

# **PUBLIC ART AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA: THE POPULAR CULTURE OF ARGENTINE PROTEST, 1986.**

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## **I**

Communication is a basic human need. Societies evolve communication systems which allows governments, organizations and individuals to present their views, demands, needs and ideas. This enables the various societal entities to lobby for their interests concerning the realization of their social, economic, political and cultural goals. The media and technology for this communication process, though, have changed over time, diversifying the channels available for the dissemination of ideas and culture.

The latest development in the explosion of communication is the sophisticated electronic media which many classify as revolutionary. In this "revolutionary" pro-

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cess, technology is God, mass culture the result. This presupposes that the mass culture of communication is imposed from above by experts and technicians hired by monied interests. Communication, however, is multifaceted. If we concentrate primarily upon the electronic dimension of communication, we lose perspective on the variety, diversity and simplicity of "less" sophisticated systems of expression such as the mass culture of street communication graffiti, wall painting, murals and posters. Their importance to the communication infrastructure within certain political systems is significant but often ignored or downgraded in importance by analysts.

Street media such as graffiti and wall painting create a paradox to the development of the contemporary electronic communication revolution for there is a renewed interest by some groups and organizations in these "old" forms of communication, or what this paper calls alternative street media. These media are the primary focus of this study. For the most part, the electronic media systems are inaccessible to many grass-roots community interests, either for financial or political reasons. Individuals and groups, shut off from other media systems may express themselves to a public audience through the mediums of graffiti and wall painting. Therefore, despite the electronic information revolution, in some countries of the world, groups, organizations and individuals are continuing to preserve their popular culture of communication and/or returning with vigor to the street to communicate their ideas and messages and establish their presence and identity. This process, when it is systematic and not random, involves grass-roots participation for creating visual images to communicate to a specific clientele or the general public through the media of graffiti, wall painting, posters and murals--popular symbols of an expanding alternative media. This development is not confined to the Third World but is also evidenced by the graffiti in the barrios of the United States, and highlighted in Europe by the political art on the Berlin wall. Graffiti have also found their way into communist countries of eastern Europe and China, but their greatest relevance as an established form of popular communication and culture is in Latin America.

In Argentina, this alternative media system is particularly important and developed. Despite the "sophisticated" electronic media, groups and individuals in Argentina, politically or socially inspired, have popularized graffiti and other street media as an alternative means for communication. Graffiti are a cheap and efficient way to share experience with the public or with specialized segments of the population. A specialized audience would pertain to gang related graffiti which has its own codes, symbols and language which are unintelligible to the general public. And in Argentina there is a growing movement in the use and art of this specialized form of communication. The participants are the youth of society who are attuned to the international dimensions of cultural transfer through the communication of the punk-rock counter-culture. In the past four years they have created a movement of intra-group communication based upon graffiti on the walls of Greater Buenos Aires.

Much more prolific, however, are the graffiti and other forms of street propaganda directed toward the political spectrum from left to right. Individuals, groups, and political parties opine on national issues and interests, and try to thrust their agenda into the national debate. Groups raise questions about the system, challenge dominant values, suggest alternative policies and modes of action, define social reality, and create their own psychological and political environment. Some of their issues attract public attention while others fade and falter. Participation, however, in this communication system is constant, regardless of whether the political system is dictatorial or democratic.

Because Argentina has had an unstable political system characterized by cyclical swings between authoritarian and democratic rule, the system and the citizenry have had constant political stimulus revolving around the debate of the systematic nature of the political process. These street propaganda media, therefore, have not lost their reason for being. They constitute a very powerful, influential, and accepted communication system, honed by years of military repression when these media were the most viable alternative to censorship. It was the communication channel most accessible to the dissidents, protesters and radicals, and was the least controllable. Therefore, past non-populist authoritarian regimes, abetted by class interest have been responsible for the majority of the graffiti and wall painting being overwhelmingly political in content because they sought to repress the outlets for protest and resistance. Alternative collective memories and class interests were subordinated. Consequently, street propaganda, especially graffiti, became symbolic of anti-system attitudes, the military had defined without reservations the nature of the system so individuals and groups vented their opposition to the political system through these media.

Political graffiti in Argentina had its origins in class politics, and was directly linked to the political evolution of the workers and the dynamics of popular culture. Graffiti were symbolic of class politics, an expression of political will evolving out of the opposition and protest of the working class against the dominant political elite and its culture, an indigenous movement which tied its fortunes to Juan Perón. A popular culture of street communication accompanied the evolution of the Peronist movement. The events revolving around the October 1945 demonstrations which forced the military from power and brought on the era of Peronist rule, created new means of expression. The working class identity had been silenced by the oppressiveness of a dominant class elite; theirs had been a culture of silence. When the demonstrations erupted with their auxiliary activities, the workers asserted their own symbolic power, cultural as well as political. Massive graffiti writing by the workers was one of the forms of auxiliary action. Newspapers reported ghastly stories of blasphemy committed by workers as they marched through the streets. They wrote pro-Perón slogans in chalk on building facades, walls, and most outrageously for the dominant class, on the national monuments (1). The workers' graffiti symbolized

something new. Their very existence was effective. The graffiti were a testament to their protest and a mark of their newly visible popular culture and political power. As it has evolved over the years, graffiti, wall painting and other forms of street propaganda came to symbolize a popular culture of the masses. It was a symbol of identity. Subsequent military regimes following the overthrow of the Perón regime in 1955 sought to reconstruct national identity based upon their dominant culture, suppressing those cultural manifestations which did not fit into their scheme of national cultural. Graffiti and wall painting became one symbol of an alternative culture, a popular culture which developed fully as a form of free expression each time the military was forced from power. Popular culture and popular forces symbolized for the military a democratic free spirit, and alternative collective memory the armed forces sought to repress each time they had the opportunity to reduce the public space for opposing views and participation. The military sought subordination of the popular tendencies for they represented the worst of society the irresponsible, the undisciplined, and most importantly, a formidable political threat with the capacity to challenge its hegemonic power.

