

Chapter 1

Violence and Politicization in Argentina in the 1970s: The Guerrillas of the PRT-ERP

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ABSTRACT

From the late 1960s throughout the 1970s, Argentina saw the rise and demise of more than a dozen guerrilla organizations. Were they the result of the weakness of Argentine democracy? Or rather, were they themselves a form of political radicalization that arose by linking left politics with a worker culture of struggle and feelings of oppression? If the latter, political violence became a way to express demands and as such a type of democratic practice by the underclass. This chapter examines a specific guerrilla organization, the PRT-ERP, by seeking to answer who were its members, why did they join such a group, what they believed. The sources for this research include both documents and extensive interviews with members of the guerrilla.

INTRODUCTION

Often, throughout the 20th Century, Argentina was governed by dictatorships; in addition, in the 1960s and 1970s there were dozens of guerrilla organizations. It seemed that violence and political instability prevented the consolidation of the nation's electoral system. To many observers the weakness of Argentina's representative electoral system was a result of various factors, including an underdeveloped middle class, and the growth of populism. Still, as John Markoff (1997) wrote, part of the

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problem is thinking of democracy as a single, fixed, institutional ideal which nations at one time or another more or less attain.

Fifty years ago, in the early 1970s, two of the more influential political analysts were the Argentine sociologists Guillermo O'Donnell and Juan Carlos Portantiero, who tended to disagree with the model whereas democracy was equivalent to capitalist representative electoral systems. O'Donnell argued that under contemporary Third World circumstances, capitalist development would have corrosive effects on the democratic gains of the past (O'Donnell, 1972, 1982). He contended that specific patterns of industrialization emerging in the more economically developed countries of South America had by the 1950s created a coalition of industrialists, technocrats and foreign bankers committed to capital-intensive producer goods, a course of action diametrically opposed to the interests of labor as well as other beneficiaries of "populist" policies that, in previous decades, had emerged around strategies of consumer oriented industrialization through import substitution. The new coalition sought to eject labor from the political arena by closing down democracy.

Portantiero agreed with O'Donnell from a different perspective. Applying Gramsci to Argentine politics he posited that there was an organic crisis resulting from the emergence of populism in the 1930s and 1940s (Portantiero, 1973). The broadening of the franchise, and increased democratic participation, implied that there was a disjuncture between economic and political power. The elite were not in control, and parliament became a resonance box for the demands of wage earners. The ruling class had no hegemony and thus no legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled; thus the crisis. Unable to win an election, and since the democratic process became an obstacle to capital accumulation, the ruling class favoured authoritarian regimes that would be immune to the interests of the majority. Notice several premises behind their hypothesis. First, that democracy is intimately linked to popular interests and participation, and not necessarily to elections. Second, that there is a linkage between patterns of capital accumulation and democracy. Third, this linkage effectively happens through the actions of interest groups. Finally, that democracy is something perfectible.

At the same time, both O'Donnell and Portantiero assumed as a given a high level of politicization in Argentina's population. This politicization implied that electoral democracy became a "resonance box" for popular demands that were not channeled through institutional means. This led to political violence as a common practice whether in electoral or authoritarian political systems. As such, the rise of armed struggle and guerrilla organizations in the 1960s and 1970s can be considered not as exceptional, but rather as a product (albeit a particularly violent one) of a fundamentally flawed political system; perhaps even as a form to pursue democratic demands through extra institutional means.

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