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*Remaking Argentina: Labor and Citizenship during the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*

I. Mercedes-Benz Argentina and the State

In early October, 1975, a wave of protests shut down the Mercedes-Benz Argentina (MBA) factory at González Catán, located in Buenos Aires province, about twenty miles southwest of the federal capital. The strike, which by most accounts involved almost all of the 4,000 workers at the plant, began in response to the firing of 117 employees, itself a consequence of the ongoing struggle over who would serve on the plant union's internal commission (*comisión interna*).<sup>1</sup> MBA workers, having rejected the internal commission appointed by the regional chapter of the auto-workers union, the *Sindicato de Mecánicos y Afines del Transporte Automotor*, or SMATA, demanded the right to elect their own representatives, and thus protect their political voice in negotiations with company management, with SMATA leadership, and with the Argentine state, especially with respect to the Ministry of Labor, and its head, Carlos Ruckauf.<sup>2</sup> MBA workers had not previously displayed a particularly militant consciousness, so

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the 1975 strike, see *Evita Montonera*, Nos. 8 and 9 (October and November, 1975); *Nuestra Palabra*, No. 119 (October 29, 1975); also see Florencia Rodríguez, "Las prácticas sindicales y políticas de los obreros de la empresa Mercedes Benz durante 1969-1976: Tensiones, contradicciones, y síntesis," presented at the 10th National Congress for the Study of Labor, Buenos Aires (August 2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Evita Montonera*, No. 8 (October 1978). "En Buenos Aires, los 4.000 obreros de Mercedes Benz resolvieron en asamblea iniciar un paro para tiempo indefinido, a partir del 8 de octubre. Exigían un aumento del 120 por ciento de salarios según la cláusula del último convenio que fijaba reajustes cada cuatro meses. También, reclamaban el reconocimiento de la comisión interna designada por los obreros, y el llamado a elecciones internas por SMATA en 15 días."

this demonstration not only signaled a sea change for the company, but also marked the entrance of the MBA workforce into the broader labor struggles that racked the country.<sup>3</sup>

While the strikers won this particular battle against management, the victory was not without consequences. The new internal commission, known as the “Group of 9” (*Grupo de los 9*), gained recognition from SMATA, Mercedes-Benz, and the Argentine government in November, 1975. Their tenure, however, would be a short one. The coup that deposed Isabel Perón in March, 1976, ushered in a new era of state-labor relations, and the repercussions of MBA workers’ successful campaign of defiance were dire indeed. Employees at Mercedes, along with those at Ford, and the factories under the sway of René Salamanca and SMATA-Córdoba, experienced especially fierce repression from the military regime, and more than fifteen MBA workers were disappeared within a year of the junta taking power, including almost the entire internal commission.<sup>4</sup> With the complicity of both Mercedes-Benz managers and SMATA’s national Secretary General, José Rodríguez, state security forces rounded up those employees identified as subversive, and replaced the workers’ representatives with delegates more willing to toe the union line, and not make trouble for the company.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which workers’ needs and demands were accurately represented was not only unimportant, but SMATA’s leadership actively discouraged such practice.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of the reasons for the explosion of protest and the immediate causes of the strike in this particular moment, see Rodríguez, “Las prácticas sindicales y políticas de los obreros de la empresa Mercedes Benz durante 1969-1976.” Rodríguez also suggests that the lack of visible protest prior to 1975 derived from both a sense that workers at MBA were better paid and better cared for, and a distinct (and paternalistic) corporate culture that sought to create close ties between workers and the company by providing employees with benefits including company housing and schools for children.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, MBA, Ford, and SMATA-Córdoba had all launched successful challenges against SMATA and its Secretary General, José Rodríguez, during the months immediately preceding the coup. Of the disappeared from Mercedes-Benz, only three people were ever heard from again. For more on José Rodríguez and his role, see “José Rodríguez y los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz,” CEDINCI, SJMP/CMS C-1/5-5.

<sup>5</sup> “José Rodríguez y los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz,” CEDINCI, SJMP/CMS C-1/5-5; see also Victoria Basualdo, “Complicidad patronal-militar en la última dictadura argentina: Los casos de Acindar, Astarsa, Dálmine Siderca, Ford, Ledesma y Mercedes Benz,” *Revista Engranajes*, No. 5 (March 2006).

This struggle for control of the shop floor at Mercedes-Benz Argentina presents us with a particular challenge. While most studies dealing either specifically with MBA, or more generally with labor conflict during the military government's *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, have focused on state terrorism carried out by para-legal or extra-legal security forces, there has been very little critical engagement with either the regime's objectives or the other methods of coercion and control which it attempted to employ in trying to realize its ambitions.<sup>6</sup> The debates over representation and legitimacy at Mercedes-Benz Argentina during the presidency of General Jorge Rafael Videla exposed conflict at multiple levels, as workers, management, union bureaucrats, and state officials vied for control of the factory, with each group seeking to impose their own strategies and defend their own interests. The task facing us, then, is how to decipher these competing projects.

To understand the tensions at MBA between 1976 and 1980, we must account not only for workers' aims, but, just as importantly, those of the state. Alliances between the parties in this quadripartite dynamic shifted constantly, developing and disintegrating based on changing notions of necessity and pragmatism. An underlying constant, however, at least at the level of objectives, was the regime's vision of how to reshape Argentina. The very title of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* revealed the junta's intentions to fundamentally remake the nation. In some sense, this name established the background against which this history took place. The social, political, and economic aims of the dictatorship performed a crucial role in determining the possibilities and limitations that individuals and groups encountered as they sought to define and control the relationships that bound workers to the company, the union, and the state. In

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<sup>6</sup> For studies that have dealt specifically with the disappearances at Mercedes-Benz Argentina, see Basualdo, "Complicidad patronal-militar durante la última dictadura argentina"; Gaby Weber, *Milagros no hay: Los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz*, BETACAM (2003), documentary film. For more detail on state repression of the Argentine labor movement, see Pablo Pozzi, *Oposición obrera a la dictadura, 1976-1982*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2008).

particular, the relationship of the individual to the state, which we might define as citizenship, must be considered of paramount importance.<sup>7</sup>

The complex and contested processes through which the military regime attempted to redefine the parameters of citizenship had particular consequences for Argentina's workers, and provoked reactions ranging from open resistance, to complicity, to simple self-preservation as people tried to distance themselves from the conflict. The legacy of Juan Domingo Perón's first presidency, during which he presided over both the expansion of trade union structures and their integration into the government, meant that questions of rights, responsibilities, and political life with respect to the state were intimately tied to labor, both as concept and practice.<sup>8</sup> As Daniel James argued in his definitive study of labor during the Peronist period, work itself became a critical corollary for political participation, and the overlap between the factory and the public plaza as sites for both the construction of the working class and the demonstration of its political power confirmed the imbrication of labor with social and political voice.<sup>9</sup>

