

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ARGENTINA.
FROM THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT
TO THE “CACEROLAZOS”**

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The angry outburst of protests that forced the resignation of two presidents within a thirteen-day period inaugurated a new era of civic engagement in Argentina. Since December 2001, vast mobilizations of unorganized citizens, clanging pots and pans, took over the streets and plazas of the whole country. These massive *cacerolazos* and the popular assemblies that meet regularly in plazas and parks, along with countless daily demonstrations of debtors, depositors, etc. have dominated the public landscape of Argentina over the past months. The extensiveness and vehemence of these mobilizations have taken political society by surprise. While the Peronist leadership secretly commended the *cacerolazo* that paved the way for their premature return to power after President de la Rúa stepped down halfway through his four-year term, they would almost immediately and tragically grasp that the target of the protest was not confined to him but to the whole political class. Far from disappearing after the appointment of new authorities, the mobilizations and protests have grown in breadth and anger, opening a period of political turbulence and turmoil where the existence of the *cacerolazo* stands as a latent menace to the survival of the presently governing administration.

What is the nature and character of the *cacerolazos* and of the multiple expressions of civic unrest that have become a daily occurrence in the streets and parks of the country since December? How should one interpret this current upsurge of civic activism? Can the demonstrator's demands be narrowed to the lifting of the banking restrictions that have prevented citizens from making full use of their deposits? In this article, I will address the meaning of these protests and refute interpretations that views them exclusively either as a selfish reaction by the middle class to the government's confiscation of their savings or as a sign of the reawakening of populist *movimentismo*.

In regards to the first instance, it would be misleading to reduce the current wave of civic engagement solely to the specific claims of the mostly middle-class depositors or *ahorristas*. Without underestimating the role played by the banking restrictions in pushing into the streets these middle sectors of the Argentine population, a group that has been traditionally reluctant to mobilize, I will argue that the demands by this recent wave

of civic activism are overwhelmingly political. To downplay the protests as a self-interested response to the freezing of savings deposits --the now infamous *corralito*¹-- as was initially the main interpretation of the phenomenon by press editorials and politicians, prevents us from adequately understanding the nature of the present crisis. What lies at the heart of the current situation is a crisis of representation of dramatic proportions in which all links between civil and political society seemed to have been severed. What we are witnessing is the cancellation by the Argentine citizenry of the representative contract arising from the loss of trust in the current political leadership².

How should one account for such a development? A crisis this profound did not develop overnight. Clearly, the negative consequences of a four-year recession which translated into a 20-% rate of unemployment and the decision by the former finance minister Domingo Cavallo to freeze all private bank accounts greatly contributed to fuel and intensify public discontent. However, I will argue that these were the factors that triggered a political crisis that already had been long brewing. The crisis that today engulfs the Argentine political system took many years and numerous scandals to develop. It has been the product of the refusal of the country's political society to respond to civic claims that historically have been present in Argentine society. In recent years, the national political scenario has been repeatedly shaken by a profusion of corruption scandals that involved political figures of all parties and ranks as well as by the repeated attempts of NGOs and social movements to establish more effective mechanisms for monitoring the lawful actions of public officials. To make sense of today's Argentina, it is therefore crucial to go beyond the immediate political and economic factors that precipitated the recent outburst of social unrest and civil society's intense rejection of politicians, and to establish some links between today's civic activism and previous forms of civic engagement in the country.

The argument that guides this article is that the *cacerolazos* are the latest offshoot in the process of civil society politicization which was initiated by the human rights movement and since has been deepened by a second generation of civic movements and associations. A common concern of all the different civic initiatives that have sprouted since the return of democracy (1982) has been to make representative institutions more

responsive and accountable to the public. The demands of the *cacerolazos*, as those of previous forms of civic engagement, are far removed from any populist undertones. In actuality, they openly question the plebiscitarian representative ideal of populism because their objective is to complement electoral delegation with the establishment of effective mechanisms for making those authorities accountable. The article is divided into three sections. The first two parts provide a brief background on the forms of civic engagement that have preceded the current outburst of civic activism. The final section concentrates on the phenomenon of the *cacerolazos* and their meaning, while calling specific attention to the common concerns that have framed civil society politics under the new Argentine democracy, post-1982.

I. Human Rights Politics and the Shift to a Liberal Representative Democracy

In previous articles, I have argued that the emergence of a human rights movement represented a cultural turning point that profoundly transformed Argentine political identities and its democratic traditions³. The politics of human rights altered well-established features of Argentine political culture, de-legitimizing the entrenched political identities and introducing a rights-oriented discourse, which provided the legitimacy for claims to re-found a democracy in Argentina and to establish the cultural and institutional conditions for an autonomous civil society.

