd quarter of 2020 (CAME 2020). Larger businesses have also been greatly impacted, with many large multinational corporations declaring their exit from the nation, including airlines and manufacturing facilities.

Fernández Government Responses (Late 2019-Present)

Since the beginning of Argentina’s strict lockdown measures, Fernández's narrative has remained consistent, stating that the health of Argentina comes before all else, economy or otherwise. During a March 23rd press conference, the president stated: “Many have told me that I would destroy the economy with the quarantine. If the dilemma is the economy or life, I choose life. Afterward, we will see how to order the economy⁶”. As circumstances worsened and his popularity wained, many of his interventionist tactics have been labeled as a catalyst for decline. The compromised state of the government has provided an opportunity for conspiracy theories and speculative narratives to develop⁷, fostering mistrust. As time has gone on, ‘choosing life’ no longer seems to be an adequate response for some social groups. Fernández has worked to shift the blame on his predecessor.

Poverty Rates 2016-2020



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Figure 3 – Poverty Rates in Argentina (INDEC 2020)

Many of the measures taken by Fernández have come under fire. First and foremost, Fernández has wielded extraordinary amounts of power for the duration of the pandemic, due to Law 27.541, affording the executive a series of time-limited powers (Gargella 2020). The law covers what can be designated as a public emergency, outlines the realm of these powers, including economic and fiscal matters, in addition to health and social protections. This allowed Fernández to declare a ‘sanitary emergency’ in the wake of COVID-19, with these powers extended for one year (Gargella 2020). The majority of Argentina’s response to the pandemic relies on a series of emergency decrees, making many, particularly opponents to the current administration, critical of sustained overreach. Many of these decrees are aimed at maintaining productions of essential goods, financial assistance measures for families, businesses, and provinces; price freezes and maximums on essential supplies; and the construction of twelve emergency hospitals (Gargella 2020). Nonetheless, as the pandemic continues to unfold, the coercive forces of the state are being called into question through protest mobilizations and daily rhetoric in Córdoba. Federal measures do not equally assist or impact the population in the wake of growing poverty and economic precariousness, at

times putting at-risk populations in greater danger, and leaving many without necessary aid⁸.

The 'Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia', a 10,000 peso government aid package available to unemployed and informal workers, paid out three times in April, June, and August, has been one of the main sources of government support, particularly in the early months of restrictions. Based on the official conversion rate, this is equivalent to roughly \$140-\$150 USD, though the unofficial 'Blue Dollar' rate of roughly 190 pesos per USD reduces this value significantly. To put this into perspective, a COVID-19 test for an uninsured person — 36% of the population (Pan American Health Organization 2017) — is 5,200 pesos⁹. Given high unemployment and the meagerness of this program, many are trapped in a situation of limited opportunities. Indeed, a growing percentage of the population has been pushed into poverty and indigence (see Figure 3 above). This has generated a political crisis that is enmeshed in the public health and economic crises. The use of emergency powers of the presidency and declining conditions of living, employment, health, and well-being have left the Fernández administration in a political precarious position.

⁸ Lower-income households, particularly those living in what are classified as slums or villas, has been disproportionately impacted due to overcrowded living conditions. During an outbreak in a villa outside of Buenos Aires — Villa Azul — was blocked off by police to prevent spread outside the community, trapping residents inside, with little access to public services. 3 million people live in villas in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. (Hoffman 2020)

⁹ As previously discussed, low-income, uninsured citizens can apply for government subsidization of medical costs, however, given the current state of the healthcare system and competitive relationship between public and private medical care facilities, these subsidy requests are being rejected at growing rates.

The economy Fernández inherited was operating at a substantial deficit pre-pandemic. With the added expenses of emergency funds for struggling families and businesses, as well as looming negotiations with the IMF regarding paying back the debt incurred under Macri, the government needs more capital to close this gap, and more pesos in circulation to keep businesses from folding. Peronism in its current form is largely identifiable through its maintenance and expansion of social and welfare programs. Tax increases were approved before the pandemic, but a one-off capital levy or ‘wealth tax’ aimed specifically at Argentines with more than 2 million USD in assets, in addition to increases in retenciones have been the most drastic taxation policies undertaken thus far (O’Boyle 2020). To assist with access to capital, Fernandez has required that banks lend out 320 billion pesos at a reduced interest rate of 24% compared to the Central Bank rate of 38% (Comte 2020). This infringement on the autonomy of the Central Bank has concerned many, particularly as this pushes the previous ‘floating currency’ into the situation of a ‘dirty’ floating currency, or one that is being manipulated by government measures.

