

# THE BORDERS OF POWER RESOURCES THEORY: A CASE STUDY OF ARGENTINA

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## Power Resource Theory and Argentina

Power Resources Theory focuses on labour strength, or the working classes' power resources, and labour's related ability to develop and shape the welfare state. Like other Marxist approaches, Power Resources Theory views the conceptualization of power as crucial to theorizing and argues that power is overwhelmingly possessed by the capitalist class, due to its position within the capitalist economy and its ownership and control over the means of production; therefore, class conflict between labour and capital is intrinsic to capitalism. It also states that, in spite of this power imbalance, that power relations are flexible and can shift when high levels of labour strength result in a working class with significant power resources and the ability to create and shape social policy to reflect their interests and demands; in this view, welfare states are formed and continually shaped by the acts and demands of political and social actors whose influence is based on the amount of power they hold. Unlike rival theories, Power Resources Theory seeks to explain changes across time and between countries (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi 1998; Olsen 2002).

This theory does not assume that social policy advancements that favor the interests of the working class are simply compromises orchestrated to control labour's power. Instead, it observes that when the working classes' impact achieves concrete change, labour strength is typically reinforced, which allows for a cycle of increasing power resources and policy advancement. This approach elaborates on the working classes' ability to shape policy by distinguishing between two types of power resources: political power resources and organizational power resources (Olsen 2002). Political power resources include the presence of a strong political party willing to represent the interests of labour; the working classes' power resources are advanced dramatically when labour is able to either create or affiliate with such a party. When a large and well organized working class strategically supports (and keeps in power) political parties that favor their common interests, labour's power to develop and influence the welfare state increases. (Olsen 2002). Organizational power resources include labour groups, such as unions and coalitions. Power Resources Theory argues that labour strength can be achieved through high union density, well organized labour (for example, through federations that are able to lobby with a single, unified voice), broad coalitions with other classes, and a strong sense of solidarity and unity. These power resources are amplified by multi-scalar rationality; in the view of Power Resources Theory, the actions of effective and powerful labour movements are well-organized, intentional, and strategic, with the aim of improving the conditions of the working class in the present and long term (Korpi 1998; Olsen 2002; Olsen 2011).

The literature on Power Resources Theory is focused specifically on the advanced capitalist nations of the global north referred to as the core countries. Studies of these nations have revealed that high levels of power resources within the working classes are correlated to higher levels of welfare expenditure, increased social citizenship rights, better quality social programs, increased labour rights, greater income equality, and more generous and comprehensive welfare states; in addition, labour strength is correlated with lower levels of unemployment, commodification, poverty, and social inequality (Olsen 2002; Olsen 2011). Power Resources Theory has not, however, been rigorously applied outside of the core countries to peripheral or semi-peripheral cases. The semi-peripheral Argentine case is especially interesting as it not only pushes the boundaries of Power Resources Theory beyond the core countries, but also offers a dramatic case study as a country in which power resources have shifted significantly over time.

### **Neoliberalism in Latin America**

During the 1980s and 1990s across Latin America, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, United States Agency for International Development, and the World Bank, became involved in Latin American economic and social policy that was coupled with significant fiscal deficits, high administrative costs, growing unemployment, high inflation, and rising debt through the Volcker Shock debt crisis. With an emphasis on limited government intervention on behalf of the working class, *laissez-faire* elite economic policies, and decentralization, as well as a heavy overreliance on the power of the market and private property ownership, these neoliberal principles diminished economic regulations, liberalized capital flows and trade, increased incentives for foreign direct investment, accelerated the privatization of enterprises previously owned by the state, and severely reduced government expenditures (Huber & Bogliaccini 2010). In terms of providing and financing social services, the private sector was emphasized and the role of the state in redistribution was severely reduced.

Those aligned more closely with social democracy advocated alternatives to the neoliberal reforms. The International Labour Office, for example, stressed the importance of social and labour market policy underscored by solidarity and equity. However, lacking financial and political power, these alternatives were typically overwhelmed by the combined force of the international financial institutions and national neoliberal governments. In spite of this, internal opposition did retain power and, although the influence of neoliberal reform was felt across Latin America, policy implementation varied across states depending on the power resources of internal pressure groups. These particular arrangements of pressures within each state created unique power struggles across Latin America during this time period. Factors included the popular attitudes towards neoliberalism and the power of the ruling government in relation to external factors, the presence of internal groups and actors in contact with the institutions, the presence of coalitions, and the power resources held by internal groups in opposition to drastic reform—for example advocates against neoliberalism, stakeholders, unions, and resistance groups (Huber & Bogliaccini 2010).