What were those elements of cultural innovation? First, the politics of rights contributed to establishing an autonomous civil society. The human rights movement inaugurated a new type of politicization that has made the strengthening of civil society a major goal of its policies in three respects:

a) It aims to establish the institutional conditions for the emergence and reproduction of a modern civil society. The human rights movement that grew out of the hostile context of military authoritarianism engaged itself in a defensive type of politicization directed at carving out a space for social autonomy and at building barriers against future

discretionary interventions by the state. Through the establishment of a system of fundamental rights, the rights-based politics have set the institutional conditions for the emergence of an autonomous civil society and a pluralistic public sphere. In this sense, the human rights movement's objective moved away from the general concern for achieving state power as displayed by populist movements to policies targeted at restraining state power through the establishment of protective rights that could legally stabilize state-society relations. Such policies represents a radical break with previous corporatist and movementist patterns. While both corporatism and movementism blur all institutional boundaries between state and society in an attempt to blend society into the state, rights-based politics seeks to set down clear institutional boundaries between the state and civil society. Rights-based politics are exercised at the level of civil society, they address the state from the outside and focuses on preserving the state and society as distinct realms.

b) It introduces a type of self-limiting politicization that seeks to expand and strengthen rights without undermining those institutional conditions that allow for the reproduction of the social sphere as a form of civil society.⁴ In open opposition to the unbound nature of a *movimentismo* (that was oblivious to constitutional constraints), rights-based politics are a self-limiting form of politicization that, by recreating and strengthening a political culture of rights and constitutionalism, are responsive to the consolidation and reproduction of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society.

c) It has incorporated civil society as a principal focus of its politics: the discourse on rights is directed at transforming political identities within civil society the development of a culture of rights and political self-limitation.

Second, by questioning all forms of state authoritarianism, a rights-based politics and discourse have helped to redefine Argentine democratic traditions to have a constitutional bent. Such a shift has transformed preconceived notions about the nature of a representative government. In Argentina, the authorization model that characterized

populism had shaped the relations of democratic representation⁵. A populist democracy relied on a particular interpretation of the representative contract whereby elections granted the populist leader the right to act as the trustee of the people. This democratic model presupposed a largely passive citizenry: the act of delegation implied trust in the qualities of personalized leadership and a subordination to his/her judgment. Trust was extended to a person and not to institutions. In the populist democratic tradition, elections were understood to be the decisive moment of the representative contract. They were a momentous decisional act that preclude any ulterior challenge or deliberation⁶. The electorate consequently would have to subordinate itself to the leader's will until the next election. In this sense, such a form of delegation entailed an act of political abdication on the part of the electorate.

The revalorization of rights and constitutional guarantees redefined the representative contract from an authorization to an accountability view⁷. The current rights-based discourse reunites two elements that the populist democratic tradition kept apart: democracy and the rule of law⁸. Such a cultural shift in the direction of a constitutional form of democracy has entailed the revaluing of mechanisms of control over political representatives to provide a corrective to the blind act of trust that had characterized the populist process of political authorization. In this new interpretation of the representative contract the process of electoral authorization must be complemented by the establishment of mechanisms and resources to monitor and discipline political representatives. Under this view, a representative does not receive a blank check that authorizes him/her to act in a total discretionary way until the next election but rather is held accountable throughout the period in office by a combination of institutional and non-institutional mechanisms. Institutionally, the elected official is monitored and controlled by what Guillermo O'Donnell has termed *horizontal mechanisms of accountability*, that is, the system of a separation of powers, of check and balances, and due process. Extra-institutionally, citizens and civil society organizations in the public sphere can contest the decisions and denounce the unlawful actions of public officials⁹. Both mechanisms are crucial for institutionalizing political distrust, greatly reducing the inherent risks that the process of delegation involves.¹⁰

It has been the great accomplishment of the Argentine human rights movement to contribute to developing the sub-institutional socio-cultural environment to hold governments accountable. The de-coupling of civil society from both the state and the political sphere has entailed a more complex form of relations between citizens and representative institutions. A direct consequence of the above mentioned processes of collective learning has been the emergence of a more sophisticated citizenry. Citizens are now eager to protect themselves from the risks that delegation implies by developing a social and institutional setting that can lower those risks. This cultural shift inevitably leads to a more critical attitude towards the workings of political society: the represented no longer stands as a passive subject but assumes an active monitoring role. Such a critical attitude towards politicians should not be misinterpreted as a sign of cynicism or as representing a rejection of politics. It rather spawns from the leveling-off of higher expectations in elected representatives and public officials as well as from an enhanced trust in institutions.