Posters have a longer tradition. The Argentine Socialist party at the turn of the century brought political posters into the electoral process, using them as a means to inform and elicit support. Posters were an important expression of the newly organizing working class. Posters, however, have had a difficult history as a symbol of political protest. They are more easily controllable during authoritarian rule and thus have not had the same protest role as graffiti and wall painting. But under the populist Perón regime and under democratic rule, political posters have had wide use and compete for space and visual impact with graffiti and wall painting. As for murals, they have had a less important tradition as a vehicle for articulating ideas in Argentina, although this began to change somewhat in the present democratic era as wall painting became more elaborate and took on some of the characteristics of murals. The sum of this process of the evolution of the culture of political street propaganda in Argentina is that today public street communication is an established and distinguishing dimension of Argentine popular culture, and often is a protest vehicle used by the masses and by marginal groups to vent their ideas and views, and in many cases, their anti-system attitudes. The culture of street communication, though, has not remained confined to the working class masses, nor to marginal groups, it has penetrated the totality of society and been transformed into a national symbol: established middle class political parties such as the Radical party have absorbed this phenomenon into their repertory of communication skills as a means of socializing the citizenry.

## II

This paper is focused upon the political dimensions of graffiti, wall painting and posters in Argentina in 1986, concentrating on the evolutionary process of street propaganda since 1985. In an early paper I examined the initial characteristics of street propaganda which evolved with the democratic opening in 1983, analyzing the forms, the size, the intensity of competitiveness, the infrastructure for placement, the initial producers, the systematic nature of placement, and how the issues articulated through street propaganda mirrored those being debated nationally (2). In this paper the focus is on the expanding process of street propaganda as a media of communication, the participants, the tradition of protest articulated, the reactions engendered by certain groups to the propaganda campaigns of others, the symbolic values, and the continued amplification of the development of this form of communication and its significance.

In looking at 1986, several trends were apparent regarding the political communication of street propaganda. First there was an expansion in the number of groups which systematically and actively engaged in communicating their views through the media of street propaganda. This contrasts with the process in several other countries I have studied, Spain and Portugal, where after an initial outpouring of political street propaganda occurring with the democratic opening, with groups identifying themselves, finding political space, and defining their issues, a contraction in the use of these media resulted as other means of communication became available. In Argentina the street communication system has continued to expand, it has not contracted, despite the availability of other media. Consequently, there has been a corresponding increase in the intensity and quantity of street propaganda and a continuation of a process which began with the civilian period in 1983. Each year since the military was removed from government rule, the propaganda wars on the city streets have escalated. This can best be explained by the repression of the last military era. Those groups which were badly repressed or weakened, and had their organizational structures devastated recovered slowly, some faster than others. Thus many groups who were previous practitioners of street art propaganda but were too weak organizationally at the beginning of the democratic process to participate, have regained the strength to engage the public. This meant that additional groups which obtained their organizational strength became active in seeking recognition and in projecting their propaganda by the means of graffiti, wall painting, and posters. As greater numbers of groups and factions entered the system, they elevated the quantity and intensity of participation. In addition, in a politicized society such as Argentina, new groups, new alliances and splinters from old groups form, break apart, and reform, in a continual struggle for survival, recognition and greater leverage.

Each uses street propaganda to advertise their metamorphosis, their identity and their realignment. This makes for a greater variety and intensity of street communication.

One change in 1986 was the shift in emphasis in the visual placement of street propaganda from the Federal Capital to the surrounding province of Buenos Aires. Immediately following the inauguration of the Alfonsín regime in December 1983, the intensity of political pressure was directed toward the Federal District of Buenos Aires, the seat of the national government. Groups lobbied for action. Some called upon the government to formulate an economic policy which did not pay back the enormous international debt, others called for an investigation into the human rights violations of the last military regime. The Federal Capital became, then, the scene of intense propaganda posturing, using demonstrations and the media of graffiti, wall painting and posters to communicate, educate and lobby for results.

As that initial period and its issues faded, the shift occurred in visual placement. Buenos Aires province's political power is awesome and dwarfs the combined influence of the rest of Argentina. The political importance of this province has meant that over the years a prolific amount of graffiti, posters, and wall painting have accumulated as groups have sought to influence the citizenry. The quantity of street propaganda in the province increased in 1986 by a quantum leap for two main reasons, the gubernatorial elections scheduled for October 1987, and the internal elections and factional strife within the Peronist party.

The Peronist party is one of the two dominant political parties in Argentina and is symbolic of the historical political struggle of the working class. Due to historical circumstances, there is a lot of myth and reality revolving around the historical figures of this movement. When the party's founder and charismatic leader, Juan Perón, a symbolic viral figure, died in 1974, the mantle of party leadership and the presidency of the nation passed to his third wife Isabel, who became the symbol for the conservative wing of the party and a figure anathema to the left-wing. She was overthrown in a military coup in 1976. During the military dictatorship that followed, Isabel remained titular head of the party. With the return of democracy and elections in 1983, Isabel remained in exile in Spain and took no active part in the elections. She decided to retire from politics shortly thereafter, creating a leadership vacuum. The Peronists lost the presidential elections they had expected to win in 1983, and with no active Perón figure to guide the movement and offer a focus, the party and the Peronist movement fell into an internal leadership struggle. The movement consisted of a loose and diverse coalition that cut across the ideological spectrum from Marxist left to fascist right and included the powerful organized labor sector. The various factions and their leaders each sought to fill the vacuum as the party adjusted to an era when the Perón family was no longer a factor.