The conflicts at Mercedes-Benz during Videla's presidency revealed the contradictions and tensions that defined the state's efforts to rearticulate the boundaries of the Argentine nation. The labor and economic policies of the regime shaped the ways in which workers interacted with union leaders, with management, and with each other, and helped delineate the parameters within which criticism and discontent could be expressed. The new legal structures put in place by the

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<sup>7</sup> This definition of citizenship as the relationship between the individual and the state draws on a varied literature that traces the growth of this dynamic during the colonial period in Latin America. In particular, see Henrik Kraay, *Race, State, and Armed Forces in Independence-Era Brazil: Bahia 1790s-1840s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 5. See also Sarah Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru 1780-1854* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero 1800-1857* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> For more detail on how Perón brought organized labor under state control and regulated state-labor dynamics, see Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. 5-41.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*. See especially 17-21 and 37-40.

dictatorship eliminated certain potential paths for opposition, and the looming threat of physical violence colored all interactions throughout this period. In this sense, although the main object of this study is the *Proceso*'s labor policy, we cannot for a moment forget that these policies were, either implicitly or explicitly, supported by the use of state-sponsored terror. Nevertheless, as Teemu Ruskola has argued, the discursive power of the legal sphere cannot be simply dismissed as a mask for the practice of violence.<sup>10</sup> To the extent that laws themselves are expressions of existing power dynamics, the measures enacted under Videla illustrated the junta's vision for the future Argentina, and by reading them as productive (as opposed to simply destructive) we are able to not only trace the contours of the state's project but also consider the competing notions of citizenship held and pursued by MBA employees.

This history presents us with an intriguing opportunity. By reading critical elements of this struggle, including the battle over the make-up of the plant workers' internal commission, or the continuous back-and-forth over wages, through a detailed examination of the military regime's labor and economic policies, we can posit an alternative explanation for the origin and spread of worker resistance. Instead of departing from an assumption of the immanent militancy or revolutionary consciousness of the Argentine labor movement, we must search for the moments in which this resistance first manifested. The interactions between workers, labor leaders, MBA management, and the state demonstrate that opposition was both engendered and bounded by the regime's decisions. Struggles between workers and the dictatorship were undoubtedly fought for the highest of stakes; it was no less than a battle of life or death. While at times this meant the very real use of deadly force by the state apparatus against workers, it also consistently centered on the contest over political life, the right to participate in governance, and the struggle over legitimate representation. Despite the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*'s

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<sup>10</sup> Teemu Ruskola, "Raping Like a State," *UCLA Law Review*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (June 2010), 1529.

efforts to exclude people and behaviors from the future Argentina, the military ultimately failed to transform the acknowledged criteria of citizenship. This paper hopes to explain the how and why of this failure.

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General Videla's first national address on March 25, 1976, clearly stated the lofty goals which the Armed Forces had for the country. In addition to overhauling the political system, the regime's goals included the eradication of all subversive elements, vigilant defense of Christian morals and virtues, and the implementation of a new economic strategy in which the state maintained control of those areas related to national security while encouraging foreign investment and private capital in other industries.<sup>11</sup> To accomplish these aims, Videla and the junta understood that they needed above all to eliminate any potential challenge to their authority. As James has noted, throughout twentieth-century Argentina, the military and the trade unions functioned as the two poles around which Argentine society revolved.<sup>12</sup> It had been the mobilization of the trade unions in Rosario and Córdoba in 1969 that marked the beginning of the end for the military government of General Juan Carlos Onganía.<sup>13</sup> With these memories in mind, the regime knew it had to subdue the Argentine labor movement to succeed. Thus, as Hugo Quiroga has argued, we must count one additional objective among the *Proceso's* stated goals: the deconstruction of the existing state-labor dynamic and the subjugation of the Argentine working class to the authority of the junta.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Objetivos básicos para la reorganización nacional," *La Nación* (March 25, 1976); "Las fuerzas armadas y su determinación," *La Nación* (March 25, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*. 249.

<sup>13</sup> James Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955-1976: Ideology, Work, and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Quiroga, Hugo. "El tiempo del 'Proceso.'" *Nueva Historia Argentina*. 1st ed. Vol. 10 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2005), 48.

Immediately following the coup, Videla sanctioned a number of measures that placed severe limitations on the abilities of workers and union leaders to negotiate legally with management or contest state interventions. Justifying its actions as necessary for the defense of the nation and the maintenance of economic security, the dictatorship enacted laws that allowed the immediate dismissal of workers suspected of subversion; prohibited all means of legal resistance formerly available, including strikes, work stoppages, interruptions, or slowdowns; ended the practice of collective bargaining; and intervened Argentina's most powerful and important trade unions, freezing their funds and ousting their leadership.<sup>15</sup> The intervention of the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) and the *Confederación General Económica* (CGE) confirmed the junta's aggressive approach.<sup>16</sup> By seizing control of the two largest bodies of the labor movement, freezing their funds and replacing the leaders with military interventors, Videla sent a clear message about the regime's new attitude towards workers.

The culmination of this effort, which came in the form of a new Law of Professional Associations (*Ley de Asociaciones*), Law 22.105, in November, 1979, signaled a massive redrawing of the labor landscape, with the most important feature being the ban on union federations and confederations.<sup>17</sup> The target of this decree, the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) had long possessed, and occasionally exercised, the power to challenge the government, even during those moments in which it functioned alongside the ruling power.<sup>18</sup> As

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<sup>15</sup> These laws described in bulletins from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). Bulletins "Law 21,260," and "Law 21,261" (March 25, 1976). For a detailed account of the intervention of trade unions by the Armed Forces, see Lisa Diane Cox, *Repression and Rank-and-File Pressure during the Argentine Process of National Reorganization* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> "Communique 25," FBIS (March 24, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Hector Palomino, "Los cambios en el mundo del trabajo y los dilemas sindicales," *Nueva Historia Argentina*. 1st ed. Vol. 10 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2005). 387.

<sup>18</sup> See James, *Resistance and Integration*; see also Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Córdoba*, for an overview of the *CGT de los Argentinos* (CGTA) which split from the CGT at the end of the 1960s and launched a massive wave of protests that effectively crippled the military dictatorship of the time, led by General Juan Carlos Onganía. The

its increasingly aggressive legislative stance on organized labor suggests, the *Proceso* sought to eliminate even the potential of an alternative power site. Understanding that organized labor as it had existed to that point posed a threat to their vision for the future of Argentina, the Armed Forces dedicated considerable energy to creating a legal framework that would proscribe and exclude those elements of the working population that they believed would be detrimental to the national health, seeking to remove activists, militants, Peronists, and any other potential menace, from the national character.