The institutional dimension of accountability would become the main target for new forms of civic activism. Recent evaluations about the nature of Argentine and other Latin American democracies seem to agree on the fact that they present notorious deficits of accountability. O'Donnell, for instance, sees Argentina as a case that is far from the accountability model of representation. In his view, the process of delegation of political authority is not being complemented by effective mechanisms of accountability: elections authorize political representatives yet there is no network of agencies capable of controlling or punishing those actions that may be qualified as unlawful or corrupt¹¹. Such a deficit is precisely the main concern of the second stage of civic engagement. As we will see in the next section, a more offensive type of civil society based politics emerged with the intent of addressing the deficits from horizontal mechanisms of accountability. The second stage of civic engagement in Argentina is thus characterized by the clash between civil society's demands for more responsive and accountable representatives and political society's reluctance to change.

II. Challenging the Accountability Deficit in Political Representation: the Politics of Societal Accountability.

The post-human rights movement scenario was occupied by a diverse group of civic associations, NGOs, social movements and media organizations that engaged into what Catalina Smulovitz and I have referred as the politics of *societal accountability*¹². The concept of societal accountability calls attention to a diverse group of civil society and media-based actions that are organized around demands for legal accountability.¹³ It consists of a series of initiatives whose goals are: a) to monitor the behavior of public officials and agencies to make sure they abide by the law, b) to expose cases of governmental wrongdoing, and, c) to activate, in many instances, the operation of horizontal agencies, such as the judiciary or legislative investigation commissions, that otherwise would not be initiated or would be initiated in biased way. The emergence of a politics of societal accountability is directly linked with the already referred to changes in the public's attitudes toward the exercise of representative government. Its ultimate objective is to guarantee the operation of *horizontal mechanisms of accountability* within the state to assure both the effectiveness of rights and the proper functioning of representative institutions.¹⁴

Who are the actors that are behind these politics of societal accountability in Argentina? We can distinguish between three major protagonists:

a) NGOs and advocacy organizations. The post-human rights movement stage has been characterized by the consolidation of a specialized group of NGOs and civic associations that show a common concern for increasing the transparency and accountability of representative government. In recent years, these associations --such as Poder Ciudadano, Fundación para el Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales (FARN), Conciencia, Coordinadora contra la Represión Policial e Institucional (CORREPI), Coordinadora de Familiares de Víctimas Inocentes (COFAVI), Asociación por los Derechos Civiles, and the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS)-- have launched a variety of initiatives to make the exercise of political power more transparent and to increase citizens' monitoring of state agencies or officials. The initiatives range from campaigns to demand public disclosure of the assets of Senators and Deputies to the surveillance of police

behavior and reporting of police abuses.

b) Social movements that emerged as the result of specific cases of wrongdoing by public authorities. Throughout the 1990s there were a series of movements organized that demanded the truth and justice in several cases of human rights violations. Those initiatives galvanized large sectors of the population, who marched in the thousands to support the various movements' demands. Perhaps the most notorious ones were the Maria Soledad, the Cabezas and the Carrasco cases. In these three instances --the murder of schoolgirl Maria Soledad Morales in the northwestern province of Catamarca, the death of Army private Omar Carrasco in an isolated garrison of the province of Neuquén, and the assassination of news photographer José Luis Cabezas-- authorities were suspected of involvement in the murder, cover up and mishandling of subsequent investigations. These three highly-publicized murders gave rise to claims for justice and to extensive social mobilizations to demand guarantees by the authorities for proper police investigations and judicial procedures. In other words, what the citizenry was demanding was the unbiased performance of accountability agencies. In all three cases, the original mobilization was initiated locally, generally by relatives and friends of the victims, and extended afterwards to include local and national NGOs and broad sectors of the population. There were trials and indictments of the accused and in all three, there was extensive media coverage of the unfolding of the investigation and the judicial process which were closely followed by the population.¹⁵

c) Watchdog journalism. In the past decade the appearance of a more inquisitive type of watchdog journalism resulted in numerous exposés of government corruption and wrongdoing.¹⁶ It was under the Menem administration that investigative journalism gained national notoriety by disclosing countless episodes of official corruption. One of the first scandals surfaced in 1991 when *Página 12* revealed that then U.S. ambassador to Argentina sent a letter to the government in which he accused high-ranking officials of soliciting bribes from the U.S.-based Swift company to allow for the import of machinery. Only months later, the president's sister in law, Amira Yoma, was implicated

in a drug-money laundering scandal. Shortly afterwards, two close aides of Menem were involved in the sale of rotten milk to a federal nutritional program for poor children. Another prominent member of the administration, the head of the national agency of social services for senior citizens (PAMI), had to step down due to accusations of receiving bribes from favored providers. The exposé about the building of an oversized airstrip near Menem's private summer residence in Anillaco ended when the TV station decided to cancel the program. In 1995, a major scandal broke out due to revelations by *Clarín* that Argentine weapons were sold to Ecuador. Argentina was one of the guarantors of the 1942 peace treaty between Ecuador and Peru. Months later, the media revealed a new and much more important sale of weapons to Croatia in 1991 that violated the the-United Nations embargo.¹⁷ Political scandals were not circumscribed to the Menem administration. In fact, the most significant scandal would take place under de la Rúa administration¹⁸. As will be seen in the next section, the case of the *Senate scandal* provides important clues for understanding the anger against political representatives, which has propelled the third wave of civic engagement in Argentina.

