

COMMENT ON

“WE WANT US ALIVE” - ARGENTINA’S FEMINISMS AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

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1: Two activists from the Mujeres Públicas collective post a sign in Downtown Buenos Aires in March 2009. The signs read: “We killed 384 women in 2008, in 2009, we are going for more. The Argentinean state together with clandestine abortions.”

On a warm end-of-summer day in March of 2009, we, Mariana and Ana, were standing at a busy intersection of Avenida de Mayo and Callao streets in Buenos Aires, waiting for people to congregate for yet another rally in the ongoing struggle for sexual and reproductive rights for women. We were calling for the legalization of abortion, which is

still regarded a criminal act in Argentina. The rally would traverse the busy microcentro (the financial and administrative district) before finishing at the Plaza de Mayo, the epicentre of most national protests in front of the Presidential House. We were joining *mujeres públicas* (“public women”), a collective that uses artistic interventions to raise awareness about gendered violence. When the rally began, we were a couple hundred in number – mostly women’s groups and a few unions – and were able to block traffic in the busy streets. As we advanced, we posted signs with statistics regarding the number of women who had died during clandestine abortions in 2008

(384 registered). The passers-by observing the march stopped and read the signs, nodding in appreciation but not joining. Maybe they felt the topic was too specific, a non-urgent matter in a country with more “serious” problems such as the history state violence. When we reached the Plaza de Mayo, our focus was on two locations: the presidential house and the National Catholic Cathedral. The two buildings are non-coincidentally close to each other, their proximity is another indication of the political imbrication of the institutions. In the plaza some of us painted graffiti, others made a circle and chanted the campaign slogan, “birth control to prevent abortion, legal abortion to prevent death.” The Plaza felt big. In Buenos Aires political mobilization in the streets is a common occurrence, rallies of tens of thousands of people happen several times every year, but this march was not one of them. The next day, the demonstration was only referred to as minor news, a footnote in the political events of the week.

Fast forward to March 2015. One of us, Mariana, emerged from the subway station at the same intersection we had met in 2009. This time the call was to rally against the growth of femicides and after the brutal killing of a teenage woman. This time Mariana did not have to wait for people to gather for the number of marchers was so big that the traffic of several avenues was completely interrupted. Indeed, it was a real significant challenge to get to the meeting point for the rally, only 400 meters away. To reach the Congress Plaza, she had to push through a sea of people for an hour. In that walk, she saw the crowd was quite different from 2009, including as it now did a multitude of men, women, families, youth, and children from very different social backgrounds. She finally made it to the National Congress, the meeting point of the rally. The place was chosen to specifically demand new legislation, and to signal the state’s responsibility in allowing women’s deaths through inaction. According

to the media, that day 300,000 people stood and overflowed the Plaza Congreso.

If the marches can be considered as symptoms, moments of conversion and regeneration of larger processes, how did this shift from a demonstration of 200 people in 2009 to one of 300,000 only six years later took place? What events made the mobilization of thousands of women in the streets and the birth of the *Ni Una Menos* (Not one less) collective possible?

In this piece we explore some of the simultaneous processes that lead to this political transformation of the feminist and women’s movement in Argentina. We situate our focus in the tension between the strong forms of grassroots political organization of feminist and women’s movements, their relative marginality in the larger political field until recently, and the massive emergence in 2015 with *Ni Una Menos*. We identify femicide as a key point of convergence that brought about not only cross-sectional alliances but also a massive engagement of the whole social fabric. As Melisa Scarcella (2017) puts it, the slogan that names the movement: *Ni Una Menos* (Not one less) is simultaneously a claim for unity “against machismo violence”, and a cross-cutting expression of a surfeit of gender violence. As such it has a comparable political significance of “Never Again” slogan that defined the Human Rights movement in the 1980s post-dictatorship Argentina. Femicide has thus constituted a “Human rights movement of and for women” (Scarcella 2017). Furthermore, the movement brought about new forms of politics and international solidarities, such as inspiring premises of the Women’s March in Washington, and whose last action was to organize an International Women’s Strike.

Within a larger political field, gender inequalities in Argentina have long been considered far from a central concern for the state, political parties, media and even progressive social movements. Although the

feminist and women's movements have been part of the world vanguard since the late 19th century, through anarchist worker organizations (see Molyneaux 2003), they never led to a massive mobilization until the first massive rally *Ni Una Menos* in 2015. Voting rights for women, for example, had been a site of struggle since the early 20th Century. But when Eva Peron granted those rights in 1947 that conquest was presented as a Peronist-only achievement absorbing women's struggles to a Peronist party politics and thus weakening protagonism and participation. Moreover, in the 1990s when assemblies of the student movement were in full force, it was not uncommon for us to hear critiques that posited gender as "dividing the bases of political mobilization", or as being part of "imported North American discourses". And yet, there were strongly gendered dimensions to these social movements and within on-going genealogies.