The strife within the party erupted between the "Orthodox" and the "Renewal" factions. Control for party leadership among these two was to be resolved through

internal elections. In 1985 the "internals" were held in the Federal Capital and this produced an outpouring of posters and wall painting which made the Federal Capital a colorful street art display and exhibit of Peronist propaganda. The "Renewals" won the Federal Capital elections. After these elections, the Peronist contribution to street propaganda diminished in the Federal Capital as their energy shifted to the Province of Buenos Aires.

The province would be the key plum for internal party control. Postponed several times, the province's "internals" were held in November 1986. Campaigning began early in 1986 with an incredible outpouring of wall painting, posters, and graffiti. Every bridge embankment, over- and underpasses, wall, inter-urban rail stations, were flooded with propaganda as the two factions tried to attract the loyal Peronists to their camp. Added to this outpouring of Peronist propaganda, was the re-emergence of the Peronist left. The "Orthodox" represented the right-wing of the party and tied its symbolic historical claim to the Juan Perón-Isabel roots. The "Renewal" faction represented the progressive center and emphasized the Perón-Evita historical roots. The left had not yet regrouped when the split occurred because it had been the sector most devastated by military repression. In regrouping, the Peronist left needed to regain its identity, its recognition from the citizenry, and to develop a cadre to demonstrate it would be a factor with whom to negotiate. To gain this affirmation and demonstrate that the left was a viable political group, this Peronist faction began a graffiti and wall painting campaign to advertise its existence. Its symbol and patron figure was Evita, Perón's second wife; she stood alone as the historical figure. The campaign resulted in a massive reappearance of her figure and image in the propaganda tributes of 1986, but caused an accompanying psychopolitical reaction as Evita is an emotional historical symbol with a controversial image in the modern collective memory of Argentina. She is the heroine-villain of class and ideological politics that divides Argentine sentiments more than any other figure. She symbolizes class differences. On the one hand, she is the modern revolutionary symbol in Argentina, not Che Guevara. In this historical aspect, Argentina differs from other Latin American countries where the revolutionary left has taken as its symbol Che. She is consequently revered by the left and by the working class. Many unions affiliated with the powerful General Confederation of Labor still use her symbolic figure in their propaganda. On the other hand, she is villain-enemy to the conservative upper class, much of the bourgeois, and especially elicits strong emotional reactions from the military. Thus when the Peronist left began again its identification campaign, Evita's name and her slogans appeared on the city walls, and her face and figure adorned many posters. During the celebration of the anniversary of her death in July 1986, at least 16 different profiles of Evita were projected on posters pasted throughout metropolitan Buenos Aires. Massive graffiti accompanied the posters and the slogan "Evita lives" became a common graffiti theme. Posters and graffiti also cited her most revolutionary slogans. The symbol

of radicalism was associated with her image.

In addition to the ideological factions, the Peronist party was officially organized into four sectors; the political sector, the labor sector, the women's sector and the youth sector, each divided by an ideological breakdown from left to right. The political and labor sectors were the mainstays of the party and had been the most active producers of street propaganda, especially labor because of its organizational and financial ability, but in 1986 with the women's and youth sectors reorganizing, their presence became more evident in the street propaganda. Thus in 1986 there emerged a richer and more diversified quantity of propaganda as the two most powerful Peronists factions, the "Orthodox" and the "Renewal", were joined by the left and by the youth and women's sectors.

For election purposes, each sector campaigned according to whether it was the "Renewal", "Orthodox" or leftist faction. This struggle produced a tremendous quantity of Peronist street propaganda, a requisite for a party projecting a "populist" image. A people's media, placing graffiti messages and personalizing the leaders through posters within the visual view of the common man on the street, takes precedent over electronic communication as a channel for reaching the public. Street propaganda is a common man's symbol, signifying grass-roots connection and mobilization. Therefore, for groups trying to establish their Peronist credentials and make their presence felt, there is the understanding that an important aspect of effective communication and image making is via the public path by way of the popular art of graffiti, wall painting or posters.

The internal struggle within the Peronist party was only one category of propaganda, albeit in 1986, the most important according to the quantity of political street propaganda. The party and its various internal factions also tried to maintain a collective image by commenting on national issues and thereby establishing public opinion credibility that the Peronists were a serious governing political alternative. The credibility gap was difficult to overcome because of the reorganizational chaos within the party around the leadership question. The historical leaders were well established, but developing consensus on a new generation of leaders was difficult. To try and build credibility, the Peronist party produced a series of posters and wrote graffiti which said "Yes, Peronism does have alternatives," a response to the Radical party's charge that it did not. These posters and graffiti advertised "popular assemblies," announcing speakers who would pontificate to interested citizenry about the party's ideas. Even if the "popular assemblies" were not well attended, the street propaganda announcing them created the image that the party was alive intellectually and engaged in finding answers to society's problems. This intellectual image campaign was themized with the maxim, "Peronism is on the move," a headline which appeared on the posters and in the graffiti throughout Buenos Aires.