The previous enumeration of some of the most visible civic initiatives and media scandals of the past years serves to give an idea of the central role played by the politics of accountability. They have allowed for the voicing of complaints over the breach of due process by public authorities, the uncovering of numerous cases of official corruption, the push to bring sanctions against lawbreakers, and the pressing for institutional reforms to increase the effectiveness of mechanisms of institutionalized distrust. As argued above, the politics of societal accountability represent an important sub-institutional complement to the institutionalized mechanisms of accountability. The reporting of specific cases of wrongdoing provides a vivid illustration of the shortcomings in the performance of horizontal agencies or representative institutions. In this sense, they serve to signal an accountability deficit, transforming it into a more general issue on the public agenda.

In many cases, societal mechanisms go beyond the signaling function and directly affect the workings of horizontal agencies or the careers of those officials under suspicion. They do so, by exerting symbolic sanctions on those agencies or officials that social mobilizations or the media's accusations have placed under the spotlight. The high

costs in terms of political reputation that civic mobilizations or press exposés usually involve, may force reluctant agencies or officials to minimize them by making or reversing decisions in ways to appear responsive to the accused institutional failures. Such decisions could entail the initiation of judicial procedures and parliamentary investigation commissions, or requesting the resignation of those officials under suspicion. Finally, civic initiatives sometimes lead to the establishment of permanent societal watchdog organizations that monitor the performance of specific public agencies.¹⁹

This form of politics has been crucial for democratic contexts that are characterized by the weakness of their horizontal mechanisms of accountability because they help to categorize and address those deficits. However, this form of politics should not be considered a phenomenon circumscribed to delegative regimes or fragile unconsolidated democracies. The politics of societal accountability represent a paramount form of politicization in any democracy, young or old, consolidated or not, since it serves to test whether the behavior of political representatives and non-elected officials abides to the normative principles embedded in liberal representative democracies. As Claus Offe argues, those practices function “to authenticate the core assumptions that turn out to be capable of withstanding and disconfirming trust.”²⁰ The “politics of distrust” are thus essential for strengthening trust in the institutional system of any democracy. “Trust” -Offe states- “is the residue that remains after the propensity to distrust has turned out to be unfounded.”²¹ From this last observation follows a possible danger arising from such politics: the failure to adequately address those demands can seriously erode citizens' confidence in representative institutions. The prevailing divorce between Argentine civil and political society could be explained by the reluctance of the representative parties to respond to the persistent demands for a more accountable and transparent government.

III. The Divorce between Political and Civil Society: The eruption of the *cacerolazos* and of popular assemblies.

In June 2000, another scandal broke out in Argentina that is crucial for understanding the current wave of civilian outbursts against political representatives. While the scandal had significant political costs for the governing coalition and was closely followed by the Argentine public, it did not trigger massive social mobilizations or any other visible form of civic involvement. Yet, the scandal seriously harmed the relationship between civil and political society. The first sign of the damage it exerted upon the legitimacy of representative institutions became visible in last year's legislative election. However, its consequences for Argentine public life would only become fully palpable in December 2001, when a wave of civic outburst spread throughout the country.

The Senate scandal was triggered by an editorial written by the prestigious political journalist Joaquín Morales Sola in which he suggested that a group of Peronist senators had received substantial bribes in exchange for their support of a labor reform law. The political impact of *La Nación's* editorial was amplified by the initiatives of two notorious politicians: a senior member of the Senate, Senator Antonio Cafiero, and the then Vice-President and acting chairman of the Upper House, Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez. Senator Cafiero presented a motion in the senate to investigate the matter while Alvarez prompted a judicial procedure to shed light on the matter. Alvarez also made public an anonymous pamphlet that had been circulating in the Senate which gave a detailed account of how the bribes were paid and who were the recipients. When Senator Cafiero testified before the court, he incriminated three colleagues.²² In the meantime, *La Nación* published an off-the-record interview with a member of the Senate (whose identity was kept anonymous) in which he not only admitted receiving a bribe to pass the new labor legislation but also declared that bribery was a regular procedure in the Congress.²³ The very same day that the article was published, Senator Cantarero came out in public and acknowledged that he was the anonymous member of the house interviewed by the *La Nación's* journalist. Yet, Cantarero denied having made such controversial statements. In the following day's edition of the *La Nación*, the newspaper confirmed the statements that the Senator publicly denied.