For many in Córdoba, neither saving the economy nor saving lives have been viable tactics, since this has left millions without work, without health, and without options. The anti-government mantra ‘Que se vayan todos’, famously utilized during the economic crisis of the early 2000s, has returned to the streets in many places. However, the real damage is located with those who have lost faith in their nation, and have determined that it is they themselves who must leave this time, in one capacity or another. With disintegrating hopes for the future, many are moving assets outside of

Argentina, while others hope they will soon follow, relocating to countries they deem to have greater opportunities.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Argentina faced a triple crisis related to politics, economy, and public health in 2020. The discussion has examined the policies put in place by the neoliberal Macri government to liberalize the economy and the damage this eventually caused, resulting in rising inflation, poverty, devaluation, and the need for a massive IMF loan. The discussion has also focused on the Fernández administration and the protocols put in place to contain the COVID outbreak, deal with the fallout from the economy, and begin to overcome the recession and worsening poverty. However, the Fernández government's use of emergency powers and failure to reverse the economic and public health crises has led to the delegitimization of the political system.

Beginning with issues of government legitimacy caused by the Macri administration, economic precariousness placed many in circumstances highly susceptible to the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic. Rising case numbers despite strict government protocols, the inability of many to survive without returning to some form of work, and panic fatigue compounded to further call political legitimacy into question. Because of this cyclical compounding, the people of Córdoba returned to traditional structures like protest and subversion to air grievances and regain the sense of normalcy the government was failing to provide.

Chapter 3: Córdoba's 2020 Protests

Introduction

Argentine society is entering a phase of restructuring. The pandemic has ushered in a new generation-defining catastrophe, and the people of Córdoba have worked to address these issues through protest. This chapter examines the emergence of protests in the city of Córdoba during 2020 in response to the triple crisis of political, economic, and public health conditions. The chapter argues that early protests were marked by activism 'on wheels' — appropriation of public spaces utilizing cars, and mild subversion through the breaking of lockdown measures. Later protests, however, were characterized by increasingly subversive tactics, disregarding social distancing and other health protocols to draw greater attention to particular protest messages about a wide range of issues. This chapter methodologically draws upon informal interviews, media coverage, and participant observation in Córdoba over the year as a first-hand witness of the COVID-19 outbreak in Argentina as well as the political, economic, and health impacts it generated.

Early to Mid 2020 Protests

Protesting and mobilization are critical components of Argentine democracy. This is recognized by the government and citizens alike, and is a reflection of a healthy political system in which movements are a key check on government power. As protests started in Córdoba in a modified capacity, this symbolized a return to normalcy through the reclaiming of the streets as an extension of the democratic process.

The city of Córdoba maintained strict lockdown requirements for months, but this did not stop protests from taking place within the city. Adapting to health and safety concerns, activists quickly devised new strategies to convey their platforms to the wider population. Protests within the city tend to follow a generic pattern (see Figure 4 below). Protestors will congregate at the centrally located Patio Olmos, a shopping center that sits in front of a roundabout where three major roads intersect. This open area, located in a highly frequented sector of the city, abuts several other small plazas, allowing for large congregations that are highly visible. These central spaces and intersections allow protestors to easily disrupt the circulation of traffic and to draw the attention of people walking through these zones and living in these neighborhoods. Parts of these roads may be entirely shut down if the group grows large enough, with casual participants driving by typically playing cuarteto music — a genre originating in Córdoba — and honking, often with signs carrying the movement's slogans. While many protests are contained in this specific area, others will begin a few blocks away near the city's central plaza and migrate to Patio Olmos, continuing up Avenida Hipolito Irigoyen towards a second large plaza — Plaza España — where five roads intersect in another large roundabout. Protests are common and highly sociable events, rapidly expanding in a matter of hours through word of mouth, social media, or stumbling upon an event, with growing numbers further enticing communal congregation. As such, this spirit of demonstration could not be quelled by social distancing orders, particularly as issues began to compound, resulting in protests expressing discontent with a specific problem but also systematically undermining government COVID protocols to enhance protest performances.

Early protests following the imposition the lockdown set the tone for the emergence of a new facet of Argentine protest culture related to public health protocol subversion, albeit gradually at first. These movements theoretically adhered to protocols for COVID-19 by taking place in cars; however, even this undermined core government tenants as citizens were prohibited from leaving their homes except to purchase basic necessities. Though adhering to some public health measures, the protests also communicated the sentiment of overruling government decisions, adding a level of credibility to the cause by subtly risking a pandemic to demonstrate on behalf of the issue. Without traffic to obstruct, caravans of protestors drove slowly up main avenues, honking, playing loud music, and disrupting the otherwise quiet city. Vehicles' signs, flags, and symbolism communicated support for causes ranging from union complaints to free public education to issue-based protests like objection to national judicial reforms. However, these protests lacked the presence and engagement of traditional demonstrations based on a culture of large-scale disruption.