### The Case of Argentina

Of the Latin American states, the case of Argentina is especially intriguing. An example of many of the trends in Latin America in recent history, it is a case study that highlights the outcomes of drastic changes within the welfare state. Considered a pioneering country within Latin America, Argentina boasted a comparatively high percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) allocated to public social spending, low poverty rates, and among the highest levels of social security, health, and pension coverage by 1980. Brought to fruition by populist-authoritarian regimes and significant industrialization, Argentina was considered a leader in social security within the Latin American world (Huber & Bogliaccini 2010).

At the beginning of the 1980s, Argentina enjoyed high scores across all of the social policy institution indicators including life expectancy, population age, salary tax rates, social insurance coverage, active and passive citizens in the pension program, sending levels, and financial deficit (Lo Vuolo 1997). However, this situation changed at the end of the 1980s as drastic neoliberal policy reform altered the Argentine welfare state and ended in the most severe economic crisis in Argentine history (Grugel & Riggiorozzi 2007). Typically categorized amongst the conservative welfare regimes, Argentina has experienced significant movement along the continuum from institutional to residual welfare state and has incorporated both social democratic and liberal regime tendencies at various points in time (Usami 2004). As a case study, Argentina has the potential to engage existing theory and to highlight the impacts of the welfare state and the working classes' power resources by documenting change over time.

In Argentina, seven years of horrendous military rule followed the death of Juan Perón in 1974 after a military coup toppled his successor and third wife, Isabel Perón in 1976. In 1983, Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Party was elected President of Argentina though the first democratic election since Perón's last term in 1973. Similar to much of Latin America, Alfonsín's government led Argentina through dire periods of the Volcker Shock, economic deterioration, massive inflation, huge debt, rampant unemployment, and falling wages; Argentina's economic situation was further worsened by a weak industrial base and severe international dependency, as well as the global recession which reduced the prices of Argentine exports. Socially, the government was also struggling with the aftermath of the extensive and violent human rights violations committed during the military rule. Attempting to deal with this complex situation, Alfonsín introduced a new currency, cut government spending and social services, introduced wage and price controls, and increased foreign loans from the International Monetary Fund (Keen 1996; Vacs 2002).

In the 1989 presidential elections, Carlos Menem ran as a Peronist candidate promising a productive economic and social revolution, as well as renewed success for Argentina. Backed by the Peronists, powerful unions, the working class, and various middle-class sectors, Menem was successfully elected in 1989. As the economic and social situation continued to worsen under Alfonsín's government, Argentina was placed under a nationwide state of siege; demonstrations, strikes, and food riots plagued the country. In the midst of this chaos, Alfonsín cut his presidency short and transferred power to Menem on July 8, 1989, five months before Menem's scheduled inauguration. Expecting an immediate rejection of Alfonsín's policies, which had

aided in the hitherto unparalleled crisis, Menem's actions once in power further shocked Argentina (Keen 1996; Vacs 2002).

Democratically elected in 1989 and 1995, Menem was the first Peronist to be elected as President of Argentina since Juan Perón. Although Menem had a background with the Peronist party and ran on a Peronist platform, his policies once in office stood in stark contrast to traditional Peronist ideals (Vacs 2002). Menem's first priority upon inauguration was to quell the chaos in Argentina by stabilizing the economy. To the surprise of his original supporters, Menem fully embraced the Washington Consensus and introduced drastic neoliberal social, economic, and labour reforms. Driven by neoliberal principles and the recommendations of international financial institutions, Menem's market-oriented policies called for the liberalization of trade agreements and labour laws, as well as the privatization of state-run corporations, pensions, and healthcare. Through new policies, workers' accident compensation insurance was pushed towards privatization, the pension system was broken up into a tiered system with a private capitalized component, and health insurance was divided by complex reforms. Family allowance was also drastically scaled back; assistance available to spouses and large families was cancelled and, of the programs that remained, qualification became strict and programs became more difficult to access; a stress on highly targeted and paternalistic social assistance programs also began to emerge. During Menem's government, the welfare state was dismantled as public social spending was withdrawn, social security was decentralized, and the responsibility for wellbeing was shifted to the family, private charities, and the market (Usami 2004; Vacs 2002).

Through these drastic reforms, Menem created a residual welfare state by overpowering the largely conservative regime with traditional liberal elements. Public social spending, income redistribution, benefits, and social programs were reduced. In addition, coverage became less complete and far narrower. With a heavy emphasis on the market and private welfare, the social programs that did exist were far more reactive and targeted, with more barriers to eligibility and accessibility. Politically, competition, commodification, stratification, and inequality increased. With the new reforms, citizens needed to have strong links to employers and the market in order to secure their wellbeing. Without strong links, those without formal employment were faced with a highly fragmented and very restricted social safety net.