Judge Liporaci, who was handling the case of "the bribes in the Senate" added to the generalized feeling of suspicion toward the Senate when he claimed that, in his view,

there were firm indications that seemed to confirm the accusation. Judge Liporaci was himself accused of illegal personal enrichment because he could not justify his purchase of a US\$1.5 million dollar mansion. Consequently, the *Consejo de la Magistratura* (the Council of Magistrates) started investigating Liporaci. Two months later, Liporaci declared the “lack of merit” of the eleven Senators charged with bribery. In January, the prosecutors appealed the judge’s ruling and by February, the Council of Magistrates suspended Liporaci from his post and initiated the judicial process to remove him on corruption charges. To avoid the trial, Liporaci resigned in March, resulting in the case being passed into the hands of two more judges. It is currently in the process of being closed for lack of evidence.

The scandal generated an earthquake in the governing administration. As mentioned before, Vice-President Carlos Alvarez had adopted a decisive position in the case, which he saw as a crucial test for the governing alliance’s electoral promise to bring more transparency and accountability to the political system.²⁴ De la Rúa, instead, stated on several occasions his belief that the accusations were unfounded. The different attitudes assumed by the two political heads of the governing coalition generated a tense political climate. The Radical party closed ranks around the government and the Senate while Alvarez publicly demanded the resignation of those senators and members of the cabinet that were suspected of taking part in the political scheme. Alvarez’s pleas were not only ignored but the cabinet-change that the president made in mid-August, promoted the Labor Minister suspected of paying the bribes to General Secretary of the Presidency. The Vice-President did not wait to respond: on the very same day that the new cabinet members were sworn in, he presented his resignation. Alvarez’s unexpected decision opened a gap in the governing coalition that would only broaden with time.

The scandal gradually faded out from the public eye. Besides some public opinion polls taken at the height of the scandal that showed a generalized backing for the decisive attitude assumed by both Alvarez and Cafiero and some scattered expressions of popular support for Alvarez at the time he announced his resignation, the scandal did not generate any visible expressions of civic discontent at the time. After his resignation, Alvarez made a reference about his intention of organizing a grass-roots movement

against corruption but the issue quickly disappeared from his discourse. By December, there was little media coverage of the case.

Why should anyone have paid so much attention to the Senate Scandal? What made this scandal any different from the innumerable exposés of corruption in recent years? There are several aspects that make this particular case different from the numerous political scandals mentioned above. The first aspect is the very nature of the wrongdoing. The accusation that the laws passed by Congress were attained through bribes goes to the very heart of the country's representative institutions. If there is a generalized belief in society that political representatives respond not to the electorate but to the highest bidder, elections lose all meaning as a mechanism for the expression of the general will. This was not simply another corruption case but an event that has created serious doubts about the operation of the Argentine representative system. In contrast to many of the previously mentioned corruption exposés, the Senate scandal affected the credibility and reputation of the entire political society and not only of some isolated members.

The second unique aspect of this scandal is the way that the political society reacted to the accusations. The attitude assumed by a country's institutions and representatives in any scandal helps to illustrate their receptiveness to the demands of those they claim to represent. The way that the whole Argentine political society closed lines in defense of its prerogatives and corporate interests, and the fact, with the sole exceptions of Alvarez and Cafiero, that there were no major political figures who acted promptly to dissociate themselves from the eventual transgressors, further contributed to confirm for many citizens that the representative institutions had detached themselves from the wishes and aspirations of the people.

Third and lastly, the Senate scandal made it pathetically visible that there was a malfunctioning of the horizontal mechanisms of accountability in Argentina. It showed how these safeguards had been distorted and expropriated by unscrupulous officials who had mastered the art of "surviving accountability." The fact that the scandal brought together the key players in the intrastate system of checks and balances (the executive power, the legislative, the judiciary, the anticorruption office, etc.) made the picture more

pitiful. It is the conjunction of all these reasons that made the Senate scandal a poignant turning point in the almost two decade-long history of the Argentine representative system. The symbolic costs that the scandal exerted on the political system helps to understand an important part of the current anger and resentment by civil society against its political representatives.²⁵

The first sign of the erosion of the representative link was in the results of the October 2001 legislative election, in which more than 40% of the electorate either abstained or cast null or blank votes. All in all, the Radicals and Peronists lost 4.7 million votes in relation to the previous election in 1999.²⁶ The two great novelties of the election, the large number of null or blank votes and the high percentage of abstentions, illustrated two different ways of society expressing its disappointment. Abstentions represent an exit strategy: the choice signals a cancellation of the representative contract by the represented. The protest vote, however, is a voice strategy that still takes place and expresses itself by the mechanisms provided by representative institutions.