Figure 4 - Map of downtown Córdoba and typical pattern for mobile protests (Google Maps 2021)

Anti-government sentiments dominated much of the protest rhetoric, particularly as economic circumstances worsened, be that against provincial or federal government, specific politicians, or policies. On May 29th, a large protest against Córdoba's Peronist Governor Juan Schiaretti took place, with vans toting a simple printed message: "Schiaretti = La Peor¹⁰". This movement, conducted by the Unión de Educadores de la Provincia de Córdoba¹¹ (UEPC), was aimed directly at the Governor's adjustments to retirement plans. It is difficult to distinguish demographics given that the movement was entirely made up of people driving, but given that it took place during the 10:00 and 11:00 hours on a Friday morning demonstrates that these protestors did not have work obligations at this time—members of the informal lower or working class sector would be reliant on working during this period of the day. The vehicles were also indicative of middle- or upper-class income levels.

As community attitudes began to relax and the fear of the pandemic began to dissipate following months of panic fatigue, demonstrations became more daring and overt from a public health subversion perspective, but remained in line with collective social ideals of taking the pandemic seriously so as to not alienate themselves from their supporting base. Following the protest against his retirement plan modifications, Governor Schiaretti made statements in support of protesting, with the stipulation of also adhering to health and safety protocols. "You can never lose sight of the need to take care of democracy ... you cannot fall at risk of authoritarian attitudes¹²". Schiaretti

¹⁰ Schiaretti = The Worst

¹¹ Union of Educators of the Province of Córdoba

¹² Nunca se puede perder de vista la necesidad de cuidar la democracia ... no se puede caer en riesgo de tener actitudes autoritarias. ("Schiaretti Dijo Que Hay Que 'Garantizar' La Protesta Social, Pero 'Sin Afectar Reglas Sanitarias.'")

would go on to urge other state actors to support these demonstrations, and to allow them to function in a manner that would not pose a public health risk, likening this permission to a situation of controlling chaos. “You have to understand these situations [protests] ... the State has to shepherd and guarantee them so that they can develop without affecting sanitary rules¹³”. As discontent continued to grow, containing these demonstrations would cease to be a possibility. Rhetoric became increasingly anti-government, and displays further pushed the boundaries of pandemic protocols and regulations.

Mid to Late 2020 Protests

The passage of time finally saw mild relaxations in COVID parameters within the city, during which time frustrations with the government’s strict approach began to receive increasing pushback. With the massive growth in unemployment, business closures, and social insecurity, discontent increasingly began to manifest in demonstrations. Whatever the main point of protest criticism, these movements fundamentally aligned against the government through the subversion of COVID regulations. Protest structurally shifted from a mission on wheels to a mixture of cars and individuals on foot, once again relying on sound impact, adding drumming and bullhorns to the arsenal, as well as firecrackers and colored smoke. Walking participants grew in number through the winter, as did the overall size of protests. Despite social distancing requirements, groups would physically gather, though nearly all wore masks.

¹³ Hay que entender esas situaciones el Estado tiene que encausarlas y garantizarlas para que se puedan desarrollar sin afectar las reglas sanitarias (“Schiaretti Dijo Que Hay Que ‘Garantizar’ La Protesta Social, Pero ‘Sin Afectar Reglas Sanitarias.’”)

By June, protests had returned to their original home outside of Patio Olmos, their frequency increased and participant numbers growing. The use of moderate subversion in these protests drew attention to their different causes, but without overshadowing the protest's actual purpose. The point was not to derail the intended protest message with a digression into pandemic protocol.

On July 6th, 17 year old Valentino Blas Correas — Blas — was murdered by a police officer when shots were fired into a car that did a U-turn to avoid a police checkpoint, with bullets narrowly missing the other passengers. The social media outcry was immediate, and the following evening a massive protest took place in the center of Córdoba. The streets were packed with protestors, led by the victim's family carrying a sign reading 'Justicia por Blas¹⁴' that stretched the width of the avenue. Many donned t-shirts with the same message, and other signs read 'Ni una bala más, ni un Blas menos, Justicia por Blas¹⁵'. Despite thousands of demonstrators and a complete lack of social distancing, there were no police in sight. The crowd primarily consisted of families and young people. All wore masks, more or less correctly. This protest can be analyzed on three levels. First, there is a call for justice and condemnation of police brutality. Second, the rhetoric 'ni un Blas menos' alludes to another prominent Argentine social movement — Ni Una Menos¹⁶. This grassroots feminist movement has campaigned against gender-based violence, and spread across South America in recent years. Third, there are clear subversive undertones visible in the lack of social distancing, refusing to adhere to government requests in the face of a state-caused tragedy. These elements

¹⁴ 'Justice for Blas'

¹⁵ 'Not one bullet more, not one Blas less, justice for Blas'

¹⁶ Not one [woman] less'

interplay to express public dissent, to link the demonstrations to another well-known anti-violence movement, and intentionally disregard COVID protocols in a massive, widely visible, and unregulated display.