Even as the dictatorship implemented its new legislative framework to disrupt union power, another facet of its plan was embodied by José Martínez de Hoz, Videla's Minister of Economy. Appointed immediately following the coup, Martínez de Hoz forcefully pursued a right-liberal developmental strategy that privileged export agriculture over domestic manufacturing, and rejected Argentina's practice of Import-Substitution Industrialization, which had been the country's economic cornerstone for more than three decades.<sup>19</sup> Wages became the center of the state's efforts to combat inflation, and a means for the control of organized resistance against the regime. Martínez de Hoz argued that only by freezing wages in both the public and private sectors could the rampant inflation devastating Argentina be kept in check.<sup>20</sup>

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leaders of the *Proceso* undoubtedly had this in mind as they tried to not only build on the foundations that past military regime's had established, but also learn from the failures of their predecessors.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed assessment of Martínez de Hoz's economic strategies from 1976-1980, see *Latin American Economic Report* (1976-1979); *Latin American Report* (1980). For an abridged version, see David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), esp. 368-370.

<sup>20</sup> While he had the power to dictate wages (to a certain extent) for public employees, obviously private industry was free to pay its workers as it saw fit. However, Martínez de Hoz made several overtures to industry leaders to follow his line, and keep wages depressed, evoking the specter of continuing economic hardship and inflation's perpetual growth. The extent to which he was successful varied greatly from industry to industry, and even from business to business. Most relevant to this case, within the auto industry, on numerous occasions management authorized wage increases that surpassed the "official" levels, creating tensions between them and the Ministry of Economy. See "Argentina's economy runs out of control," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 4, No. 19 (May 14, 1976); "Strikes highlight problems of Argentine economy," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 4, No. 36 (September 17, 1976); "Argentine cars and steel reflect production crisis," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 16 (April 29, 1977).

In retrospect, we are able to see that his approach failed to slow the pace of inflation (which remained at or around triple-digits even during the years prior to the 1981 economic collapse). The wage freeze did, however, cripple consumer purchasing power, which in turn further depressed industrial production.<sup>21</sup> Workers found themselves under assault from all sides, as avenues for negotiation and political participation were blocked off, and whatever influence they held based on their consumption and economic contribution disappeared during Martínez de Hoz's tenure. Lack of political opportunities combined with rampant economic instability left tens of thousands of workers without an effective way of fighting back. The exclusion of those persons deemed undesirable or unworthy of the status of citizen looked to be at the point of realization.

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Yet despite this apparent position of strength, the junta proved incapable of bringing its plans to fruition, at least as they had envisioned it. How did it go wrong? And, what can the case of Mercedes-Benz Argentina tell us about this moment? The relationship between Mercedes employees and the regime demonstrates several key elements of how the general labor-state dynamic developed during the *Proceso*. The force and brutality of the military's initial repression, resulting in the disappearance of at least sixteen people, clearly had a profound effect on workers' ability to organize opposition throughout 1976 and late into 1977. The first indications that protests were occurring with some frequency come from the middle of 1978, although there were almost certainly incidents before then.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, even as

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<sup>21</sup> This argument has been well-documented. In particular, see Eduardo Basualdo, *Estudios de historia económica argentina: desde mediados del siglo XX a la actualidad* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 8-9, 11, 14-15, 17, 19. The timeline of protests has been exceedingly difficult to reconstruct, at least in a comprehensive and chronological manner. Speaking generally, as early as September, 1976 a wave of wildcat strikes took place in a number of Argentine auto factories around the country (see "Strikes highlight problems of Argentine economy," *Latin American Economic Report*). These demonstrations resulted in severe repression, with dozens if not hundreds of disappearances, and

opportunities to express discontent became available, the conversation remained firmly bounded by the limitations imposed by the Armed Forces.<sup>23</sup> Overt discussion of politics, or any semblance of political organization, was far too dangerous in such a climate.

That workers at MBA attempted to frame their dissent in economic terms suggests two possibilities. The first is that in the early years of the *Proceso*, workers tried very hard to stay out of explicitly political debates, a conclusion which seems quite logical; the second, and more significant, is that some workers recognized both the stakes of the conflict and the most effective (as well as safest) language for articulating opposition, and identified a means to push back against the dictatorship's attempted redefinition of their role within the social, political, and economic spheres of the nation.

The spaces that became available for MBA employees to voice their critiques of state policy did not emerge from thin air. Rather, they derived from the junta's inability to unite behind a single strategy. While Videla managed to retain his position as President, and through his alliance with General Rafael Viola kept control of the Army, his time in office was defined by frequent clashes within the military leadership. Infighting between the three branches of the Armed Forces over how best to manage the economy and the appropriate course of action with

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hundreds of rank-and-file members arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms (Palomino, "Los cambios en el mundo del trabajo y los dilemas sindicales," *La Nueva Historia Argentina*, 383). Evidence suggesting MBA workers' participation in these events is extremely scarce. The best concrete indication suggesting unrest at Mercedes during the last few months of 1976 is the disappearance of the internal commission and other employees (Basualdo, "Complicidad patronal-militar en la última dictadura argentina," 13-16.). By early 1978, however, there are frequent mentions of *quites de colaboración* (suspensions of collaboration), which generally entailed refusal to work overtime hours, as well as the ongoing struggle over the constitution of the internal commission (again, see Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 8-9, 11, 15, 19). It seems very unlikely that this type of opposition emerged without a longer period of organization and small-scale acts of resistance.

<sup>23</sup> Accounts of protests continued to increase in frequency during 1979 and 1980, with *trabajo con tristeza* (go-slows) and small-scale strikes becoming more common (see Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 52, 59 for *trabajo con tristeza*; see Folios 14, 17, 27-28, 30-31 for descriptions of strikes). However, even when MBA did go on strike, as happened on June 17, 1980, the root cause was determined to be a claim for better salaries, and not an explicitly political intervention (Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 27-28). The language and parameters of resistance, even as late as mid-1980, still centered on economic concerns, as these claims were effective without provoking violent reprisals from the state.

respect to the labor movement exposed the cracks in the regime's project which were evident from the shop-floor through to the highest levels of government.<sup>24</sup> In this context, opposition from MBA personnel simultaneously challenged the state's new policies while managing to remain largely within the parameters established by the dictatorship. Employing the language and tools at their disposal, those workers who participated in the resistance effort highlighted specific targets towards which they dedicated their energies, while simultaneously trying to avoid the severest of possible repercussions.

