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Recommended Book

DANA WILLIAMS

Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina, Marina Sitrin (ed.)
(Oakland, California: AK Press, 2006)

Horizontalism is not just the first English-language account of the most recent social movements in Argentina. It is also an in-depth exploration of the ideas—prefigurative politics and direct democracy—driving those movements. Editor Marina Sitrin considers a variety of topics in turn, including horizontalism, *autogestion* and recuperated factories, autonomy, creation, power, feminism, and protagonism. As Sitrin states in her introduction, many of the words currently used in Argentina’s movements—such as *horizontalidad* or *autogestion*—have no exact English translation, so she rightly keeps the original Spanish word and allows her subjects to explain the new words and their meanings. This approach is appropriate given the dramatic and quick changes taking place that require new language to describe.

Sitrin has compiled a book with a structure that mimics the very thing it helps to explain. *Horizontalism* discusses the dramatic changes in social life in Argentina following a devastating financial crisis in 2001—changes that created widespread democratic, autonomous, self-determined, collective-minded, and empowering groupings and organizations—by the use of passionate and articulate oral histories. Following the premise of horizontalism, Argentina’s movements respect the diversity of participating voices, and this book’s characters provide an equally nuanced and diverse explanation of movement activities. Just like in their popular assemblies, the book’s subjects generally agree on what they describe, but there are large, healthy portions of comradely disagreement. Each interviewee contributes his or her own understandings of a variety of phenomena occurring in Argentina, ranging from the December 2001 rebellion, reclaimed and cooperative factories, and neighborhood assemblies, to a movement of unemployed workers, feminism, middle-class revolt, and horizontalism.

During the past few years, activist documentaries have been permeating the political left; films like *The Fourth World War*, *The Take*,

i: Argentina, Indymedia, and The Questions of Communication. These films have introduced English-speaking audiences to upheaval taking place in this country and have favorably displayed the creative actions of everyday Argentinians for all to see. This book adds the necessary texture and analysis to the social revolution presented in the films. Who would not be inspired? Or at least shaken (and depending who you are, maybe even scared) to the bone? This social revolution is not one that is debated by armchair Marxists or heady intellectuals in the Ivory Tower. The revolution—and in some respects, Argentina's very future—appears in the tight control of the movement participants themselves.

The book details the social revolution following the economic crisis of late 2001, and in doing so, reveals the new language and vision of Argentina's social movements. Within the span of a few weeks, five successive governments disintegrated as countless thousands of citizens gathered outside the Presidential palace in Buenos Aires chanting “¡Que se vayan todos!” (“They all must go!”). People met by the hundreds on street corners and held meetings (*assembleas*) with their neighbors—by consensus—after reading chalked messages on sidewalks asking for people to converge at a certain time (*horizontalidad*). In these assemblies, neighbors discussed community problems and worked collectively to address needs unmet by conventional government. Workers who had been unemployed by corporations fleeing the ruinous economy decided to seize and cooperatize their former workplaces and run the machines themselves (*autogestion*). Other unemployed workers organized into small-trades with each other, while creating road blockades to prevent corporate trucks for carrying products and raw materials of Argentina out of the country (*piqueteros*). And families and whole communities occupied spaces as varied as abandoned land and bankrupt banks, turning them into squatter neighborhoods and community centers.

Social movement participants interviewed in the book name-drop the various influences and inspirations for the explosion of activism and social revolution. Some mention Zapatismo, others the patron-saint of the Argentinean radical left, Che Guevara, and one mentions the circulation of John Holloway's book *Change the World Without Taking Power* among the movement. Most interviewees, however, say the horizontal approach bubbled-up naturally from the bottom and was formed out of necessity. In fact, movements' self-organization is derived from the failure of all establishment methods; to succeed, movements had to do things in a radically different way.

The book's best contribution for readers interested in social theory is likely to be its insights into radical democracy and decentralization. Democracy—something frequently talked about by scholars, pundits, and

politicians, but rarely attempted (or achieved) in the real world—is being theorized in tandem with everyday practice by Argentines trying to find popular, empowering, and autonomous ways of acting to support themselves in both a weak economy and reeling political state. “Horizontalism” is the name that Argentina’s movement uses to describe this approach to democratic decision making. It serves as a way to decentralize the power held formerly in the political party machines and re-distribute it among people who are clearly interested in making more active use of such power. The recuperated workplaces serve as a dramatic economic example of horizontalism: workers self-managing their jobs via direct democracy and not allowing decision making (or profit) to be centralized in the hands of managers and owners.