### **Resistance to Neoliberalism**

These drastic reforms were not met without resistance. Many unions, as well as the *piqueteros*—a new group of demonstrators—actively opposed the reforms. A history of strong social involvement and the legacy of Perón, who created heightened expectations of the role of the state and a concrete understanding of the ability of the working class to shape policy through their collective power resources, fuelled the opposition (Turner 1983; Usami 2004; Vacs 2002).

During Menem's presidency, the labour movement was far from the largely unified entity it had been during Perón's government. Following Perón's death, the strength of organized labour was weakened and the number of industrial workers fell dramatically. Military rule deteriorated the power of the labour movement by taking control

of unions and by kidnapping, exiling, or killing influential labour leaders. Menem's presidency further weakened the labour movement as union density plunged, coalitions broke apart, and rival groups arose within organized labour and Argentina's General Confederation of Labour (*Confederación General del Trabajo* or CGT).

The divisions occurred for two main reasons: first, there was a divide in support for Menem as some supported Menem fully as a Peronist leader, while others remained loyal to Peronism but opposed Menem and the neoliberal reforms; second, whereas Perón had attempted to consolidate labour into a unified force, Menem pitted unions against each other by creating a strategy in which unions frequently had to compete against each other for increasingly scarce benefits (Usami 2004; Vacs 2002). This fracturing between the working class and Menem's government weakened the force of the labour movement by reducing the working class' political power resources. By systematically undermining unity, the labour movement's organizational power resources were also largely dismantled during Menem's presidency; as the power of the capitalist class increased, labour's single and unified lobbying voice wavered.

Even under such conditions, the labour movement continued to be a significant force and trade unions maintained power and exerted pressure through strikes. Due to this, trade unions were actively involved in negotiations and were able to influence labour and social policy reforms; furthermore, "the CGT remained the biggest support organization of the Peronist Party and despite its weakened political influence, it was almost impossible to carry out policies in complete disregard of its demands" (Usami 2004:235). This loyal opposition aided in shaping the welfare state by maintaining existing policies or in keeping parts of past policies. For example, the labour movement was able to halt the proposed full privatization of the pension system and health insurance; furthermore, in the case of health insurance, the right to operate health insurance through trade unions was secured. Thus, due to the involvement of the labour movement, Menem was not able to adopt a market-oriented economic approach in full, but rather was forced to retain parts of past policies.

Even with the concessions achieved by the labour movement, the neoliberal reforms had drastic negative consequences for the people of Argentina as inequality, poverty, and unemployment increased rapidly. With increased privatization and the liberalization of labour laws, massive layoffs created a large sector of unemployed workers. It was from this dire situation that the *piqueteros*, or the picketers, emerged in 1996. Comprised of Argentine workers who had become unemployed due to neoliberal reforms, the *piqueteros* showed their fierce opposition by setting up road blocks and cutting traffic from main thoroughfares—sometimes for days at a time (Colmegna 2003; Giarracca & Teubal 2004).

Though pickets had been used previously during strikes to prevent entrance to factories, the actions of the *piqueteros* reconceptualised and reconfigured the practice: "the *piqueteros* set up barricades made of burning tires, nails, and broken bottles, thousands of men and women sit on the road, preventing the traffic from passing and only allowing emergency vehicles through. They cook, eat and take turns to sleep" (Colmegna 2003:4). At first, these demonstrations were intended to fulfill the immediate needs of specific groups; in the early stages, mass layoffs were considered to be exceptions. Yet, as reforms increased and the state withdrew further, unemploy-

ment and the informal economy increased, and the *piqueteros* became a symbol of the destruction caused by neoliberal reform, failed democracy, and economic instability. Demonstrations expanded as solidarity between those exploited by the reforms and outcast from the system grew to include youth, women, the poor, and union members. Becoming more formally organized, spreading throughout Argentina, and demanding more dramatic social, political, and economic change, the *piqueteros* constituted concrete resistance to Menem's neoliberal agenda (Colmegna 2003).

As the economic situation continued to deteriorate, the *piqueteros* formed more organized social groups and established concrete and formal power networks. Some *piquetero* groups allied with political parties—for example the Communist Party or the Workers' Party—while others allied with unions; others remained entirely independent. Many *piquetero* groups advocated for direct representation through a reconceptualization of the politics and democracy that have betrayed them; “instead of delegating power to representatives during elections only, leaving the government to make decisions in the name of a ‘majority’, a permanent participation of the citizenry has been arising” (Giarracca and Teubal 73:2004). Led through assemblies, these groups have operated on consensus-based decision making and a rejection of hierarchical power; by ensuring equal participation in decision making and constantly changing delegated representatives, the assemblies enforce horizontal power as opposed to vertical power. The groups further provide for members through a solidarity economy in which resources are pooled and used for projects to enhance the wellbeing of all participants. In addition, barter and exchange is promoted, food is purchased communally, and workers are supported in turning abandoned factories into cooperatives.