## II. Battlegrounds of Citizenship

Of these areas, one of the most critical was the battle for control of the internal commission. This conflict pitted MBA employees against not only the company but also the SMATA bureaucracy, and highlighted the issues of representation and legitimacy at the shop-floor level. The decimation of the worker-appointed internal commission during the first year of the *Proceso* took place with the approval of both Mercedes management and SMATA secretary José Rodríguez.<sup>25</sup> Although we do not know the exact timeline, in the aftermath, SMATA, presumably with the support of both the company and the military, sought to reassert its control over the workforce by appointing new delegates that would be more responsive to the concerns of management and the union bureaucracy. This, of course, came at the expense of representing

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<sup>24</sup> This is evidenced by not only the junta's continued inability to control wages and working conditions, even within the public sector, but also by the dissent that at times openly presented itself in public discourse. For example, in response to an outbreak of wildcat strikes in September, 1976, General Horacio Liendo, the Minister of Labor under Videla, publicly admitted that wages were too low. This indicated not only the disagreement over Martínez de Hoz's plan to keep wages depressed, but also that the government recognized the origins of these strikes as primarily socio-economic, and not political. Although the distinction is subtle, especially given the hyper-politicized climate which the *Proceso* inevitably created, it is crucial to understanding why certain expressions of resistance were tolerated (or at least, tolerated to a greater extent). "Strikes highlight problems of Argentine economy," *Latin American Economic Report*.

<sup>25</sup> For an account of José Rodríguez's participation, see "José Rodríguez y los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz," CEDINCI.

the workers themselves, a critical factor in explaining why this instantiation of the internal commission did not enjoy the support of factory personnel.<sup>26</sup> What is known is that by the end of 1977, unrest had resurfaced at the plant over the question of representation, as evidenced by the fact that by May, 1978, a new internal commission was actively and openly negotiating with MBA management and contesting the implementation of various rationalization measures by the company.<sup>27</sup>

As the state ultimately aspired to redraw the boundaries of citizenship, removing the worker, as he or she had been understood until that point, from the national polity, the struggle over the internal commission was of paramount importance. During Perón's first two presidencies, the popular conception of the worker underwent a radical transformation. From the wreckage of the *década infame*, workers emerged with not only expanded social recognition, but also considerable political influence, magnified by the trade union structures that walked a fine line between representing workers' voices and coopting them in pursuit of other goals, often dictated by the Peronist state itself.<sup>28</sup> The Law of Professional Associations established in October, 1945, and largely maintained over the following thirty years, obliged employers to bargain with the representatives of the recognized union for that industry.<sup>29</sup> One of the critical changes brought about during the *Proceso* was the inversion of this dynamic, with workers losing the upper hand in the labor-management relationship for the first time in decades. As employees lost power to employers, the issue of representation only increased in significance. The composition of the internal commission, and its ability to speak accurately and authentically

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<sup>26</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 49.

<sup>27</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*.

<sup>29</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*. 10.

on behalf of those it claimed to stand for, was central to the workers' ability to resist the junta's attempt to exorcise them from the future Argentina.

Several key examples corroborate this claim, of which we should examine at least one, in order to better understand the intricacies of this struggle. An internal communication from the Intelligence Directorate of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police from May 8, 1978, captured a moment of escalated activity in the ongoing conflict at MBA. The memo described the workers' rejection of a proposed wage increase offered by management on May 1, and a brief work-stoppage which lasted from 11 a.m. until 1 p.m. on May 4.<sup>30</sup> As the recently-elected internal commission negotiated with company management for salary increases, the police worried about the possibility of a mass strike that involved all 4,000 workers (although such an action might have been disastrous in terms of state repression).<sup>31</sup> The document further noted that the internal commission had set a meeting with the German directors of the company, to take place in the federal capital.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, there is no follow-up memo, and thus we are left somewhat in the dark as to the results of this scheduled encounter, including whether or not it even took place.

Regardless of its realization, this supposed meeting deserves our attention as it opens the door to a number of possible interpretations that shed light on the dynamics between workers, SMATA leadership, MBA management, and the *Proceso*. First and foremost, it suggests the depth of the friction between individual plant chapters and the national union hierarchy. SMATA's structure allowed for some diffusion of authority, with regional heads being in charge of negotiations for all the member factories within that region; the Mercedes plant in González Catán pertained to the San Justo delegation of SMATA. There is no indication, however, that individual internal commissions were regularly given permission to negotiate directly with

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<sup>30</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 17.

<sup>31</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Factor Gremial, Mesa B, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

management on questions of salary or working conditions. In fact, such an arrangement would almost certainly prove too destabilizing to the larger goals of the union to be permitted.

Second, it also indicates that the relationship between Mercedes management and the Armed Forces was not without its difficulties. These negotiations point to consequences beyond their immediate implications for MBA employees. Martínez de Hoz's frequent calls for strict control of wage levels in accordance with levels dictated by the state were meant especially for this type of situation.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Mercedes managers appear to have felt that the best interests of the company were better served by dealing directly with their employees, sidestepping not only the union bureaucracy, but also the regime's regulations. Such a decision shows the lack of faith that many industrial leaders had in the state's ability to solve critical problems related to labor.<sup>34</sup> That pragmatism trumped ideology for company management is hardly a groundbreaking assertion. Of greater importance is what it reveals about the feasibility and acceptability of the state's goal to redefine citizenship through the remaking of labor relations. Clearly, workers were not the only party with a stake in the *Proceso's* transformative project, and examples like this raise the possibility that among these other parties we can find notable manifestations of opposition.

Finally, the nature of the negotiations between the internal commission and Mercedes directors demonstrates that at no point were these relationships definitively or permanently set. Rather, they changed with a rapidity that seems almost incongruent with the background of

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<sup>33</sup> "Argentina's budget sets difficult targets," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 13 (April 1, 1977).

<sup>34</sup> This lack of faith was most likely compounded by a general unhappiness with the direction of the Argentine economy, at least with respect to major industrial and manufacturing concerns. Martínez de Hoz's decision to focus economic policy on agriculture and divest from industry alienated not only workers and certain members of the Armed Forces, but also numerous directors and managers. Chronic complaints about limited export growth at the expense of considerable industrial deterioration further emphasized this disagreement over the Martínez de Hoz's strategy. See "Argentine economy still in the melting pot," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 28 (July 22, 1977); "Argentine external sector gains at the cost of inflation," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 33 (August 26, 1977).

violence and terror against which they unfolded. Management's role in the death of several members of the Group of 9 did not prevent members of the new internal commission from agreeing to sit down with the MBA directorate. Similarly, as an article from November 28, 1978, showed, the same representatives also, in appropriate circumstances, could call on the state to help their cause. In response to large-scale dismissals carried out by MBA, the internal commission delivered a letter to General Horacio Liendo, the Minister of Labor, arguing that the company had violated the law by demanding that employees put in extra hours.<sup>35</sup> Workers claimed they would be willing to cooperate with Mercedes on any issue, as long as compromises were reached that protected workers from unfair dismissals and put the brakes on management's rationalization plans.<sup>36</sup> In both instances, necessity engendered temporary agreements that call into question any notion of an exclusively antagonistic dynamic between the various groups.