Anti-government protests surrounding COVID-19 restrictions have drawn on imagery and symbolism from the contemporary history of national protest. A protest on September 19th utilized rhetoric centered on 'libertad'. Demonstrators referenced the 2001 economic crisis slogan 'Que se vayan todos', while others aired specific grievances like 'basta de usar al senado como aguantadero¹⁷', or 'no a la reforma judicial.' The protests are nationalistic, the streets filling with supporters carrying Argentine flags, a protest style known as *banderazos* (Aimar 2020). These events are highly inclusive: all demographics can be witnessed, and vendors line the sidewalks selling Argentine flags to passersby who wish to join. In addition to rhetoric referencing constitutional abuses and abuses of power, this imagery used by protestors attempts to position participants as the true representation of Argentina, as a patriotic force seeking to defend its democracy and the will of the people. These demonstrations show how the people, as a representative of the nation and protectors of democracy, will not silently permit perceived abuses.

On October 12th, massive anti-government protests took place in cities across the country, however Córdoba's demonstration quickly evolved into a large-scale participatory performance tailored to suit the culture of the city. Beginning as a protest following predictable rhetoric against ongoing government policies and the waving of the national flag, the event quickly morphed into a street party of thousands. This street

¹⁷ Stop using the Senate as a supporter

party involved a crowd of young people, many without masks — an uncommon sight in public spaces. Moreover, these street party protestors rebuffed social distancing as loud electronic music, a genre intertwined with the city's identity, blared. Electronic music and rave culture are key elements to the culture of Córdoba, particularly as a youth outlet — it is the sound of local nightlife, and the summer is dominated by electronic festivals in fields and hangars outside the city. According to one participant:

It was actually a normal protest in one way — against the government, and on the other hand, electronic party organizers supposedly "calling" to have a kind-of party there.¹⁸

These subversive actions by young people—violating social distancing and masking protocols—are directly in contrast to government COVID-19 precautions, in addition to being a display of local culture and youth frustrations. These young adults took the streets to party in a way that had been taken from them for nearly nine months. By these actions, young people are actively appropriating public space in protest for their youth. With their freedom to freely associate, gather, and in this case, party, stripped by government protocols, they turned to traditional outlets and unexpected methods of political subversion to voice discontent.

Conclusion

This chapter examines how protests emerged in Córdoba against the political, economic, and public health crises during 2020. I argue that the protests began with a logic of a mission 'on wheels' that violated the lockdown measures but maintained social distancing and mask requirements, be that out of respect for government authority or

¹⁸ En realidad era una protesta normal en una parte contra el gobierno y en otra parte organizadores de fiestas electronicas supuestamente "reclamando" hicieron tipo fiesta ahí

fear of the virus. However, protest forms changed as the lockdown measures were relaxed. Protests moved beyond car-based missions to include cars and walkers that wore masks but violated social distancing measures. Finally, by late 2020, there were protests—involving youth street parties—that violated social distancing and mask protocols. This reflects the tactic of increasing subversion of public health rules to gain public attention to protest a variety of issues.

Many of the underlying elements visible in the 2020 protests were not new, and recycle tactics from the great political movements of the past. As protests expanded, the deeply emotive aspects of these movements became exceedingly clear, drawing on cultural forms of expression to speak in a uniquely Cordobesa voice with the incorporation of regional elements like cuarteto music and youth rave culture.

Chapter 4: Understanding Youth Perspectives

Introduction

This chapter examines youth protest in response to the multifaceted crisis in Argentina. It offers a glimpse into the lived reality of young people in Córdoba as the world they have known has been fundamentally altered, utilizing interviews and participant observations from March until December 2020. Through this approach, I examine reactions and rationalizations of changing social practices, understandings of the government, and a new emerging youth consciousness as young people grapple with uncertainty and what it means to be Argentine. This chapter argues that young adults have embraced the politics of everyday subversion. Going beyond public protests, young adults have sought to rebuild youth culture through appropriation of city spaces during the day and at night in ways that challenge the legitimacy of government public health protocols. Through these acts of everyday subversion, youth culture expresses a desire for a return to the normalcy that this crisis has erased.