With all these heady efforts to transform institutions and social relations, it is difficult for a reader to resist comparisons to other incipient, revolutionary situations. The Spanish Civil War of 1936 is an ideal reference point: both Argentina and Spain include the rise in cross-movement solidarity, the de-centering of political authority, the appropriation of land and workplaces, large networks of counter-institutions established to sustain alternatives to hierarchical institutions, and a spirited increase in rebelliousness and optimism. Yet, elements that did and can prove detrimental to sustained movement activity are also present in both examples: increased repression by the counter-revolutionary forces (primarily the state and its police), leeching of energy by the authoritarian left (and electorally oriented liberals in Argentina), and rough, never-ending vigilance against a re-establishment of centralized power. The Spanish experiment in anarchism was militarily crushed by Stalinists and fascists in-turn; the fate of Argentina’s horizontalism remains to be seen.

Horizontalism’s prose is powerful, but more importantly, clearer than most academic writing, a benefit clearly attributable to the non-academic origins of the participants. Consequently, the book is on-topic, intricate, and treats complex ideas thoroughly—using straight-forward language in a compelling interview-style format. Sitrin expertly edits her interviews to encapsulate the various threads into chapters that are (relatively) neatly packaged and cohesive. As with any social movement still in its formative stages, the book’s main sister topics (horizontalism, *autogestion*, autonomy, and so on) have many points of overlap and potential synonyms of confusion, which may cause some readers to struggle to keep ideas separate and unique (particularly given most English-speakers’ inexperience with these concepts and practices). Equally, by the end of each chapter, there is a fair amount of repetition on many points, which may lead a reader to become slightly impatient—but redundancy is to be expected in an oral history. The book also includes a good number of photos (over sixty), and although none are large resolution, they help prop

open a compelling window into the surreal and normal aspects of the extraordinary events being described.

I do have a few questions, concerns, and issues I would have liked to see included or discussed. First, there are no dates attached to the interview snippets, leaving the reader curious as to what point in time the events related by interviewees occurred. Are these reflections from the immediate aftermath of the 2001 rebellion? Or are they the result of a few years worth of gestation and internalization? Enthusiasm in the wake of the economic crisis is predictable, but if people's passions remain years later while organizations and practices are solidifying, then the movements have been gathering a terrific momentum even after the initial outburst.

Even though *autogestion*, horizontalism, autonomy, and other ideas are intricately described by the interviewees, few arguments against the merit of these ideas are offered. It makes sense that activists would be generally supportive of the ideas dominating their movements, yet it is curious that there are few (even friendly) criticisms of the overall agenda. Do popular arguments exist, perhaps outside the movements, that criticize the goals or methods of these ideas? Equally important, it is difficult to know how widespread the ideas and practices described are, not to mention the movements that such things are embedded within. One could calculate the size of the movement based on the estimated population of Argentina and the eyewitness accounts of participant accounts at events or in organizations. Still, Sitrin's subjects do not speak to the numbers involved in assemblies or other neighborhood projects, or the ratio of those who would prefer to engage in horizontal activities compared to party politics (or neither). Of course, such questions may serve as an interesting future research project for a curious quantitative-oriented social scientist.

Finally, although the response to Argentina's newest movements by the Right has been clear—repression and smear-campaigns—what is the “established Left” (parties, unions, and so on) currently doing in Argentina, and what has their overall response been to these movements? Cooptation has occurred in some instances, it appears, but have there been efforts to appropriate the movements' ideology to the advantage of parties? Political systems do, of course, try all they can to absorb and redirect outpourings of dissent and creative expression. Thus, if the horizontal tendency in Argentina's newest movements is to remain, holding off the incursion of formal, representative politics seems paramount. Although these may be frustrating and open questions, in reality they are minor issues that should not tarnish an otherwise excellent book.

It was incredibly difficult to pry myself away from this book and I found it easy to imagine an excited tone of the voices behind the transcribed words. I think this engaging content is relevant and important for two

audiences. The first would be anyone who cannot imagine everyday people's ability to self-organize in a directly democratic fashion, without the use of bureaucracy, elected representatives, or charismatic leaders. A second audience would be anyone who knows that such possibilities exist but have yet to witness such an eloquent description of such futures. Sitrin's volume will surely inspire and fascinate students of social movements, organizations, and social change, as much as it will inspire activists wishing to emulate Argentina's impressive moves toward horizontalism.

It is tempting to wonder aloud if similar precipitating factors, such as an economic collapse in the United States, could trigger a popular rebellion like that witnessed in Argentina. If anything, this book conveys a strong sense of optimism and faith in human potential that generates confidence in our neighbors and fellow citizens given a possible future collapse as devastating as Argentina's.

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