Yet, the state of affairs that the October results insinuated would only become vividly and tragically palpable in December 2001, when thousands of angry Argentines took to the streets and plazas of the country demanding the resignation of all the country's political representatives. What more dramatic expression of the severing of relations between civil and political society could there be than the battle cry of the *cacerolazos* "*¡Que se vayan todos! ¡Que no quede ni uno sólo!*" (Let's get rid of them all! Not one should stay!) or the emergence of the popular assemblies inspired by the model of direct democracy? Both phenomena provide vivid examples of the actual degree of decomposition that has occurred in the representative link in Argentina.

The current explosion of civic activism -the *cacerolazos* and popular assemblies standing as its most salient expressions- has generated a great deal of debate about the nature and meaning of these novel forms of collective action. I referred earlier to the widespread interpretation of the phenomenon as a side-effect of the *corralito*. In this view, the *cacerolazos* express the discontent of middle sectors for the government's decision to confiscate all bank deposits in early December in order to stop a run on the financial system, which had begun to reach worrisome dimensions. It is undeniable that

the freezing of bank deposits has played a major role in the surge of popular discontent and that many mobilizations -especially after Duhalde severed the banking restrictions and put a disorderly end to convertibility- have entailed a defensive and particularistic reaction by groups affected by the crisis of the financial system and by the consequences from the devaluation. The economic measures of the Duhalde - Remes Lenicov tandem spawned a new wave of mobilizations by groups that organized themselves to voice their discontent and to pressure the government of reverse, or to modify, some aspects of the new legislation that the administration was trying to implement. The many loopholes, inconsistencies, and arbitrariness of the measures provided incentives for a new wave of mobilizations by groups that were adversely affected by them²⁷.

Undoubtedly, the *corralito* contributed to fueling the anger and discontent within sectors of the population that otherwise would not have easily engaged in collective action; especially when those measures were the corollary to a dramatic failure in political performance which resulted in a rampant rate of unemployment and the longest and most severe economic recession in Argentine history. Yet, it is important to make some qualifications to this assertion. First, it was not Cavallo's announcement and implementation of the *corralito* that triggered the *cacerolazos*. Actually, the phenomenon arose as a direct response to de la Rúa's decision to suspend some of the constitutional guarantees after a bloody period of rioting and repression that took a considerable toll in terms of lives lost. Second, while the *ahorristas'* demands were certainly present in the demonstrations, a large proportion of the slogans were clearly of a political nature. The numerous banners and signs carried by citizens in those mobilizations ranged from insults directed at some of the most notorious members of political society (predominantly against Menem, Alfonsín, de la Rúa, and Cavallo, but later at Rodriguez Saa, Grosso, Vernet, and Duhalde) and the Supreme Court Justices, to countless references of government corruption. What more of a dramatic statement against the present-day political representatives than the "*Que se vayan todos*" slogan of the *cacerolazos*? Lastly, it is important to stress that although the middle-class component of the phenomenon is important, the phenomenon of the *cacerolazos* is not circumscribed to this social sector.²⁸

The predominant discourse of the present wave of civic engagement entails a stern critique of the existing political class and of the elitist closing of representative institutions. In the eyes of most Argentines, the political system has uncoupled itself from the country's societal needs. Their refusal to adequately address the generalized civic outcry for legal accountability in the previous wave of civic engagement, and the tendency of party leaders to engage in elite pacts without considering the demands of the electorate are seen by many people as vivid examples of a political class that stands above the normative claims embedded in constitutionalism and is unresponsive to the electorate's. Society's immediate answer to the closing of political society was to cut off all links with the country's representative institutions and to block the questionable attempt at recapturing its *constituent power*. As Maristella Svampa has argued, society responded to the self-referentiality of political society with its own self-enclosing.²⁹

Svampa wonders if the current situation does not bear any resemblance with previous waves of *movimentismo*³⁰. She reminds us that in the mid-1970s, Argentina also experienced a burst of social activism against what was considered a largely ossified institutional system. Certainly, the main ingredients of the populist recipe are present in today's Argentina. The widespread perception that seems to exist on the part of the citizenry of an insurmountable gap between the promise and the performance of Argentine democracy certainly has provided a breeding ground for the extraordinary politics of populism. The scenario has been set up for the emergence of a charismatic leader that can capitalize on the current discrediting of Argentina's representative institutions, substituting a confidence in its institutions for the belief in the extraordinary qualities of a leader. This alternative could certainly provide a plausible avenue for recreating political trust. However, such a populist short-cut to trust building is deceptive.³¹ As the Argentine experience amply exemplifies, such a road to institution building is questionable and ineffective. In fact, it is an expression of the failure to mediate trust through institutions.³²

While a populist solution can not be discarded, especially if there is not a rapid and effective response from representative institutions to the crisis, it is important to pinpoint that the present manifestation of politicization bears little resemblance to

movimentismo. As the previous review of civil society politics has tried to show, the current stage of civic activism must be understood as the upshot of a self-limiting form of civil society politicization that has placed a great trust in institutions. In this sense, the different waves of civic engagement that have dominated public life since 1983 are far removed from populist *movimentismo*; rather, they are guided by a strong commitment to a constitutional form of representative democracy. Common to all three forms of civic activism is the refusal to blindly delegate political authority, and the concern for building and strengthening effective institutional mechanisms of accountability to reduce the risks from electoral authorization.