Social Life in Córdoba

A densely packed city dating back to early Spanish colonial rule and Jesuit mission settlement in the late 16th century, Córdoba is a bustling concrete jungle dominated by pedestrian foot traffic and public transit (Historia y Memoria). The city contains a multitude of barrios — neighborhoods — each possessing a unique character and community, making even adjacent barrios distinguishable. For this reason, a strong ‘barrio identity’ has developed — close, friendly relationships between neighbors, from small talk at the lavandería (laundromat) to a first name basis with verdulería (vegetable

store) employees to city street workers carrying groceries to a passerby's apartment. Cordobesas utilize public spaces as an extension of the home, even into the street, be that by bringing chairs to sit outside of a kiosco (kiosk) or chatting on a curb — the city is never quiet. Just as the street serves as a prominent space for socialization, municipal public spaces act as an essential conduit for supra-barrio interactions that create urban identification with and solidarity for Córdoba. Mate¹⁹, a traditional tea, is a key signifier of national Argentine identity, in addition to being a quotidian social practice (Yerba Mate Argentina). In the mid-afternoon, public spaces, from the open fields of Parque Sarmiento²⁰ to the open stairs and ledges surrounding the concrete fountain at Paseo del Buen Pastor, contain friends and family sharing mate, cigarettes, and conversation, pausing for community and reflection each day.

Youth social life in Córdoba is also defined by its nightlife. Urban nightlife involves *boliche*²¹ culture, the *previa*²², and the *after* component. In addition to nightlife, there are social gatherings across networks of kin and friends and acquaintances, including an early evening cervecito or an asado²³, an Argentine tradition of grilling often beginning in the afternoon and running well into the night. Gastronomy is central to the community building process, inviting large groups to

¹⁹ A traditional South American tea with ritualistic communal drinking practices in which water is poured over dried leaves, drunk out of a bombilla (explain) through a metal straw and passed around a group

²⁰ Parque Sarmineto is the largest public park in the city of Córdoba, located in the Nueva Córdoba region of the city adjacent to the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.

²¹ Argentine slang for a nightclub

²² Pregame

gather on a terrace. Music and the scent of food cooking fill the air, as neighbors convene groups that may spontaneously grow. Indeed, the urban cultural dynamics of Córdoba revolve around the fundamental element of shared spaces: the street, parks, open air markets, or central plazas. These shared spaces create physical proximity, emotional warmth, and a sense of togetherness, intimacy, and solidarity.

The Pandemic and New Cultural Practices of Togetherness

The introduction of a new, deadly virus posed a threat to youth socialization practices and cultural norms in Córdoba. A swift, total lockdown in a city dominated by one-bedroom apartments left the chronically sociable society paralyzed, with interactions strictly prohibited and the use of public spaces forbidden for months. Social distancing measures reshaped everyday cultural norms and impacted a lively economic sector based on entertainment. It eradicated traditional gatherings and customary greeting practices. Gone were the days of a kiss on the cheek to each person in a room, replaced instead with distant elbow bumps and maintaining a minimum one meter of distance between all parties in any public setting. An early mask mandate was well respected, particularly given the constant presence of police and military on the street, standing guard on every corner. The nation and city's public health approach in late March and April cultivated palpable fear in early days when case numbers were in the single digits. In this initial period of lockdown, everyday social interaction was sharply curbed, leaving many lonely and alone, drastically impacting mental health, and alienating community members from one another out of fear.

New cultural practices began to appear that initially expressed solidarity with the public health mandate. In the early days of lockdown, neighbors would bang pots and pans, clapping and cheering in unison at 9:00pm each evening in support of healthcare workers. There were stories of loud, socially distant parties between apartment buildings, blaring loud music from speakers as people gathered on balconies. As the days wore on and lockdown in Córdoba continued to be extended, a spirit of solidarity to flatten the curve dissipated and was replaced with growing resentment and animosity towards government protocol. As discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrations began to grow. Also, covert subversion flourished. The government loosened public health restrictions, and outings were permitted based on national ID number (DNI) and corresponding week days, as well as restricted access to public spaces for exercise.

Fewer government regulations created spaces of opportunity, namely for prohibited gatherings and manipulation of legal parameters. This was aided by lax law enforcement approaches. Despite distancing measures and mask mandates, green spaces became an open space of youthful subversion. This began with some people exercising without a mask, followed by increasingly large groups gathering for mate or a game of soccer. The reopening of the skate park within Parque Sarmiento in May reignited the prevalent skating community within the shelter of a literal safe space — surrounded by a tall fence, police, and monitoring authorities. However, the police allowed free use of the space without regulation. Public and green spaces have always functioned as gathering places and the lungs of the city, but, without other options, they became the social lifeline for many residents.