A second factor which made Buenos Aires Province the focus for street propaganda were the gubernatorial elections scheduled for October 1987. Electioneering



began early and by May 1986, a year and half before the elections, the major candidates from the various Peronist factions and from the governing Radical party already had their propaganda placed throughout the province by means of graffiti, posters, and wall painting. Much of the election propaganda was simple, "Vote for Caffero (a Peronist) for governor", for example. The intensity for control of the province was linked to national politics; whichever party won the province would have the jump on the presidential elections to be held in 1989, for the province is to Argentine politics what New York, California and Texas combined is to presidential politics in the United States. To begin the gubernatorial campaign much of the street propaganda was for posturing, establishing name identification. Peronist candidates, though, had a more difficult task because of the movement's broad ideological spectrum. Political reality and tradition dictated that each faction which competed for the party nomination had to identify itself with an ideological image related to the appeal it wished to project. This was accomplished by fixing a political maxim to the faction's name as these visual appeals connotated certain political emotions to Peronists. The rhetorically simple maxims included such phrases as "True to Peron," "Always with Evita," or "Loyalty to Isabel," symbols of historical personal roots of the party. Each group and faction had to connect itself in some way to one of the three Perón figures. The party retained its personalized character.

The governing Radical party, not wanting the Peronists to steal the electoral initiative in Buenos Aires province, entered the pre-election fray with vigor by proposing its own candidates with qualifying identities. The Radical party also realized the important symbolic role the culture of people's media connotates. Street propaganda is crucial to the party's image, it cannot allow opponents to set the tone of the street debate. The Radical party's messages in the province had a more unifying tone than the Peronists.

The Radical were most concerned with stressing "continuation," that is, gaining political mileage from the relevant national and international issues. These issues seemed popular at the time and stemmed from the policies initiated by the governing Radical administration in both the province and at the national level. The Radicals deemed it vital to its national presidential campaign of 1989 to hang on to Buenos Aires province and thus the party competed vigorously by inundating the province with wall paintings, graffiti and posters. The Radical party missed, the elections of 1987 castigated the governing party, gave victory to the faction prone Peronists, and elected a Peronist governor of Buenos Aires province and in so doing establish a leader most likely to be the party's 1989 presidential candidate. But the political parties were not the only producers of street propaganda in the province. Many other groups added to the variety of political debate and visual display by expounding upon such relevant issues as the national debt, ties with the International Monetary Fund, solidarity with the political struggle in Chile to overthrow the Pinochet dictatorship, as well as anti-American propaganda pertinent to the Central American conflict.

These articulated international issues were not marginal, they were at the center of the national debate, a debate centered on the symbolic domination by the giant of the North. The United States genders a great deal of comment, to many it is the symbol of a hostile enemy.

### III

In addition to the reactivated political parties, the democratic opening brought about the re-emergence and open political solicitation of groups from both the ideologically extreme left and right, groups not officially affiliated with the mainstream political parties, and symbolic of the anti-system attitudes of a highly politicized state. Not only was this propaganda symbolic of deep anti-system attitudes, but it was aggressive, antagonistic, included symbols of heroes and martyrs, it was enemy driven, dividing the world between us vs them, good vs evil, with the overall tone symbolic of a hostile prone society driven by emotional intergroup conflict. The ideological groups presence were particularly felt in 1986 because they burst upon the political scene with force and became prolific producers of street propaganda, creating a feeling of social mobilization which caused dismay within certain political circles. This environment projected the feeling that unstable polarization was reoccurring, adding to the fear that Argentina might not have the political maturity to break the past cycle of military-civilian-military rule.

Within military and conservative circles there were reactions to the perceived re-mobilization of left-wing "subversives," evidenced by their systematic street propaganda campaigns. This re-emergence symbolized to these conservative circles the social and moral corruption of the system, neutralized by the "heroic" sacrifice of the armed forces during the "dirty war." Left-wing political activity symbolized an enemy penetration; and to the military mind, they were the guardians against external enemies (internal subversives were pawns for international conspiracies according to the collective military thinking). Patriotism and nationalism must defeat internationalism. A paranoia quickly surfaced within the military-conservative forces due to the street propaganda. The military warned that if the democratic forces could not deal with this social threat, the armed forces would. The renewed and aggressive political activity of the ultra-right also caused consternation, especially within the left, the intellectual community, the human rights organizations, and within the large

Jewish community. The ultra-right symbolized to the Jewish community blatant anti-semitism and genocide, a threat to their existence within this society, and for other social groups, the ultra-right symbolized the worst of state terrorism and repression which had occurred under previous military rule. These groups were reacting to the visual street propaganda campaign which represented a mobilization of ultra-right political forces, creating a feeling of an enemy within. Jewish groups reacted with their own stepped up street propaganda campaign and mobilization, and in November 1987, supported by large numbers of social and political groups, realized their first big march against anti-semitism (3).