That at least four distinct internal commissions represented the workers of Mercedes-Benz Argentina over a span of just about three years speaks to the back-and-forth nature of the struggle over who would speak for the plant's employees. The importance of the internal commission in defending workers' rights located it at the heart of the *Proceso's* project of redefining participation and citizenship. If the junta sought to ally itself with Mercedes management and the SMATA bureaucracy in attempting to alter the balance of power and take control of the union from the rank-and-file, the internal commission became one of the principal tools with which certain workers could assert their autonomy and resist the state.

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However, even a worker-approved internal commission frequently found itself limited by the proscriptions effected by the dictatorship, and thus great care had to be taken to identify those

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<sup>35</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 10.

<sup>36</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 10.

areas where protest and opposition could be articulated. At Mercedes and elsewhere, the critical question around which resistance predominantly consolidated was that of wages.<sup>37</sup>

Here, the question of the political deserves a more detailed examination. The regime's stated goal of overhauling Argentina's political system included the proscription of all political parties and political activity, a ban that lasted throughout Videla's presidency.<sup>38</sup> Between 1976 and 1980, this prohibition was enforced with varying degrees of severity, and numerous politicians, including Ricardo Balbín, the leader of the primary opposition party, the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), were arrested on several occasions.<sup>39</sup> However, it was ultimately not party leaders that had the most cause for concern. Rather, the ban on politics had a far more profound effect on those lower down the totem pole, especially the rank-and-file. This measure effectively silenced their voice, and placed them in a precarious position vis-à-vis the state, compromising their ability to exercise their citizenship in practice. The one area where the government was disposed to overlook challenges to its plan was regarding the economy, and this largely derived from the lack of consensus within the junta itself over the proper course of action to rescue the country from its accelerating collapse.

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<sup>37</sup> This is true at least until 1979, and I would argue probably until closer to 1980. Prior to that point, the vast majority of protest is framed in economic terms, with workers demanding not their political rights, nor necessarily a return to the trade-union system of the Peronist era, but rather salary increases and normalization of working conditions and labor relations. The primary concerns of workers during this period, at least as articulated to company management and the state, hinged on questions of economics and a living wage. See Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 17; see also "Strikes highlight problems of Argentine Economy," *Latin American Economic Report*; "Argentine wage rise lags well behind inflation," *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (January 14, 1977); "Argentina: unions ease pressure on regime," *Latin American Political Report*, Vol. 12, No. 20 (May 26, 1978). As we will see shortly, by late 1979, a far more confrontational faction had emerged among the personnel at MBA, and openly political questions, like the fate of the *desaparecidos* and democratization, entered the public debate with far greater frequency. However, even at that point, the most commonly employed flashpoints for organizing resistance were those related to salaries and working conditions.

<sup>38</sup> In a speech by General Albano Harguindeguy, the Minister of the Interior, he declared that the political parties had lost their chance to have a voice in the government because of what happened between 1973 and 1976; "Argentina: back to the army," *Latin American Political Report*, Vol. 12, No. 17 (May 5, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> See "Argentina: back to the army," *Latin American Political Report*; "Argentina: dissenting voices," *Latin American Political Report*, Vol. 12, No. 49 (December 22, 1978); "Argentina: whistling up the wind," *Latin American Political Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8 (February 23, 1979).

At the same time, because the *Proceso* had essentially created a permanent state of exception marked by the suspension of politics and constitutional norms, and because the measures concerning labor and the economy tied all aspects of this stratagem into the defense of the nation, for practical purposes *all* state policies, including social and economic ones, were political. Thus, the fight over wages, though initially seen by the military as an economic question, articulated an implicitly political challenge against the dictatorship, without transgressing the prohibition on political activity. Although by 1979 there were hints that the Armed Forces recognized the potential repercussions of this tactic, it remained relatively permissible, even as more overt political participation stayed firmly off the table.<sup>40</sup> If the regime's proscription of politics closed channels for participation and opportunities for open denunciation of the state, emergent opposition found a way to disguise its political intent behind a façade of economic criticism which allowed discontent to circulate without incurring, for the most part, either legal or extra-legal repression.

The role of the internal commission at Mercedes-Benz Argentina in the evolution of resistance helps illustrate the political nature of economic concerns. Though workers had retaken control of the commission by 1978, they faced an increasingly difficult situation, as rationalization by MBA eliminated hundreds of jobs. In a November 7, 1978 memo directed to MBA personnel, the internal commission declared that management's rationalization plan sought not only to take revenge against the employees' labor representatives (namely, the members of the internal commission) but also against the gains they had made prior to the coup, gains that

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<sup>40</sup> See "Argentina: softly, softly," *Latin American Political Report*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (February 2, 1979). This article chronicles the response of Colonel Rolando Valentino, the interventor of the CGT, who, in response to denouncements by recently-emerged labor bodies like the *Comisión Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) and the "Group of 25" (*Grupo de los 25*), warned them about transgressing the ban on political activity. This suggests at the very least some acknowledgment of the purpose behind, or possible consequences of, demands for wage increases and improvements in working conditions.

enabled them to maintain their salaries above “starvation level.”<sup>41</sup> This, they stated, was “the cause for which we must unite ourselves even more, strengthening the organized movement, in defense of our rights, our salary, fighting against those that want to destroy our source of work.”<sup>42</sup> That even after more than two years of the dictatorship and the disappearance of at least sixteen of their coworkers, the language of resistance remains firmly linked to workers’ economic well-being is simultaneously remarkable and unsurprising.

Certainly, it is worth noting that such an attitude appears strongly to contradict Pablo Pozzi’s argument about the militant and revolutionary political class consciousness of Argentine workers being the principal factor inciting opposition from 1976 onwards.<sup>43</sup> The internal commission’s commitment to framing their struggle around wages and the right to work demonstrates that even as workers’ protests challenged the government’s project, the regime’s policies established borders within which workers articulated resistance. The claim that these delegates made to work *as an idea*, and something which they had earned and deserved, highlights the deeply imbedded legacy of Peronism and its effect on understandings of citizenship in Argentina. Despite the passage of decades and the best efforts of the Armed Forces to excise this belief in labor as a foundational component of the citizenry, this argument continued to be wielded with great success as workers defended what they viewed as their right to participate in the nation.

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<sup>41</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 8.

<sup>42</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 8; “Y esta es la causa por lo que debemos unirnos más aún, fortalecer al movimiento organizado, en defensa de nuestros derechos, de nuestros salarios, luchando contra aquellos que quieren destruir nuestra fuente de trabajo.”