The present stage the rejection of political representatives and the attempt to recapture the power that was delegated to them and the representative institutions can serve a therapeutic function by allowing the expression of anger and frustration against a political system that has proven insensitive to popular demands. Yet, the unilateral termination of the representative contract can not provide a plausible solution to the present crisis. It is therefore necessary to turn the battle cry of the movement, "*¡Que se vayan todos!*," into a positive program of institutional reform aimed at recreating the bridges between civil and political society.

The demand for political change, as captured in the protest chant "*¡Que se vayan todos!*," must be realized, first, by a profound process of political reform. This should put an end to the parties' monopoly on candidate selection, make more transparent the financing of political campaigns, and establish effective horizontal mechanisms for controlling the country's political representatives. Second, civil society must avoid the temptation offered by "anti-politics" and engage in a form of politicization that has been absent through all three stages of civic involvement, but which is an important dimension of civil society politics: the politics of inclusion;³³ the formation of alternative leaderships and organizations that, if successful, will eventually bring new actors into the political system. It is imperative to positively channel the existing "civic effervescence" into a set of measures that could establish the grounds for the reconstruction of Argentina's political institutions. A ground-breaking political reform and the renewal of political leadership can provide the initial steps to rebuild a credible authority and, at the same time, turn into

reality civil society's long-delayed aspiration for a more responsive and accountable government.

¹ The term "*corralito*" or "enclosure" has become the most popular way to refer to the economic measures that have restricted the use of deposits by freezing most withdrawals from personal bank accounts. The *corralito* was implemented in December 2001 by then Minister of the Economy Domingo Cavallo and tightened later by President Duhalde after he took office in January 2002.

² The crisis currently has extended beyond representative institutions to include the judiciary, most notably, the Supreme Court.

³ Enrique Peruzzotti, "Towards a New Politics: Citizenship and Rights in Contemporary Argentina," *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 6, number 1, 2002; "The Nature of the New Argentine Democracy: The Delegative Democracy Argument Revisited," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 33, 2001.

⁴ In the past, the struggle for the extension of rights was carried out under the populist self-understanding that, by polarizing society and eroding the legitimacy of constitutionalism, the institutional conditions required for the existence of a modern civil society would be undermined. See Enrique Peruzzotti, "Civil Society and the Modern Constitutional Complex. The Argentine Experience," *Constellations. An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, vol. 4, number 1, April 1997.

⁵ I am borrowing this concept from Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, CA: University Press, 1972, p. 38.

⁶ Enrique Peruzzotti, *Civil Society and Constitutionalism in Latin America. The Argentine Experience*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, The Graduate Faculty, The New School for Social Research, 1996.

⁷ Pitkin, op. cit., p. 55.

⁸ Peruzzotti, op. cit.

⁹ Jean Cohen, "Trust, Voluntary Association and Workable Democracy," in Mark Warren (ed.) *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 216; Andrew Arato, "Accountability y Sociedad Civil," in Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz (eds.), *Controlando la Política. Ciudadanos y Medios en las Nuevas Democracias Latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Temas, 2002, pp. 64-66.

¹⁰ Susan Rose-Ackerman, "Trust, Honesty and Corruption: Reflection on the state-building process," *Archives European of Sociology*, vol. XLII, number 3 (2001), p. 543.

¹¹ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, number 1, 1994.

¹² Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal Accountability in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 11, number 4, 2000.

¹³ Accountability refers to the ability to ensure that public officials are answerable for their behavior, in the sense of being forced to justify and report their decisions, and of being eventually sanctioned for those decisions. The accountability of political power can be established on legal or on political grounds. The notion of legal accountability refers to a set of institutional mechanisms aimed at ensuring that the actions of public officials are legally and constitutionally framed. The concept of political accountability refers instead to the responsiveness of government policies to the preferences of the electorate. Political accountability is intimately intertwined with the concept of democratic representation. A government is politically accountable if citizens have the means for punishing unresponsive or

irresponsible administrations. It is usually assumed that elections are the central institution for this type of control. See Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz, "Accountability Social. La otra cara del control," in Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, op. cit., pp. 25-30.

¹⁴ The concept of horizontal accountability refers to the operation of an intrastate system of checks and balances oriented to control or punish the actions or omissions by agents or agencies of the state that might be considered unlawful. See Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies," in Andreas Schedler, L. Diamond, and M. F. Plattner (eds.) *The Self-Restraining State. Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999.