The ultra-right in this process was represented by the fascists headed by the emergence of the officially proclaimed National Socialist party, symbolic of ideological anti-democratic ideas and having definite views of whom, the hostile enemies were. They made a big psycho-political impact with an aggressive and well organized graffiti and poster campaign. Fascism has for many decades had a strong following within certain important sectors in Argentine society and the country continues to be the center of fascist propaganda in the Southern Hemisphere. There were in 1986 six pro-fascist groups and seven periodical publications with a readership around 6000 (4). Taking advantage of the democratic climate, the fascists sought to reach a much broader audience and have a greater impact than their periodicals had within the general public, and this was accomplished through an extensive street propaganda campaign. In July 1985, the National Socialist party was officially launched, an attempt to coalesce fascist thinking. Fascist graffiti had been evident even before the party's inauguration, but with its birth, the party launched a propaganda blitz to gain recognition and educate the citizenry that fascist ideology was yet relevant. Street propaganda played a big role in this blitz and entailed an incredible output of posters and distribution of fliers. The first fliers and posters listed the difference between Fascism and Marxism, with the propaganda stressing that Fascism was pro-Christ while Marxism was atheistic. Marxism was trouted as one of the symbolic enemies. The phenomenal volume of Nazi propaganda was demonstrated in August 1986 when the National Socialists pasted six different posters on the walls in key viewing spaces throughout Buenos Aires. The posters talked about the bankruptcy of the present democratic system and especially made an appeal to the working class to join them in replacing the present "worn out" system. The ironical twist about the posters were their placement. Most were pasted in the downtown commercial and banking-financial district where the major pedestrian traffic consisted of white-collar workers while in the industrial belt districts of Buenos Aires where the workers congregated, the fascist posters were evident but at a reduced frequency. The importance of placing the posters in the main commercial zone stem from visual consumer traffic and from the traditional fascist appeal directed toward recognition among the educated as well as the blue-collar workers.

The antagonism of the fascist posters were directed at two main villains, the go-

verning Radical party and Marxism, both symbols of "exhausted" political systems. The fascist propaganda stated such things as, "Christ will come, Religion or Death; the Radical government permits the profanity of our Sacred Cross, We will not." This poster message was accompanied by a picture of a cross-bones and a skull. Another more elaborate poster was titled, "Death to Marxism so socialism will live," accompanied by a picture of a fascist crushing the tentacles of the Marxist octopus. A third poster made a direct appeal to the workers. It stated, "If the people govern, why are they dying of hunger?." The poster then showed a series of pictures comparing the standards-of-living of the workers and government representatives: the government officials drove a limousine, the workers rode in an old bus, the government officials feasted on a big chicken, the worker had an empty plate, the government officials lived in a big house, the worker in a shack. Then there was a long written commentary on each of these subjects.

Common pro-fascist graffiti consisted of swastikas painted on walls and buildings around Greater Buenos Aires, mostly placed by pro-fascist groups. Mostly is a qualifier because other groups also made use of swastikas, one being counter-culture youth groups which sought identity by adopting swastikas as a new status symbol to express their alienation. Additionally, leftist groups at times placed swastikas on facades of buildings owned by groups and institutions considered reactionary, such as swastikas on the facades of the Catholic cathedral and churches. This symbolic gesture was meant to link and equate the conservative Argentine church with Fascism, stemming from the Church's strong ties to ultra-right elements within the military and its silence during the "dirty war." Other blatantly pro-fascist graffiti were violently anti-semitic, the Jewish community being a third villain. There were graffiti that stated "Hitler did not finish the job of genocide." Contradictory to the above message were other anti-semitic graffiti which proclaimed, "the Holocaust never happened." There were graffiti that just said, "Yes to fascism," or "No to fascism" depending upon one's proclivity. Most of the pro-fascist graffiti was anonymous, no individual or group claimed responsibility for it even though it was common practice in Argentina to sign one's graffiti or wall painting. This contrasted with the posters which always had sponsors.

The outburst of fascist street propaganda produced an alarm in Argentine society. At first, the appearance on the streets of an activist fascist movement was brushed aside as insignificant by the traditional media and influential groups as the work of a few individuals, outbreaks which occur periodically. But within a few months, the media began to take the movement seriously, resulting in a series of articles and commentary in the major newspapers and magazines over how politically threatening this movement was. The fascists had always been in Argentina, but it was an interesting phenomenon of how quickly and effectively street propaganda could create a psychological environment of concern. As the propaganda appeared, the questions arose, will people be recruited by the street propaganda? Are the fascists a

growing movement? And how does society deal effectively with this undemocratic phenomenon? By society's response and reaction to this fascist propaganda, graffiti and posters were proven to be effective symbolic tools of psychological warfare given the appropriate political climate. Fascism became a topic of national debate.

In addition to the concerns expressed in the press about fascist activity, the Zionist youth became alarmed and tried to counteract the anti-semitic street propaganda with their own. Pro-Jewish graffiti have been evident over the years, but in response to this campaign it became more systematic, better placed, of greater quantity and wider distribution. In the Jewish district of "Once," simple pro-Jewish graffiti said "No to fascism," or "Jews are Argentines also," and was signed "Zionist Youth." This later slogan answered the long-time ultra-right charge that Jews were really not true nationalists and did not fit the ethnic profile. This charge was based upon two factors. First, Jews were not "true" nationalists because they were pro-Zionist with primary loyalties to Israel. Second, Jews did not fit into the parameters of the Argentine nation-state as defined by Argentine fascist ideology because only individuals with a Latin ethnic heritage could be considered legitimate citizens. Fascist anti-semitic propaganda messages were threatening because Argentina has one of the largest Jewish communities in a Catholic country. With Jewish and fascist ideologues clashing, an explosive emotional situation was just below the surface, adding stress to the instability of the Argentine political system and exemplifying the social proclivities of creating symbolic enemies.