Though ousted from the capitalist system, the *piqueteros* have exerted significant influence over government through resistance and opposition. Consolidating their political and organizational power resources, the *piqueteros* reconceptualised mass demonstrations, lobbying, government, the role of the citizenry, informal economies, and cooperatives. Though the *piqueteros* never reached the same level of political or organizational power that the unions did—particularly during the presidency of Juan Perón—the movement grew to constitute an alternative power resources institution during a time when unions were severely weakened. As one *piquetero* stated: “We advance very slowly, but we go along together... Maybe we will take longer to arrive, but we will do so all together” (Giarracca & Teubal 2004:75).

At the end of Carlos Menem's term in 1999, Argentina had been reshaped by neoliberal reforms, and inequality, poverty, and unemployment were rampant. Fernando de la Rúa, Menem's successor, was inaugurated on December 10, 1999. Under de la Rúa, Menem's neoliberal policies were heightened; health and education were further reformed, labour laws became more flexible, massive capitalist flight occurred, the recession deepened, wages continued to fall, unemployment increased dramatically, and living conditions deteriorated. In response, protests, demonstrations, strikes, and *piquetero* road blocks increased. On December 3, 2001, with the intention of stopping alarming capitalist flight, the *corralito* measures were introduced; these measures effectively froze bank accounts, leaving Argentine citizens unable to draw money from the banks.

With the introduction of the *corralito* measures, protests grew to include the middle class, who now found themselves instantly unable to access their savings. Massive protests increased and food began to be looted; this prompted the government to declare a state of siege on December 19, 2001, under which all gatherings were prohibited. The public announcements stimulated an immediate response and people took to the streets in defiance of the state of siege throughout the country. In Buenos Aires, demonstrators gathered at the Plaza de Mayo, a historic main square and center for political protest. Many stayed throughout the night; the next day, the crowds grew. The chant, which came to encapsulate the fury of Argentina, arose during these demonstrations: “*¡Que se vayan todos!*” or “throw them all out!” (Colmegna 2003; Giarracca & Teubal 2004). “*¡Que se vayan todos!*” was a call for the ousting of not just the corrupt politicians, but the entire economic system of neoliberal capitalism that had come to dominate Argentina (Klein 2009).

The next day, on December 20, 2001, the government ordered the repression of the demonstrators in Buenos Aires. At noon, forced control began in the Plaza de Mayo; from there, repression spread outwards through the city center. Over 4,500 people were arrested and violence resulted in over thirty people being killed (Lavaca Collective 2007). With at least seven being shot at point-blank range, the incident was “one of the worst repressions by a democratically elected government in the history of Argentina” (Giarracca & Teubal 2004:57).

Due to the impacts of these events in Argentina, as well as the international media coverage, de la Rúa resigned and his presidency was cut short on December 20, 2001. Following de la Rúa’s resignation, protests, demonstrations, strikes, and road blocks continued and multiplied throughout the country (Colmegna 2003; Giarracca & Teubal 2004). Over the next twelve days, Argentina introduced and ousted five Presidents—a testament to the power of the Argentine people, the *piqueteros*, and the labour movement.

### Impacts of the Crisis: Rising Inequality

The impacts of the Argentine crisis were extreme. Economically, it is estimated that between 1974 and 2002, Argentina’s GDP fell 25%. Production decreased dramatically as factories began to close in 1999; by 2002 the industrial sector was operating at only 50% of its capacity. Likewise, in 2002, Argentina’s unemployment rate was over 23% with an additional underemployment rate of 22% – over 45% of the population was either entirely unemployed or without sufficient employment.

For those who remained employed, incomes fell and, as illustrated below, disparities increased substantially (Giarracca & Teubal 2004).

Table 1 – GDP Distribution and Disparity in Argentina (1974 – 2002)

Year	GDP received by:		Level of Disparity
	Poorest 10%	Richest 10%	
1974	2.3%	28.2%	12.3
1990	2.3%	35.3%	15.3
2002	1.1%	37.6%	34.2

Source: Giarracca & Teubal 2004

In 1974, with a distribution of wealth that approximated developed countries, the richest strata of Argentina received 12.3 times more than the poorest strata; as the graph outlines, by 2002, the rich received 34.2 times more. This figure only continued to rise throughout 2002 and into 2003, when the level of disparity reached close to 50 times greater (Giarracca & Teubal 2004; Lavaca Collective 2007).