There was a performativity to public health regulation and caution at work in Córdoba among the government and police. Lax enforcement by public authorities created the performance or semblance of robust regulation that enabled citizens to circumvent the rules and—in some cases—flout noncompliance. The relaxing of public health rules led to case numbers skyrocketing and an infection rate among the highest in the world. The initial lockdown quickly turned into a panic fatigue, with rising apathy and the perception of minimal risk creating a false sense of security visible in improperly worn masks and distancing policies in bars and restaurants that neglected consideration of ventilation or a defined maximum capacity. Once more, lax policing created the perfect structure for viral transmission. As Interviewee A remarked:

That's why I think that when they were relaxing [quarantine parameters] or yes they were releasing people, raising the quarantine a little, they are not so strict, hey, well, no, I suppose they couldn't measure - measure themselves rather well and they left and well they caused the greatest amount of infections. ²⁴

From their perspective, this interviewee saw rising case numbers to be the result of relaxing restrictions, but as the fault of the people, who lacked the ability to adequately judge the circumstances and restrain themselves to prevent the spread of the virus. Lulled into a false sense of security, they underestimated the reality of the pandemic in Argentina, taking advantage of leniencies as if the threat of COVID was no longer real. Illegal parties began in late May and June, growing larger and more frequent throughout the winter, and expanding even further with the return of summer. In early months sneaking people into a household was difficult due to heavy street monitoring.

²⁴ “Cuando fueron liberando o si liberando a la gente, levantando un poco la cuarentena que no son tan estricta eh la gente bueno no, no supongo medir — medirse mas bien y se largó a salir y bueno se causaron la mayor cantidad de los contagios”

With time obvious loud music, shouting, and multicolored lights—all noticeable from the street—rarely met with any police intervention. Secret gatherings —known as *clandestinos* — could number anywhere from within the ten-person limit implemented during the winter, to parties of fifty or more, with little to no repercussions, even if the police were specifically alerted. These events were handled with simple warnings at the front door without any further investigation, despite neighbors calling to report large parties. Efforts to reinstate stringent measures were moot, particularly given that the existing spread was the result of an already outlawed activity that was being perpetuated discreetly, and actively ignored by the enforcing body.

Perspectives on the Government

Young Cordobenses articulated nuanced, ambivalent perspectives on the federal, provincial, and municipal government. Though they dismissed government actions as ineffective, performative, and economically harmful, young adults also recognized the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the attempts by government officials to keep Argentines safe from a public health standpoint.

Young Cordobenses expressed various complaints about the federal government related to COVID-19 management. These complaints introduced a new found agency visible in social decision making. Individuals emphasized self-governance. Where a single person openly understands the rationality behind COVID restrictions and government actions, they simultaneously contradict this through electing to follow their own personal guidelines instead, disregarding facets that they deem unnecessary or burdensome. This manifests itself in a variety of manners, ranging from participating in

illegal gatherings to wearing masks improperly in institutions that require them. In response to asking if acting against government rules were a form of rebellion, one participant answered:

Yes, obviously yes, totally. Apart from that, that is ... They [the government] did not do things well ... I know that they are not doing well, I know that they will not be good, so that is why doing what is prohibiting is not so bad ... they are prohibiting something that really should not prohibit.²⁵

From this participant's perspective, the Argentine government had not handled the pandemic well, and because of this discredits the protocols and restrictions put in place. In their opinion, the precautions are unnecessary, and as such, subject to being circumvented based on personal discretion, introducing a degree of self-rule.

There were also critiques of the Fernández administration and the economic outcomes of managing the pandemic. Young adults voiced significant frustrations with a stalled economy, evaporating opportunities, and the psychological impact on the youngest generation. Some stressed the inadequacy of the economic response from the Fernández administration to the scale of the problem. The government developed a stimulus and social welfare support policy designed to support workers, minimum wage workers, and vulnerable groups, increase monetary transfers to poor families, and ensure social security payments to lower income beneficiaries through a package worth 6.0% of the national GDP in 2020 (Policy Responses to COVID-19: Argentina). As such, many families turned to government payments to make ends meet, and household

²⁵ Si, obviamente si, totalmente. Aparte de eso o sea ... No hicieron las cosas bien ... se que no están haciendo bien se que no van a ser bien por eso por ahí lo aquello esta prohibiendo no esta tan mal que lo no se ... lo que esta prohibiendo algo que realmente no debe prohibir.

members searched for additional work to replace or supplement incomes. Young people were faced with difficult decisions regarding the future. Interviewee F remarked:

The government gave an aid plan for people who did not have a job or at least a [formal] job and they gave stimuluses of 10,000 pesos per month. I was able to collect just one because you had to still be unemployed, so the following month I could not get paid because I started working. But this does not seem like a good measure to me because it was 10,000 pesos — in Argentina that is very little, and it was a single payment per family. For a family , 10,000 pesos when you do not have a job and have two or three children it's impossible, I think they are not even eating²⁶

The stipulations to qualify for government aid left many families in difficult financial positions as business closures caused jobs to evaporate. This interview participant was fortunate to find two part time jobs to supplement his family's income as the small business they owned suffered, in addition to being a full-time university student. With little free time, Interviewee F's grades suffered, and they often spoke of leaving the country for better opportunities elsewhere, saving money in dollars to protect whatever assets they were able to accumulate. There was no clear end or solution to repair the state of the national economy, which diminished hope for the future.