The psychological fears and reactions expressed in Argentine society about the ultra-right also applied to the extreme left. The specter of street propaganda which marked the re-emergence of certain leftist groups, created tensions and concern. In 1986, the Marxist guerrilla underground which was suppressed by the military junta in the 1970s during the "dirty war," resurfaced again if graffiti propaganda was any indication of its presence. Both the Montoneros (proclaiming to be Peronist Socialists), and ERP (People's Revolutionary Army), the military wing of the Trotskyist revolutionary party, the PRT (Revolutionary Workers' Party), made their political presence felt. With graffiti, ERP and PRT acronyms with their Red Star logo appeared throughout the city written on national monuments, walls and the facades of buildings. In addition to the extensive use of their acronyms, other ERP graffiti contained testimonials to its martyred leader, Santucho, who was killed by the military in 1976. They tried to keep alive the name of Santucho as a martyred hero, a particular symbol for group identity, and a general symbol of martyrdom in a society where this symbol draws deep emotions from society's socio-psycho veins. The initial campaign was an attempt to keep alive the historical collective memory of this organization. There were variations on the theme but the most common slogans were, "Remember Santucho," "Sanucho lives," and "Homage on the 10th anniversary of Santucho's death." In keeping with the symbolic theme, the "Trelew" martyrdom was commemorated, the murder by the military of 16 leftist youth in

their jail cells in the military prison of Trelew in 1972. The graffiti read: "Homage to the fallen at Trelew."

The Montoneros had been the larger and better financed of the two guerrilla groups, and from indications of the profuse graffiti and other street propaganda placed throughout the city, their partisans were better organized and more numerous and active than ERP. This outpouring of Montonero graffiti was related to the extradition from Brazil of its leader, Mario Firmenich, who was to stand trial for murder. Placed in prison, he became the focus for reorganizing the Montonero movement. Conservative anti-Montonero groups, especially the military, claimed that the Montoneros were initiating a pro-Firmenich psychological campaign which entailed the massive use of graffiti and other propaganda. Conservatives charged that the Montoneros were trying to create a symbolic image of Firmenich as an Argentine patriot fighting against military repression. He was consequently a political prisoner who should be given his freedom. As a reflection of this campaign, the pro-Montonero graffiti contained an array of messages which stated, "Freedom for Firmenich," "Freedom for the patriot, Mario Firmenich," and "Danger for democracy, Firmenich is hostage of the oligarchy and of the military." The Montonero graffiti tried to tie the Alfonsín regime to the military, the symbol of the hostile enemy of the Montoneros.

The sudden proliferation of leftist graffiti, which caused concern within the military and the more conservative political forces, did not come just from ERP and Montonero graffiti. There were other groups which had similar ideological tendencies, such as the Revolutionary Peronists, and the Peronists de la Base which were actively engaged in the placement of street propaganda. Added to this psychological threat were the recognized leftist political parties of various ideologies such as the Communist party, the Worker's party, the Intransigent party, and the Movement to Socialism. All these parties had been active in the street propaganda wars since the beginning of the democratic period. Thus, as each year progressed, a greater quantity of leftist graffiti, posters and wall painting inundated the country, creating the visual impact that the left was a mobilizing force.

As the military and its conservative allies experienced the visual psychological impact of the leftist graffiti, wall painting and posters, they connected it to their historical memory and projected it to the present. The historical memory meant to them the attempt to define an alternative system which threatened their way of seeing Argentine society, and the present effort to counteract this threat was symbolized by the "heroic" efforts of the Chilean dictator, Pinochet, in his fight to control the conspiratorial worldwide Marxist forces agitating in Chile. Thus for the ultra-right in Argentina, leftist and Marxist activity was quickly equated with subversion. Any demonstrated activity by the left meant it was resurfacing and this represented the potential of the left being able to set the nation's political discourse. The ultra-right placed the blame upon the Alfonsín government and on democracy for being tole-

rant toward these subversive groups in the name of liberalism. Because of this charge, the government had to respond by stating that the country was now a democracy and as long as these groups remained non-violent they had a right to organize and propagandize within the limits of a pluralist society. This justification was not consoling or convincing to the right and they communicated their discontent, dissatisfaction, and opposition in various ways, one of which was their own street propaganda aimed against the government and the Marxist elements.

## IV

In addition to the above cited groups, the increased volume in street graffiti and propaganda in 1986 was aided by the systematic participation of groups who over the years have sporadically used street art as propaganda media and who in 1986 carried out extensive campaigns in defense of their ideas and interests. Their visual presence and mobilization had a political impact. From the Argentine Armenian community there emerged activists who produced some of the most violently written graffiti which were strategically placed on the walls in downtown Buenos Aires, much of it sprayed painted in red to symbolize the genocidal suffering of the Armenian people and to claim blood revenge for those responsible. The public enemy was explicitly identified, the evil forces were the Turks. The graffiti blitz campaign was part of the Armenian global communication strategy aimed at holding the Turks responsible for the genocide against their people and keep alive the collective memory of this historical event. The basic goals of the graffiti campaign seemed to be two, to educate the Argentines of the tragic history of Armenians and to warn the Turks of retribution. The graffiti were dominating, there was no way to visually escape this propaganda. The violent nature of the Armenian graffiti was represented in such statements as: "Justice for the Armenians-Turk assassins," "A free Armenia, for a free and sovereign Armenia," "Armenians reclaim justice for the Turkish massacre of 1915," "1.500,000 Armenians massacred by the barbaric Turks," and "Turkey will pay with blood for the genocide against the Armenians."

