

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Argentina and the World at the Dawn of 2016 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In part 1 of the Listening Post the members were invited to share their experiences and preoccupations in a variety of social roles that they occupy in their everyday life. This part was also of usefulness in 'breaking the ice' between the members of the whole group, as the event was an unknown experience for all members involved. A dynamic atmosphere soon developed and most members shared several of their everyday social thoughts and concerns.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. The group was temporarily broken up in four, smaller sub-groups and subsequently these sub-groups later reported their identifiable topics to the original large group. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. The first cluster of themes was dominated by the topics of **violence** and **co-existence**. In the first instance, the former was mostly associated with the presence of violence in political discourse and social relationships as well as with the preoccupation of having to learn to live without violence. The members reflected on the major political changes which took place in Argentina in the last three months (since November 2015) where a 12-year rule of the Peronist party ended with the election of a centre-right coalition. In particular, they reported the notable difficulty in debating political ideas and how political disagreement corroded personal relationships ("I didn't have any fights with friends because I avoided talking with anyone [about politics]") which made co-existence with friends (and in some cases, family) a very challenging endeavour. Members also mentioned feeling "attacked" for their political ideology and fearful of talking their mind. The members associated this "us" vs. "them" split in society with the years of a particularly cruel dictatorship (1976-1983) where violence was present but it stayed out of public view ("hidden"). On further reflection the members reported their preoccupation on the chronic-presence of violence in Argentine society wondering "where is all this

violence coming from?"

2. The second category of themes was about **perversion** and **complexity** and, following from the first cluster, it was mostly within the context of the previous theme of intense political antagonism and the apparent impossibility of bridging the deep chasm between the two dominant (and opposing) sides. The group reflected on how society has also split in terms of generations, with usually young people being much more open and supportive of Peronist ideology (as it was represented by the last government) than were previous, older generations who tended to be more sceptical and harder to convince. One member described that divide as one between "hippies vs. spoiled little girls". The effort to keep up with the complexity of pluralism and of a productive debate was seen as impossible, members reported enormous pressures of having to choose a side and the nearly impossible task of staying reflective and open when politics or any other social conflict would be discussed. In that sense, there was a notable frustration by members in the loss of, what was previously thought of as, "objective facts" and, more importantly, the loss of common consent upon the nature of those "facts". This was particularly present in the Argentine society during the last two years of the previous government, when an all-out war broke out between the government and the dominant media outlets. This mainly resulted in the existence of two separate, parallel narratives, at most times each contrasting the other, about the same political and social phenomena (e.g. corruption, crime, poverty, economic hardship, etc.) As a member of a group put it, "my children do not see what I see [in society and politics] anymore!"
3. The third category of emergent themes was concerned with **decadence and disintegration of symbols, meanings and institutions**. The group reported increasing concern about the impact of such prevalent, social attitudes (as described previously) on social institutions and society as a whole. It was reported that widespread attitudes and mentalities, like clientelism, have caused irreparable damage to important social and political institutions (such as, the judiciary and productive political discourse). Gradually members reported that these types of attitudes could not solely be attributed to the last 12-year period of governance but were part of a decades-long process where social institutions were manipulated from citizens for personal, short-term benefit. In the same way, in some respects, as historically progressive political forces came to be seen as totalitarian (described as "neo-fascist" by some) and conservative one were suddenly perceived as progressive and tolerant. On that note, a member reflected on the country's first

democratically-elected president, following the end of the last military regime who had a reputation of being a moderate leader, that he was the “only good one” – only to be soon reminded that at the time of his presidency and the period following it, he was frequently described as “naïve and stupid”. This last comment might have gone some way in exemplifying the social ambivalence towards moderate and polarised mentalities and attitudes.

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the data gathered from Parts I and II, with the aim to collectively identify the underlying dynamics – conscious and unconscious – that may be predominant at the time of the group meeting. As well as developing hypotheses as why they might be occurring at the moment. As such at this point the members are working with their ‘psychological’ or ‘internal’ world.

This part proved the most challenging and tiring for all group members. But all were committed in making their best effort, through an engaging discussion, to make sense of this experience. In this last part the group agreed on two main hypotheses that bear significant relation to each other:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: As mentioned in past reports, Argentina is a country very much still in the process of democratic transition. A long history of authoritarian regimes, at times notably violent ones, has left local society with an open, emotional wound which appears particularly difficult to work through and heal. At the same, Argentine citizens view the State as an entity which works *against* them and not *for* them. And as a result, citizens are constantly seeking out ways to either protect themselves from a negligent State (one which “deceives”) or to obtain individual benefit in any way possible (often to such an extent that illegal practices become so commonplace that they are “legalised” almost by common consent). But as it happens, this type of self-destructive behaviour often results in the violent denigration of social institutions (e.g. the judiciary) and the rule of law which, serves as to reinforce the initial impression of a state distanced from its citizens.

Hypothesis: Argentina is a country with a long history of social and political violence (military regimes, Dirty War) which has only recently celebrated its very first 30-year period of uninterrupted democratic governance. While politically, the country appeared to have moved on from oppressive, totalitarian regimes, emotionally society seems to be struggling to appreciate the value of moderate, non-encompassing

rule. This mainly serves as to perpetuate self-destructive, abusive attitudes of clientelism and political polarisation, which in turn facilitate the repetition of society's traumatic violent past and the further denigration of its institutions – in effect, destroying the very fabric upon which moderate governance can be built on.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: During the last 12 years of continuous governance by a Peronist government, the concept of “la grieta” (the rift or the split) was one that was mostly used to describe the relation between the pro- and anti- government camps. With time The Rift became more than a descriptive term to connote differences in political and economic ideology, it soon manifested in the actual co-existence of two, separate but parallel realities. On one side, there was a part of society who firmly believed in the previous government as one which put social interests first and was constantly fighting under a torrent of negativity and misinformation from the power elites and their affiliated media. On the other side, another part of society was absolutely convinced that they were living in an oppressive political environment which they often compared with the tumultuous decade of the 1990s and even more so with the brutal years of the last military dictatorship – at times, even with fascist regimes of the last century. In this violent, antagonistic and highly polarised environment, the participants kept referring to Argentina (and the Argentine reality) as a blond, attractive woman with long legs. To many that woman was standing just in front of us but due to The Rift society couldn't agree if she was indeed a “blond and attractive” woman or a “brunette and overweight” one.

Hypothesis: Around two months ago (December 2015), the main centres of political power and social influence have been re-calibrated with the change of government from the (traditionally considered as) centre-left to the centre-right. The change in question exemplified the long-standing Rift in Argentine society between opposing political viewpoints and social narratives. Furthermore, other (at times, underlying) rifts have also (re-) emerged along gender lines, between generations and economic classes. These kinds of realisations were accompanied by anxiety on the potential, total disintegration of society (“this is our last chance [to get things right]”) and the social violence this could unleash. At this transitional period, society appears to be struggling between the perpetuation of violence (as a participant put it, in the wish “to see some [political] blood spilled”) and arduous task of understanding “where [does] all this violence come from?”

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