Despite these critiques of the government, young Cordobenses also voiced more ambivalent perspectives that recognized the difficulty for any administration to deal with an unexpected situation of such magnitude. Interviewee B remarked:

²⁶ “El gobierno dio un plan de ayuda para la gente que no tenía trabajo o por lo menos trabajo en blanco y bueno dieron bonos de 10,000 pesos por mes yo pude cobrar un solo porque necesito mantener no tiene trabajo pero después el mes siguiente no lo pude cobrar porque empecé a trabajar. pero esto no me parece una buena medida porque era 10,000 pesos en Argentina es muy poco y era un solo bono por familia y para una familia 10,000 pesos, cuando no tiene trabajo y tiene dos hijos o tres es imposible creo que están ni comer.”

I think the measures were justified in the first moment that they were taken because well, as I said before, it is a very new situation, eh, very extraordinary, so well, we really do not know what could work and what not ... When they started taking this type of measure, at a time when people were tired and they needed to work, it's a bit unjustified. Protocols could have been established and things would work a little more freely.²⁷

This statement expresses some understanding of the legitimate public health risk and how “extraordinary” the situation was. However, as the economic downturn accelerated, the faults of the government were compounded as they recognized the need to adapt to ensure that people could work and survive.

These anti-government perspectives facilitated the protests that began in late May and contributed to the sense of illegitimacy and inadequacy of the political leadership in Argentina. This political perspective fostered the spirit of subversion that took hold in urban green spaces, public areas, and homes. The restoration of cultural practices of everyday life—being together, drinking mate, dancing, playing music, and nightlife—became the goal for this politics of resistance. The problem was that this cultural restoration could not be achieved as people struggled to survive, worked odd jobs, and had other concerns related to family, businesses, and education.

Forging a New Youth Consciousness in Córdoba

COVID-19 placed a critical role on the individual, relying on personal moral obligation to close this gap between regulation and realistic policing capacities. This

²⁷ Yo creo que las medidas eran justificadas en su primer momento que se tomaron porque bueno como dije antes es una situación muy nueva eh muy extraordinaria, entonces bueno realmente no sabemos que podías funcionar y que no... Ya cuando se empezaron a tomar este tipo de medidas en un momento en cuando la gente estaba cansado necesitaran trabajar aye bueno es un poco injustificado se podrían establecer protocolos y las cosas funcionarían un poco mas libremente.

brought about debates of communal obligation and Argentine society in general focused on the issue of “consciousness” or “awareness” (*conciencia*).

On the level of health, I think it's [COVID regulations] good because the Argentine people don't have a lot of consciousness about the cause — no one uses a mask, the people look for , I don't know, social gatherings and the like... If we were another, more conscious society things would be better... At least our society is a society that lacks education and there are a lot of people that aren't conscientious about many things... In other countries they can distinguish between what is bad and what is good. I think we are a very irresponsible society.²⁸

This concept of consciousness is being discussed through an understanding of the direct impact the choices of a single person can have on the wider community, resulting in a multilevel understanding of culpability. The reality of public consciousness is far more nuanced than protest propaganda; mobilizing against the government while masked demonstrates that despite anger over management approaches, the individual is aware of their role in the greater system.

The notion of self-governance results from a lack of belief in the government. This is not a new phenomenon, and arguably a tenant of Argentine culture, particularly visible in this case along generational boundaries due to the inherent risk and fear of contracting the virus.

People if they want to get together, will meet... Most of the people, if they want to get together, they want to do something they are going to do - that's the problem. You can

²⁸ “Al nivel saludo creo que esta bien porque la gente argentino no — no tiene mucha conciencia en la causa de nadie usa barbijo, la gente busca — no se — reuniones sociales y e igual ... Si fuéramos otra sociedad mas consiente mejor sería... Por lo menos nuestra sociedad es una sociedad en que falta educación y hay mucha gente que no es consiente en muchas cosas ... En otros países puedan darse cuenta en que esta mala y que esta buena. Creo que estamos una sociedad bastante inconsciente.”

only control the way it's done, that's why there are so many clandestine meetings [illegal gatherings].²⁹

Once more, this reenforces the notion of performativity, but from the perspective of the individual as a subversive unit. Where counterculture was revolved around illegally smoking marijuana in public, youth counterculture has taken on new forms related to the art of evasion, circumventing roadblocks designed to prevent potential virus-spreading movement, gathering in public spaces moments after police leave, and hosting massive parties. Raising stakes and consequences also affords a heightened degree of self-instilled power and intentionality. While individuals understand why gatherings are prohibited, it is approached like an honor code system rather than a criminal offense in the eyes of the proud, independent self-governing actors who—given the issue of government legitimacy—have taken power for themselves.