Divorce became a major issue in 1986, bringing forth an array of street propaganda by proponents and opponents alike. Argentina is one of the few countries in the world without divorce and when a divorce bill was introduced in Congress to legalize it, the church and supporters mounted an extensive campaign to halt it, re-

sulting in an outpouring of graffiti and posters. Divorce was an important symbolic value for ardent Catholics and the conservative inclined church. It symbolized the current struggle against a persistent enemy, the secular culture of modernization. The church sponsored the printing of tens of thousands of posters throughout the nation, while partisans took to the streets to write graffiti slogans against divorce. The church lobby, headed in this incident by the institution of the church, was one sector of society which was not systematically involved in using these sorts of media to lobby for its agenda, although on occasions pro-church forces recognized the cultural importance of this channel of communication. Consequently, on this crucial issue, this alternative communication system could not be by-passed. To oppose the church's stance, pro-divorce forces organized and took to the streets. The result was that the country was inundated with pro- and anti-divorce messages and slogans. The most prolific graffiti were rhetorically simple, "Yes for divorce" or "No divorce" which allowed for interesting alterations as each side could easily cross out the others yes or no and insert the opposite so the message reflected their own position. Other statements on this issue were: "Divorce is not better, family yes, divorce no," "For God and country, no divorce," "Divorce for everyone except the Catholics," "Yes for the family, no to hypocrisy, yes for divorce," and a most amusing statement, "Why is it that Primatessa never married?" (Primatessa was a conservative bishop and president of the Argentine Bishop's Council).

And 1986 brought an increase in propaganda directed toward the continued struggle against colonialism, symbolized in the historical enemy of the north, the United States. The aggressively hostile propaganda was directed outward because the US symbolized power. To neutralize the power a collective struggle was necessary, symbolized by solidarity groups-support for the Nicaraguan struggle against the US, support for the "popular" struggle in Central America, and support for the Chilean efforts to overthrow the Pinochet dictatorship. Pro-Chilean solidarity groups were especially prominent because of the cadre of exile Chileans living in Argentina. They painted elaborate street propaganda stylistically reminiscent of the murals and wall paintings that characterized and decorated Santiago during the Allende years preceding the dictatorship. The wall paintings emphasized the emotion of nationalism by using the colors of the national flag. The Chilean graffiti and wall painting were rhetorically simple in being anti-Pinochet and calling for his overthrow. This outpouring of street propaganda was related to the intensified internal struggle taking place in Chile which drew international attention to Chile in 1986 and animated the exile community in Argentina. There was hope the military regime was near its demise and this animated the propaganda activity.

In addition to Chilean solidarity, there were other graffiti and wall painting that directly singled out the symbolic arch enemy, the United States. It related to the Central American conflict. The Central American issue, though, seemed far away and was less emotional than the Chilean situation and thus the support groups were



less strong and the graffiti and wall painting were not as prolific as those concerning Chile, nor as prolific as in the first years of the democratic opening. "Yankees out of Nicaragua" was the most common of these graffiti, but there were also graffiti against Duarte in El Salvador which said "Duarte the Assassin get out" and "Duarte was made by Reagan." And there were anti-American graffiti related to David Rockefeller, the ultimate symbol of neo-colonialism, who made a visit to Argentina in 1986. The youth who demonstrated against him, toasted him in their graffiti, "Rockefeller get out, the south also exists."

## CONCLUSION

A salient point concerning the medium of public art and street propaganda in Argentina is its continued relevance and establishment as a national system of popular communication. This communication system spread during the democratic period even as other media forms opened when censorship lifted. Specialists talk about the electronic information revolution and how it is transforming the way people communicate, but the Argentine case demonstrates that older forms of communication, in this case something akin to the oral traditional, will not necessarily be replaced, only supplemented. This alternative media system of street propaganda is an established structure of communication because it offers access, free expression, is unquestionably democratic, is dramatic, exemplifies communication, and plays a role in defining and recording the historical reality of groups and individuals in their actual experiences and identifies their political preference. The system is stimulated by reactions from authoritarian regimes that strive to implement a collective silence from those opposed to their dominant culture, trying to erase in its sweep contradictory historical memories. But resistance has persisted. Graffiti writing is a way to break the silence, to disrupt, to challenge the media monopoly of the dominant class. The culture of graffiti, wall painting and posters, is therefore, one symbol of the continued evolution of popular culture which a dominant class, headed by the military, was unable to eradicate. Its persistence is a testament to a cultural manifestation which has embedded itself as a political expression, for the popular culture of street propaganda is an efficient system. It offers visual metaphors of history, of opponents and enemies, of a sense of the actual, of the interests of classes and various ethnic and ideological groups, of symbols of identity, and it is rhetorically simple.

In 1986 this media system witnessed a growth in volume as more groups systematically availed themselves to the opportunity of propagandizing their political preferences and recalling their historical memory through street propaganda. They aggressively articulated their hostility through visual shapshots of rhetorically simple discourse. This was particularly true for the pro-church groups over the issue of divorce, for Fascists on the right and Marxists on the left, and for such ethnic groups as the Armenians and the Jews. This volume added to the traditional heavy use the Peronists make of street propaganda, which increased because of two factors, the confrontation with the governing Radicals, and the internal struggle for control of the party.