<sup>43</sup> Pozzi, *La oposición obrera a la dictadura, 1976-1982*, esp. 23-26. Pozzi argues that the Argentine working class consciousness operates on two levels, one quotidian and one more broadly ideological. He points to the latter as directing workers’ resistance efforts during the dictatorship, arguing that the working class’s “activity and responses defined and limited the course of action of the dominant class” (26). This is almost certainly true *in part*, but it seems more appropriate to suggest that both sides influenced one another, while also noting the roles that union leadership and company management played. Such a conclusion does not depreciate the sacrifices made by workers in pursuit of their rights and goals; rather, the recognition of their humanity and their limitations makes these sacrifices even more remarkable, presenting these workers as human beings instead of ideologues.

Even as they saw many of their avenues for protest closed off by the *Proceso*'s labor policies, some workers at Mercedes still found ways to fight back. One of the chief weapons available was the so-called "suspension of collaboration" (*quite de colaboración*), which involved a general refusal to work extra hours.<sup>44</sup> Unlike strikes and stoppages during normal working hours, this particular tactic occupied a liminal space with respect to its legality, and thus the possibility of punishment.<sup>45</sup> The frequent mention of *quites de colaboración* in newspapers, internal plant memos, and police documents suggests that, because overtime existed outside of the purview of regular labor relations, workers clearly felt more comfortable asserting their autonomy in this capacity than they would have in relation to disruptions or strikes at other times of the day. However, this does not mean that the internal commission and section delegates were not at times willing to push back against management in pursuit of wage increases or in defense of workers' jobs.<sup>46</sup> And, at times, these tactics even led to small victories, as in June, 1980, when MBA agreed to monthly salary increases for the remainder of the year, and committed to both maintaining the stability of work availability, avoiding lay-offs and cutbacks, and keeping salaries of MBA employees at the highest level in the automobile industry, above what any other firm paid.<sup>47</sup> Thus, resistance centered on economic concerns as opposed to politics not only bore occasional fruit, but also provided the means for workers to oppose the state's attempts to severely limit their potential as citizens.

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<sup>44</sup> For examples in which workers suspended collaboration, see Archivo DIBPA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 11, 51, 53-55, 58-59, 61. These examples range from July, 1978 until December, 1981. While such tactics were likely in use both prior to and after this tentative timeframe, we can also see that these *quites de colaboración* became increasingly frequent as time passed, occurring with far greater regularity in 1980 and 1981 than in 1978 and 1979.

<sup>45</sup> Any disruption of work during regular business hours still fell under the jurisdiction of Law 21.261, which proscribed any measure of force or manifestation of protest. At Mercedes, this law was specifically invoked on multiple occasions, including the firing of 16 workers for having realized an illegal work stoppage on July 27, 1978. Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 14.

<sup>46</sup> For actions taken in support of wage increases, see Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 17-19; for defense of jobs, see Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 23-24.

<sup>47</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 29.

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Any adequate analysis of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* as an attempt to transform Argentine society must necessarily account for the implicit meaning of the name itself. The idea of reorganizing the nation demands we consider not only notions of citizenship and participation, but also what that the nation entails, and for whose benefit it exists. While elaborating on the differences between the nationalism of the workers and the nationalism of the Armed Forces sets us on the right path, to explore properly the stakes of the conflict between these competing visions for Argentina, we are obliged to expand our scope to include all parties involved in this dynamic, not just workers and the state. Once more, the experience of MBA employees provides an excellent entry into this conversation.

An article from October 4, 1978, discussed the proposed firing of 400 Mercedes operators, explained by management as a purely economic decision, based on falling sales. The internal commission, however, claimed that MBA, in addition to being one of the industry leaders, had actually upped its production numbers from 640 units per month during the pre-coup period to 840 units per month at the end of 1978.<sup>48</sup> It also sustained that the machinery at the González Catán plant had not been repaired or renovated in more than 25 years, and that the tools they used were “totally obsolete.” The most important statement made by the commission, however, was an accusation at the end of the article directed at MBA management. It stated that:

The delegation of workers reported that the company plans to reduce personnel and to entrust these jobs to third parties, which is to say the suppliers, arguing a false rationalization of expenses with the added cost of maintaining the factory’s obsolete machinery in order to be the recipients of industrial credits for the renovation of said machinery, which, instead of using them to this end, they distribute for other intentions which we understand should be investigated by the national authorities. “With the pretext of renovating the machinery - they [the workers] concluded - they receive money, then

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<sup>48</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa 2, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 23. The article, unfortunately, appears in the archive without indication of the newspaper to which it pertained.

they use if for other purposes and on top of that they continuously fire the workers, who are the real victims of these maneuverings by the management.”<sup>49</sup>

This quote reveals two critically important elements of the workers’ understanding of nation and nationalism. First, the closing point reiterated their belief in the worker as not only the backbone of Argentine society, but also as the true victim of exploitation by foreigners. The members of the internal commission make it clear that they saw the privileging of a European company at the expense of Argentine citizens as something that should not happen. Second, along similar lines, the commission’s call for national authorities to investigate the suspect business practices of Mercedes-Benz shows their willingness to turn to the state for support, and, regardless of their actual expectation, try to ally themselves with the government against an outsider.<sup>50</sup> Workers, at least in this instance, expressed nationalism as a defensive project against exploitation by foreign industry, and understood their place to be on the front lines of that conflict.

To establish the Armed Forces’ perspective on citizenship and the nation is a more difficult task. The economic strategies of Martínez de Hoz indicate one aspect of the broader picture, but we must not ignore the fact that his plan met with consistent and vocal criticism from within the dictatorship throughout his tenure as Minister of Economy.<sup>51</sup> As Paul Lewis has

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<sup>49</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa 2, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 23. Original quote: “Asimismo, la delegación de trabajadores informó que la empresa pretende reducir personal y encomendar el trabajo a terceros, es decir a los proveedores, argumentando una falsa racionalización de costos con el agravante de mantener un sistema de maquinaria obsoleto en fábrica para ser beneficiarios de los créditos industriales para renovación de maquinarias, que en vez de utilizarlos con ese fin distraen los fondos para otras actividades que entendemos deben ser investigadas por las autoridades nacionales. ‘Con el pretexto de renovar maquinaria - finalizan - consiguen dinero, lo utilizan con otro fin y encima despiden continuamente a obreros, que son las verdaderas víctimas de todas estas maniobras patronales.’”

<sup>50</sup> Although there is no record of how the military received this information, it is very unlikely that the junta ever acted upon the commission’s accusation. Besides holding a very different set of beliefs about what was good for the nation, the state was MBA’s primary customer, as the trucks and buses produced at González Catán were destined for the Armed Forces and Argentina’s various urban public transit networks.