¹⁵ For a specific analysis of these cases see Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal and Horizontal Controls: Two Cases of a Fruitful Relationship" in Scott Mainwaring and Christopher Welna, (eds.), *Accountability, Democratic Governance, and Political Institutions in Latin America*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, forthcoming; Jacqueline Behrend, "Mobilization and Accountability: A Study of Societal Control in the Cabezas Case in Argentina" paper presented at the Workshop on Societal Accountability, Buenos Aires, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, November 2001.

¹⁶ Silvio Waisbord, "Interpretando los Escándalos. Análisis de su Relación con los Medios y la Ciudadanía en la Argentina Contemporánea" in Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz (eds.) *Controlando la Política. Ciudadanos y Medios en las Nuevas Democracias Latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Temas, 2002.

¹⁷ For an analysis of watchdog journalism in Argentina see Waisbord, op. cit.

¹⁸ The profusion of scandals during the Menem administration have led some authors to wonder whether the citizenry was reaching a state of scandal fatigue that could spread skepticism and political apathy. Waisbord, op. cit., pp. 315-320. The current upsurge of civic activism seems to place a question mark on such diagnosis. Actually, Waisbord himself tempers the scandal fatigue diagnosis by pointing out the existence of many cases that contradict such hypothesis like the civic mobilizations that took place nationwide in the Maria Soledad, Jose Luis Cabezas and Omar Carrasco cases or as a result of the terrorist bombing of the Israeli Embassy and the AMIA. Those scandals not only generated public outrage and massive mobilizations demanding truth and justice, but in some cases they were also successful in bringing the culprits to the authorities. In his view, wrongdoings that represent a clear affront to civil society, like those involving human rights violations, are the ones that are going to elicit a strong civic response. op. cit. pp. 320-323.

¹⁹ For example, an important accomplishment of a group of social movements that emerged as a consequences of cases of police brutality and violence was the eventual establishment of permanent organizations for the supervision of the police forces. Those organizations act as external "fire alarms" that are set whenever violations of human rights by police officers occur. For the concept of fire alarms, see Matthew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 28, number 1, February 1984, p. 168. For a more extensive analysis of the politics of societal accountability, see Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, op. cit.; Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz, "Accountability Social. La otra cara del control," in Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, op. cit.

²⁰ Claus Offe, "How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?," in Mark Warren (ed.). *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 76

²¹ Offe, op. cit., p. 76.

²² *La Nación*, 08/29/00.

²³ The tone of the declarations of the interviewed Senator as well as his acknowledgment and defense of corruption shocked the Argentine public. The Senator admitted that "we are all

involved [in bribe taking] although there are some idiots that did not take part and blew the whistle." He complained about the latter's attitude in a appalling statement: "we have mafia-style codes of behavior" that excluded ratting. For the complete interview see *La Nación*, 08/30/00.

²⁴ A large sector of the electorate had placed their hopes for change in the Alianza. Political reform and the fight against corruption ranked high in the agenda of the electoral coalition led by the Unión Cívica Radical and FREPASO. The very strength of FREPASO as a political force was built on its image as a new and innovative political actor that would change the old ways of doing politics. For an analysis of FREPASO and the Alianza government see Maria Matilde Ollier

²⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the Senate Scandal see Enrique Peruzzotti, "Media Scandals and Accountability. Assessing the role of the Senate Scandal in Argentina," mimeo.

²⁶ *La Nación*, 10/16/01.

²⁷ For example, those who had contracted mortgages over US\$100,000 quickly mobilized to claim the same benefits that the devaluation exerted on those that had fallen on the other side of the monetary divide. Immediately after the government's announcements, the public scenario was taken by multiple mobilizations; from debtors whose bank mortgage was above the US\$100,000 limit to debtors that had contracted their debts outside of the financial system.

²⁸ It is also important to stress that the wave of civic engagement initiated by the *cacerolazos* has, in recent months, become more diversified. The protests now have different layers: there is a wide-range of mobilizations that include weekly demonstrations of *ahorristas*, popular assemblies in the main neighborhoods of the city of Buenos Aires, numerous *escraches* against politicians, regular demonstrations and *escraches* against the Supreme Court Justices, and violent popular outbursts like the ones that took place in the cities of Junín and Casilda.

²⁹ Maristella Svampa, "Las dimensiones de las nuevas protestas sociales," mimeo, p.13.

³⁰ Svampa, op. cit., p. 12

³¹ Offe, op. cit., p. 77.

³² Offe, op. cit., p. 77. On the shortcomings of populism as a road to institution building, see Enrique Peruzzotti, "Modernization and Juridification in Latin America. A Reassessment of the Latin American Developmental Path," *Thesis Eleven*, number 58, 1999.

³³ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.