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Stencils and Argentine Upheaval

By Ryan Hollon

Post-millennial Argentina faces a daunting crisis. Years of corrupt politics and unrealistic International Monetary Fund policy have culminated in massive financial meltdown. In December 2001 millions of Argentines took to the streets in protest of it all. They demanded an end to backdoor policy-making and rampant corruption. In its place they offered neighborhood based governance and worker-run factories. Today the country is under the rule of a newly elected president and is returning to the old model of development led by the Washington consensus. The once massive neighborhood assemblies have dried up and the worker-run factories are being intensely repressed. What the massive uprising left behind was a cultural memory of resistance. In Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital, this memory has been inscribed onto the city walls. On nearly every bank and government building stencils bear witness to the fresh legacy of widespread mobilization.

Throughout the period of intense uprising, social possibilities were rearranged and identities were revolutionized- if only temporarily. During this brief and powerful period, stencils offered the possibility of alternative public expression to the sea of new groups and individuals looking to get out their call for a new Argentina. Many in the middle class suddenly became street artists combating global capital. Government workers took the streets prepared to stencil on government walls. Various psychoanalysts became graffiti writers. The poor, who have historically been used by politicians to paint murals during political campaigns, could now use murals to tell all the politicians to get the hell out of their country. After the protests, which happened almost daily for many months, the city blocks that had been marched were often lined with fresh stencils. Newly organized artist collectives used stencils to propose political alternatives and advocate alternative politics. Graffiti pieces began popping up by groups like "El Ejercito de Artistas" ("The Army of Artists"), "Grupo de Arte Callejero" ("The Street Artists Group"), and "el Taller Popular de Serigrafía" ("The Popular Screen Printing Workshop"). Stencils allowed the voices of the uprising to make their critiques and their alternative visions widespread.

As the momentum of the uprising dramatically slowed over the months that followed, many of the stretched identities went back to their traditional comfort zones. Reverse social mobility, unemployment, and poverty are still monumental issues in present-day Argentina. Nonetheless, also persisting are those old slogans of resistance still up on the city walls. The paint is left as a reminder of the possibility of alternative possibilities.