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed description of the internal tensions over Martínez de Hoz’s policies, see “Argentina seeks support for economic plan,” *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 4, No. 21 (May 28, 1976); “Argentine planners fail to solve fundamentals,” *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 4, No. 33 (August 20, 1976); “Argentine prices seem on an upward course,” *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 5, No. 36 (September 16, 1977); “Measuring the swings on Argentina’s see-saw,” *Latin American Economic Report*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (January 13, 1978).

described in his analysis of the Argentine Right, the two principal tendencies of the twentieth century can be characterized as the corporatist *nacionalismo* of right-populists and the authoritarian capitalism of the right-liberals, and they disagreed violently over the shift in emphasis from domestic manufacturing to export agriculture.<sup>52</sup> Only the unflagging support of Videla and the Army, as the most powerful of the three branches of the military, kept Martínez de Hoz in office as his policies slowly sunk Argentina deeper into economic crisis. However, given that the government did, in fact, implement this strategy, in spite of the controversy it provoked, this transformation should be seen as a fundamental piece of the puzzle, provided that we not lose sight of the above caveat.

The *Proceso*'s vision for the nation, as expressed through public declarations and labor and economic policies, ran almost directly counter to that of workers.<sup>53</sup> Putting the junta's internal dissent aside momentarily, Videla's efforts to cripple the ability of organized labor to pursue a political agenda or meaningfully challenge the regime's project suggested an Argentina with only one site of power, the state. The overall approach of the military, exemplified by the dissolution of the state-labor dynamic that had remained largely intact since Perón's first presidency, demonstrated that for Videla, the gravest threat to the nation was not subversion, or at least not as the term referred to leftist guerrillas like the *Montoneros* and the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP). Rather, it was Fordism; it was

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Lewis, "The Right and Military Rule, 1955-1983," *The Argentine Right*, Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart, eds. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1993).

<sup>53</sup> In addition to the Laws 21.260, 21.261, and 22.100, the *Proceso* also intervened seven of the top eight unions in terms of economic importance and eight of the top nine in terms of political influence; see Cox, *Repression and Rank-and-File Pressure during the Argentine Process of National Reorganization* for a more detailed account. For public statements, see "Primer mensaje presidencial de Jorge Rafael Videla," *La Prensa* (June 30, 1976); "Objetivos básicos para la reorganización nacional," *La Nación* (March 25, 1976); "Las fuerzas armadas y su determinación," *La Nación* (March 25, 1976).

the welfare state; ultimately, it was the workers themselves.<sup>54</sup> The *Proceso*'s reorganization of the nation sought to not only eradicate these undesirable elements from within its boundaries, but to replace them with an obedient workforce, dependent on the state, and without the security and benefits that would allow resistance to the Armed Forces' project. This is confirmed by the fact that the dictatorship never truly tried to ban trade unions; instead, it wanted to redefine them.

Within this framework, how do we incorporate company directors and union leaders? The former clearly had a complicated relationship with both workers and the state. The inherent tension between labor and management was not always enough to ensure collaboration between management and the dictatorship, and there were undoubtedly moments in which companies felt that supporting their employees against the regime best served their interests.<sup>55</sup> Still, we should not assign these examples more significance than they merit. Although industrial leaders doubtless felt slighted by Martínez de Hoz's economic strategy, and at times ignored government directives in deference to their own bottom lines, it would be remiss to posit that businessmen, especially international firms and those manufacturers backed by foreign capital, actively resisted the state's project in most cases. While the dynamic between workers, management, and the state clearly shifted as alliances were made and unmade, in the end the interests of the industrial elite generally lay with the *Proceso*. At MBA, despite the firm's willingness to negotiate with workers outside of official channels, the company's ongoing willingness to assist

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<sup>54</sup> A January 1977 article in *Latin American Political Report* explained that, following a negative response from the Minister of Labor to union demands, "Like the political parties, the unions had 'fallen into the error of supposing that the reasons which prompted the military intervention no longer existed' (according to semi-official voices). In fact, the strength of Argentine trade unionists, which has been demonstrated again and again over the past year, was one of the principle reasons for the coup. *The question that divides the armed forces is not whether to break the power of the unions or not, but how best to do it.*" Vol. 11, No. 2 (January 14, 1976). Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> See "Argentine prices seem set on upward course," *Latin American Economic Report*.

the state in identifying and eliminating subversives (by legal or extra-legal means) indicated that it was not an exception to this rule.<sup>56</sup>

The vision of the union bureaucracy appears considerably more difficult to describe. However, a set of documents from September, 1979 helps to shed some light. A memo to the Director of Intelligence of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police noted that several copies of fliers of a political nature had been circulating around the plant at González Catán.<sup>57</sup> This flier, which was an issue of *Política Obrera*, was accompanied by an article in the Argentine daily *Clarín*, supposedly authored by MBA employees. Reflecting the attenuation of the Armed Forces' control, the language employed by these documents was far more overtly political, calling for an aggressive and public response to the rash of kidnappings, detentions, and murders since the coup.<sup>58</sup> The authors accused Martínez de Hoz of surrendering the country to foreign exploitation, and explicitly demanded an end to the *Proceso* and a return to democracy.<sup>59</sup>

Within days, a reply bulletin had circulated, presumably originating from SMATA's headquarters in the federal capital. This document, printed on official SMATA letterhead, bore the title "Let's talk clearly" (*Hablemos claro*), and unequivocally stated that the authors of that propaganda did not speak for the workers of MBA. Instead, it dismissively blamed Marxist subversives, stating "We want our comrades to appear, but we will not allow ourselves to be used by Marxists or the idiots in power that serve them within the plant. We have contributed to

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<sup>56</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 42-44. This internal memo from the Intelligence Division of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police stated that "factory authorities find themselves perfectly aware and willing to collaborate with governmental authorities to unmask and abolish any trace of subversion in the industrial arena."

<sup>57</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 38.

<sup>58</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 39-40. Interestingly, this document also makes explicit mention of the internal dissension crippling the junta, and contrasts this inability to unite with the workers' capacity for organized resistance. "Los obreros no lograron a ser aplastados y desde el mismo golpe vienen acrecentando sus luchas para defender sus conquistas; mientras que la patronal - producto de la crisis económica y del plan de Martínez de Hoz - se va dividiendo cada vez más y esto se traduce en una división dentro de las fuerzas armadas y en parálisis del gobierno militar."

<sup>59</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folios 39-40.

solidarity, but not to leftist tricks.”<sup>60</sup> The declaration is signed “Workers of Mercedes-Benz Argentina.” While we cannot determine exactly who the authors of this counter-statement were, it does help us hypothesize about the union bureaucracy’s interpretation of the nation, and what they saw for the future of Argentina at that moment. As James has shown for the 1960s, once institutionalized, the majority of Peronist labor leaders did what they had to in order to maintain their power.<sup>61</sup> If actually authored by SMATA officials, the blanket denunciation of *Política Obrera* would thoroughly encapsulate this attitude. Throughout the *Proceso*, labor leaders often tried to walk the fine line between fighting for their members and displaying loyal to those in power.<sup>62</sup> At the very least, this response potentially sheds some light on the SMATA bureaucracy’s position towards the ongoing struggle between competing visions of Argentina’s future.