The impact and receptive effectiveness of street propaganda was exemplified by the emotional political reaction of various groups, by counter campaigns of opposing groups, by the diversity of groups involved in the process, by government response to charges stemming from the propaganda, and by responses from other media systems. This phenomenon could be analyzed by following the content of debat played out in the established media, especially the print media. Ideas, events, and issues which were often brought into the national arena through the above mentioned alternative media, found their way into the pages of the print media. This was most graphically evident in the debates on the political relevance of the rise of the new fascist and Marxist forces, and the response to the Armenian crusade. Each of these forces became the object of intense reaction and debate. Articles in the leading editions of the print media appeared. Some of the print media did extensive articles on the Armenian genocide, others did stories on the Jewish community, most publications and newspapers discussed the depth of the fascist movement, all followed closely the internal conflicts and tensions within the Peronist movement, while much of the conservative oriented media and established papers discussed the psychological campaign carried out for the benefit of Firmenich and the Montoneros.

The stepped up street propaganda phenomenon came to symbolize ultimately not only a reinforcement of popular culture and recognition of its importance as a form of political expression, but also something much deeper, the aggressiveness and hostility of the slogans and posters exemplified the lack of strong social cohesion in Argentine society. It symbolized the diversity of socio-political thought in a complex, intensely conflictive society, where the lack of consensus is the norm. Social groups see reality in their own particular way, structured by their collective memory registered from historical symbols, and in turn they attempt to construct and define that reality to the political world, be it fascists who see a worldwide Jewish and Marxist conspiracy, Armenians who seek revenge as a cleansing reality, Marxists who see reality as capitalist exploitation, solidarity groups who understand reality as international power, the church which constructs reality around the lose of power to secular culture, Jews who struggle against the ultimate reality of the consequences of

anti-semitism, or Peronists who understand the reality of popular forces. In sum, the use of graffiti, wall painting and posters as an alternative medium, has been fortified in the democratic period because it was recognized as an important dimension of the Argentine political system. Groups saw this medium as an effective method for participating in the debate on the public agenda, eliciting responses and recognition, and influencing public opinion and government decision-makers.

## NOTES

\* This is a revised edition of a paper presented at the XXXII Annual Meeting of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies in Whittier, California, October 1986. The data for this study has come from annual field, trips to Argentina since the 1983 democratic opening, and from extensive trips in the late 60s and up to the military coup of 1976.

(1) The information on the workers' use of graffiti during the October 1945 demonstrations and their significance comes from conversations with Daniel James, a Yale historian who is working on this period of Argentine history.

(2) See "Political Graffiti and Wall Painting in Greater Buenos Aires: An Alternative Communication System". Forthcoming in *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*.

(3) *El País* (Madrid), November 24, 1987.

(4) Ibid.

## SELECTED POLITICAL GRAFFITI

### Radicals

Desarrollo o dependencia, juntos con Alfonsín, entremos en la historia.  
Defienda el futuro con Alfonsín.

### Peronist

Democracia real o continuismo oligarquía.  
Patria sí, colonia no.

Alfonsín traidor.

Moratoria, FMI o Pueblo.

Homenaje a Evita, al frente de Liberación, no burócratas ni rosqueros.

La oligarquía exige y Alfonsín cumple.

Firmenich preso, Alfonsín negoció con los milicos asesinos la vida de Firmenich.

Libertad a Firmenich.

Libertad a los presos políticos.

Por otra política y otro gobierno - frente opositor.

Peliga la democracia, Firmenich rehen de la oligarquía y los milicos.

Excarcelación a Firmenich.

El poder joven.

Si a Isabel Perón - Juventud Peronista de la Nación Argentina.

Basta de persecución, justicia para Isabel Perón.

### **Economic**

Sólo los trabajadores salvan a los trabajadores.

Para que Alfonsín pague la deuda interna.

Navidad sin desalojos.

Divorcite al Estado.

No al plan económico del FMI.

Aumento de salarios.

Minga al FMI.

No al FMI.

Ni hambre radical, ni burocracia sindical, ni al FMI.

Consulta popular por la deuda externa.

Ni un mango al FMI.

Menos papeles y afiches y más sueldos para el pueblo.

### **Human Rights**

No al punto final.

El juicio es un circo.

Lista de estudiantes detenidos y desaparecidos.

Juicio y castigo a todos los culpables.

Policía fascista, vos sos la terrorista.

Vigila a la policía.

Videla, hijo de puta.

Navidad sin presos.

**Divorce**

Por la dignidad, por la libertad, por el amor, si al divorcio.  
 Quiero otro papito.  
 El divorcio es mejor.  
 Cómo se ve que Primatesta nunca se casó.  
 El divorcio no es mejor, familia sí, divorcio no.

**International**

Fuera Duarte asesino.  
 Duarte hijo de Reagan.  
 Fuera Rockefeller, el sur también existe.  
 Solidaridad con Chile.  
 Fuera Pinochet.  
 Fuera yankis de Nicaragua.  
 Fuera yankis de Libia.  
 No se rinde, Malvinas sí Argentina.

**Ethnic**

Justicia a los armenios, turcos asesinos.  
 Armenia libre.  
 Por un Armenia libre y soberana.  
 Armenios reclamamos justicia por las masacres turcas de 1915.  
 1.500.000 de Armenios asesinados por turcos en 1915.  
 Turquía pagará con sangre el genocidio contra los armenios, armenia vive.  
 Armenia no morirá.  
 Argentina, también judía.  
 Clausura a la revista Cabildo.  
 Marcha contra el antisemitismo.

**Anarchists**

La moral corrumpe a los niños, el dinero corrumpe a los adultos, abajo el estado, viva la anarquía.  
 No gobierno, no guerra.  
 La represión continúa, la lucha también.  
 Por la autogestión obrera en todo el país.  
 Desprecio vuestra orden, vuestra leyes, vuestra autoridad.

**Other:**

Cocaína o salud.