Young people in Córdoba are also situating themselves within the national experience, looking to tradition and precedence as an explanation for their subversive behaviors. An interviewee stated the following after being asked if this trespassing mentality was a product of Córdoba uniquely, or a nationwide attitude:

I believe it's very Argentine, very Argentina to break the rules, to always look for something to do that goes against what you're told — it's very Argentine, very cultural.³⁰

In many ways, this interview statement establishes that youth and everyday subversion are merely an extension of the national cultural tradition; these actions are a

²⁹ La gente si quieren reunir se va a reunir ... La mayoría de la gente si quieren juntar se quieren hacer algo lo va a hacer — ese el problema. Pueda controlar la forma solo de hacerlo por eso hay tantas reuniones clandestinas.

³⁰ “Yo creo que es muy argentino, muy argentino de traspasar las reglas, de siempre buscarle el hacer la contra de lo que dice — muy argentino, muy cultural”

continuation of the status-quo, rather than a specific response to the current political, economic, and public health crisis. Once more, the youth of Córdoba are seeing cultural tradition as an avenue to return to normalcy on their own terms, after being let down by state actors.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the nuance of rationalizing COVID-19 and the impact it has had by the youth in Córdoba. I argue that despite a degree of empathy with the government responses to the pandemic, young people are turning to self-rule to attain a return to normalcy the government has failed to provide. Engaging in the politics of everyday subversion — casual acts of rebellion against what is deemed illegitimate or unnecessary — the youth of Córdoba have appropriated their own understanding of what it means to be Argentine and what they are owed by the state. Frustrated by a triple crisis that has created massive uncertainty, they have become brokers for their own futures as they seek to rebuild a future in the wake of drastic changes that have permanently altered the lives they once knew.

The impacts of COVID-19 have created a new space for the individual within society, as an actor's role in self-governance has become more critical due to the nature of a spreading disease. In grappling with top-down mandates and protocols, the individual is propelled into a moral debate, and as such is able to elect a form of self governance in the face of policing insufficiencies. As inadequate government support, economic collapse, and growing unemployment affect the people, they are afforded growing agency through subversion. As local culture is redefined and government and

world-views shift, the individual as an actor with heightened agency holds the position to negotiate the terms of their involvement, choosing to work for or against preexisting narratives and shape the future of entire communities.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the reaction of the people of Córdoba to the triple crisis catalyzed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on protest culture, resistance, and youth subversion. I have argued that the youth of Córdoba, motivated by disillusionment with the government, have turned to politics of everyday youth subversion to reconcile state failures with the future they have lost on their own terms. Coupling traditional Argentina tactics like protests and subversion with rebellious youth subculture, the youth of Córdoba sought to reconstruct a sense of normalcy through the solidarity of appropriating the world they once knew into a recreation of a recognizable future for themselves.

The youth of Córdoba are faced with never before seen political, economic, and public health circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown their futures and the future of Argentina into a space of unprecedented uncertainty, but also altered the understanding of everyday life. Young people in Córdoba have turned to everyday subversion to restore a sense of normalcy and configure their new reality within the framework of the nation they have always known. Young people have engaged in public protests with other groups to denounce government failures to deal with the economic and social implications of the pandemic, while also engaging in subcultural resistance in everyday activities.

Chapter 2 examined the causes of the triple crisis as well as the context for civilian disillusionment with government practices. It showed how the Macri and Fernández administrations have each contributed to these crises, and the priorities and strategies utilized by the current administration to address political, economic, and

public health issues. As state failures became more evident, criticisms gave way to the return of traditional protest practices to air communal grievances.

Chapter 3 examined 2020 protests in Córdoba, their adherence to traditional practices, and modifications with respect to the public health crisis. This chapter demonstrated an added layer of performativity to already salient protest practices through tones of increasing subversion of public health protocols to draw greater attention to a given cause. These events would eventually create a merging space for underlying, everyday subversive youth behaviors as protests became a way to appropriate public spaces into cultural events reminiscent of normal life and youth culture in Córdoba.

Chapter 4 investigated youth responses to the triple crisis in Córdoba. This chapter showed the nuance of understanding held by young people, in addition to the way they rationalize and experience state failures. Disillusioned with the government, youth in Córdoba turned to everyday subversion to reclaim their lives and reconstruct a recognizable future for themselves in the wake of government failures to provide a return to normalcy.

This project contributes to academic literature on Argentine political culture, youth responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and research on Córdoba pertaining to protests practices and youth culture. Based on participant observation and interviews conducted in Córdoba during 2020, this project has explored the nuanced youth experience to these unprecedented circumstances. Finally, it examines how Argentines in the “second city” are reconfiguring themselves through protest culture and new socialization practices amidst the pandemic. This study also begs questions for future

research on the communal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of Córdoba in the construction and affirmation of the Argentine experience, and the role of youth in the creation and perpetuation of culture and communal values.

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