### III. The Inheritance of Authoritarianism

The battle to redefine the limits of citizenship reached its apogee of intensity between 1976 and 1980. The *Proceso*’s efforts offered a brief glimpse of an Argentina where organized labor lacked the standing and influence to function as an alternative site of power, parallel to the state. Not coincidentally, this period also marked the acme of the military regime’s authority. By the time Viola assumed the presidency in 1981, the economic crisis brought on by Martínez de Hoz’s policies had eliminated almost any semblance of legitimacy that the Armed Forces had

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<sup>60</sup> Archivo DIPBA, Mesa B, Factor Gremial, Carpeta 78, Legajo No. 1, Folio 41. The authors of this response actually were not far off in alleging a Marxist hand in the fliers found at the Mercedes factory. The flier, *Política Obrera*, was an organ of the Trotskyist *Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores* (PST), founded by Nahuel Moreno.

<sup>61</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*.

<sup>62</sup> See Pablo Pozzi, “Argentina 1976-1982: Labour Leadership and Military Government,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (May 1988). While Pozzi’s treatment of workers as individuals, and their relationship to the state, might benefit from a less homogenizing approach, this account of the interaction between the labor leaders of the *Proceso* period and the military government offers an interesting picture of how the Peronist union hierarchy attempted to maintain control even as they faced repression from the state and increasing unrest from their base.

been able to maintain to that point.<sup>63</sup> The history of Mercedes-Benz Argentina during this period of upheaval and attempted transformation illustrates the general contours of the contest over the remaking of the nation, as the labor and economic policies of the dictatorship were instituted, enforced, ignored, and subverted in accordance with various actors' exigencies. It further reminds us that broad strokes, though useful in articulating the larger picture, can also obscure the smaller details. These details do more than just contribute the nuance and shading that deepen our understanding of the past. They also help rescue individual actors from characterizations that threaten to elide the similarities and differences that defined them, be they workers, managers, union bureaucrats, or state officials. Examining particular moments of conflict and considering the actions of all sides can offer remarkably diverse interpretive possibilities. The challenge, as always, lies in finding the appropriate balance.

As a conclusory exploration, the question of the *Proceso's* legacy seems an appropriate topic. The military ultimately proved incapable of achieving its primary objective; the consensus that governed state-labor dynamics in Argentina from the time of Perón through to the 1970s largely withstood the various attacks leveled at it by the regime. Attempts to redraw the nation with the goal of excluding particular behaviors and persons predictably met with resistance, yet that resistance remained mostly bounded within the parameters determined by the junta, at least over the first three years. Even so, those workers that fought back over wages, working conditions, and representation proved strong and committed enough to exploit the spaces made available by Argentina's continued economic deterioration and the Armed Forces' inability to agree on a course of action. Given the chaos that marked the final years of the dictatorship,

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<sup>63</sup> For a concise account of the collapse of the *Proceso's* project in the first years of the 1980s, see Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, 367-374.

especially the disastrous Malvinas escapade, it would be natural to deem the military's experiment a failure.

Yet, nearly forty years after the establishment of the *Proceso*, contemporary Argentina appears to have far more in common with the vision espoused by the military than it does with that of the workers. The broad implementation of neoliberalism throughout Latin America has not spared Argentina, and the changes have been extreme. While organized labor arguably remains stronger in Argentina than anywhere else in the hemisphere, as compared to the golden era of Peronism, or the years of the Peronist resistance during the 1950s and 1960s, the decline has been precipitous. The privatization of the state sector reached its culmination in the 1990s, during the presidency of Carlos Menem, as he accomplished through democracy what Martínez de Hoz was unable to realize despite the backing of a dictatorship. Moreover, Argentina's integration into the global market not only crippled domestic manufacturing, but also created a new subset of the working class, flexibilized laborers without safety nets or support systems. Lacking the recognition and institutional structure of the trade union system, these workers frequently found themselves at the mercy of the open market during the 1980s and 1990s. This marginalization of large sectors of the population engendered new socio-political dynamics, with former citizens being shunted to grey areas of semi-enfranchisement. At times these groups reemerged in other guises to demand recognition; among the most well-known are the *cartoneros* of Buenos Aires.<sup>64</sup> However, frequently they were simply forgotten in this limbo, and their rights and voices gradually disappeared.

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<sup>64</sup> For more on the *cartoneros* as an example of this phenomenon, see their website: "Cartoneando, (MTE)," <http://www.cartoneando.com.ar>. Among their principal goals, they describe the pursuit of social and labor rights similar to those enjoyed by other trade unions. Their statement declares, "We fight to formalize our work, so that there will be no differences between the included and the excluded." ("¿Quiénes somos? MTE Cartoneros," accessed April 27, 2013, <http://www.cartoneando.com.ar/quienes>). This language echoes the very debates that took place during the dictatorship, and confirms the need to reconsider the legacy of the *Proceso*.

In his classic work *Social Policy in the Third Reich*, Tim Mason argued for the importance of studying class conflict from above, from the perspective of the dominators.<sup>65</sup> The proof of class conflict, he noted, is found not only in resistance from below but also in the amount of attention those in power dedicate to these questions. This project has sought to offer an alternative interpretation for the emergence of working class opposition in Argentina during the most recent military dictatorship, one that does not hinge on assumptions of an innate revolutionary consciousness. Instead, I have tried to show how larger structural concerns both opened spaces for resistance and set their boundaries. While the brutality that backgrounded the regime's project cannot, and indeed must not, be overlooked, we must also acknowledge that though the circumstances were harsher, the objectives of the *Proceso* were not so different from those being carried out contemporaneously by President Reagan in the United States, Prime Minister Thatcher in Britain, or any number of other leaders throughout the Americas and Western Europe. In some sense, then, my own aim has been to recover what Ursula Vogel has described as “‘normal’ politics (albeit under abnormal circumstances).”<sup>66</sup>

The final legacy of the *Proceso* remains unclear, and might well stay that way for the foreseeable future. The dearth of scholarly engagement with the military's project up to this point does not indicate that the questions surrounding the dramatic shift in Argentina's political trajectory have garnered as much interest as those surrounding violence, trauma, and memory. While this is not meant as a critique of the Argentine “memory industry” that has emerged over the past two decades, it does seem that until historians begin to pay more attention to other aspects of the period, our understanding of this era's historical and contemporary significance will remain unfortunately one-dimensional. The impact of the *Proceso*'s labor and economic

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<sup>65</sup> Timothy Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the National Community*, transl. by John Broadwin (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993). 288.

<sup>66</sup> Ursula Vogel, Introduction to *Social Policy in the Third Reich*, Timothy Mason. x.

policies echoes through to our contemporary moment. Although Videla, Martínez de Hoz, and the Armed Forces might have lost the battle, it may well be that they won the war.

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