The number of Argentines living below the poverty line also increased dramatically: 15% in the early 1990s increased to 30% by 2000. In 2002, over half of Argentina's citizens were below the poverty line and 22% were living in extreme poverty. Vulnerable age groups were especially susceptible to poverty, with 58% of the youth under 14 years of age living below the poverty line and many retired Argentines, whose pensions had been drastically reduced under the neoliberal reforms, falling into the category of extreme poverty. While most of the unemployed lived in extreme poverty, even employed Argentines experienced drastic hardships; in 2002, 733,000 jobs paid wages so low that employees lived in extreme poverty – a 70% increase from 1998. During the crisis, 1.8 million employed Argentines lived in extreme poverty. Many of those who became destitute during the crisis were categorized as “the new poor” – previously middle class Argentines who experienced a rapid transition into poverty (Giarracca & Teubal 2004).

In spite of the fact that Argentina produces a tremendous amount of food, hunger and malnutrition also rose alarmingly across the country; millions of people turned to sifting through garbage as the population began to starve. Children suffered tremendously as food in schools disappeared due to government cuts and the situation became direr; for example, in 2002 in Buenos Aires, more than 58% of children were undernourished and, in the northeast province of Misiones, 60% of children experienced anaemia due to malnutrition. To complicate matters, the quality of healthcare worsened and medical accessibility decreased due to reforms and funding cuts (Giarracca & Teubal 2004).

Considered one of the most extreme and rapid transformations in history, the level and speed of deterioration in Argentina highlights the impacts of neoliberal reform and economic collapse. Overall, over 80% of Argentines were impoverished by the crisis through unemployment, poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. The economy was ruined, citizens lost their savings instantly with the introduction of the *corralito* measures, and industry was devastated. It is

no wonder that almost all walks of life have gone to the streets, because of the massive nature of the damaging being done. Not only the unemployed were robbed of their jobs, the workers of their wages, the middle classes and pensioners of their saving and pensions, but the very foundation of the capitalist system has been put in question. (Giarraca and Teubal, 2004: 67–68)

As extreme, deregulated capitalism ran rampant, so too did the emphatic public opposition to inequality-fueling neoliberalism.

### **Conclusions: Shifting Power Resources**

As a radical and relatively new theoretical approach, Power Resources Theory has engaged in considerable self-reflexivity. The most relevant self-critique of Power Resources Theory is that the theory does not expand past the borders of the state; there-

fore, by focusing heavily on the working classes' power resources, Power Resources Theory struggles to grapple with increasing global integration and the new actors and institutions that have emerged from this integration (O'Connor & Olsen 1998). It can be argued that, as it becomes ever easier for capital to transcend national boundaries, power resources become less meaningful. With growing deregulation, international considerations become ever more important as assets become more mobile and elite economic actors gain more power, leverage, and flexibility. This shift benefits capital and increases its strength significantly. In contrast, global integration has an inverse effect on labour and the working classes' power resources, which are situated heavily within national borders. In addition, government power has been constrained (at the very least ideologically) as economic globalization has increased. Power Resources Theory has had a difficult time theoretically accounting for or incorporating these rapid structural changes (Korpi 1998; O'Connor & Olsen 1998; Olsen 2002; Olsen 2011).

Unlike in core countries, peripheral and semi-peripheral countries suffer largely external economic destabilization. Therefore, Power Resources Theory's self-critique is exceptionally relevant in the semi-peripheral case of Argentina where global integration and international financial institutions induced massive economic and policy changes. Beginning during Menem's presidency and culminating in Argentina's economic collapse, the drastic neoliberal policy reforms and the Volcker Shock, which brought about increased deregulation, liberalized trade agreements, inflation, devaluation, and capitalist flight, were instigated by economic globalization and international pressures. Therefore, despite labour's power resources within the nation, much of the structural changes were influenced by factors beyond Argentina's borders and out of the reach of the working class.

Yet, as the analysis shows, welfare state theory cannot disregard the power resources of the working class. As documented, even when systematically weakened by the state, the capacity of the Argentine working class (bolstered by the innovative *piqueteros*) continued to moderate the neoliberal assault. Therefore, while accounting for the influence of the working class through a power resources lens, an additional external intervention variable can be specified as the susceptibility to external economic destabilization. The implication is that central to welfare state robustness and resilience is a country's capacity to buffer external destabilization, such as creditor-debtor relations, capital flight, and capital strike.

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