Gender politics and women's and gender nonconforming people have played a major role in politics. As in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, in Argentina Feminism, both as an analytical lens and a form of politics, was first related to academic debates that resurged in the post-dictatorship period in the mid-1980s. This Feminism was linked with a middle-class leftist activism whose central concerns were reproductive rights and a fight for gender equality. In the late 1980s, this urban feminism made explicit efforts to connect "movements of women" that organized as women but with political objectives not explicitly articulating gender claims. As Gago (2017) and Di Marco (2010: 53) suggest, these other sources were the human rights movement, and women's action and leadership in popular organizations. These three streams are also related to specific periods. In the late 1970s during the last political dictatorship which deployed state terror as a method of social control, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, (lit Mothers of Plaza the Mayo) was one of the only forms of organization

challenging state violence. They are the mothers of the people kidnapped by the state, and disappeared (most were killed and their bodies disposed in common tombs or thrown into the sea). They broke the fear of mobilization by publicly claiming for the "alive apparition" of their daughters and sons, and became a vanguard of civil organizing and Argentina's human rights movement. On a different line, in the 1990s, and during ferocious neoliberal adjustment policies that pushed vast sectors of the population into poverty, women from popular sectors became protagonists of the *Piqueteros* movement, the unemployed movement. This is a national horizontal movement, composed of laid-off workers whose main form of protest is to picket national roads and highways across the country. When the demands allowed unemployed people to obtain small state subsidies, the different sections of piqueteros started pooling those monies into the movement in each of its territorial units, to create autonomous forms of subsistence. Women played central roles in this novel and horizontal form of organizing, running soup kitchens, organizing collective purchases and small businesses. Meanwhile, feminists' fight for the abortion right reached a peak with the creation in 1988 of the "Commission for the Right to Abortion" which organized the Campaign for the Right to Abortion, responsible for the march we joined in 2009. Their collective actions continue today within and outside the *Ni Una Menos* mobilization.

The place of convergence and a key antecedent to *Ni Una Menos* is the Annual National Women's Meetings. Women with links to the three threads of activism have organized these meetings in different cities every year since 1986. The meetings have joined left wing feminists from the middle class, popular feminism, and movements of (peri)urban, peasant and indigenous women. The meetings began as small gatherings joining a couple of organizations together to discuss women's citizenship rights, sexual and

reproductive rights, violence and gender inequalities. Every year they grew from a number of the hundreds to thousands of participants to reach 60,000 women in the last meeting in 2016. Beyond deliberation, the meetings became a space for generating joint political strategies both independently and within state politics, enabled to generate strong demands for institutional reforms and state policies to address gender violence and reproductive rights, among others.

2015

One of the main catalysts of the massive June 2015 rally that Mariana joined was a new awareness of and mobilization around femicide, the killing of women because of their being women. The months previous to the march feminist organizations had circulated news accounts using social media about the violent killing of teenagers, framing these incidents in terms of gender violence and not simply crimes of "passion". According to unofficial statistics from a feminist NGO circulating via social media that year, there were 1850 femicides in Argentina between 2008 and 2015. Femicide thus became identified as a problem with roots in patriarchal relations, a symptom of structural forms of violence. Women's and feminist organizations, social movements, political parties, and unions incorporated femicide into their vocabulary. The topic went viral through the social media hashtag #NiUnaMenos ("not one [woman] less").

The June demonstration that Mariana attended, was a result of a series of previous events. On March 16 of 2015, the body of the teenager Daiana García was found on the side of one Greater Buenos Aires highway, naked and inside a garbage bag. As part of a public commotion a group of artists and activists organized a "reading marathon" in a central Buenos Aires square. People gathered to read poems and writings by historic feminist figures. The readings also included texts by

women who had been victims of femicide in the last few years. This event intervened in the public space and consolidated the collective *Ni Una Menos*. The first *Ni Una Menos* march took place on June 3, 2015, in more than eighty cities in Argentina, including the rally in Buenos Aires that Mariana attended. As part of the event, public figures read a document with a series of demands directed to the State, including the creation of an official record of femicides, and the implementation of the Law on "Comprehensive Protection to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence against Women."

One year later, on June 3, 2016, a second march was held in the same place bringing together 200,000 people under the slogan "We want us alive." Organizations made new demands including the legalization of abortion and protecting against the murder and low-life expectancy of transwomen; they also directed critiques at the new neoliberal government of Mauricio Macri (who came to power in late 2015), responsible for drastic budget cuts and the defunding of reproductive health programs. In October, after the news of another femicide, *Ni Una Menos* and 50 other organizations called for another rally, once again massive. The official document released by event organizers further critiqued the criminalization of social protest, the abuse of women in prisons and the growth of precarious labour.

2017 reached another moment of massive mobilization: the Women's International Strike on March 8th, which redefined the strike as a common tool for women cross-sectionally and internationally. This strike also aimed to re-politicize International Women's Day (Gago 2017, Dillon 2017). While the effects of striking were different, it nonetheless became enabled collective action. For low-income women working in the informal economy, to striking meant they stayed away from subsistence activities in the family and within political movements. For employed women striking

called attention to gender-based disparities in income. For all women, to step out of the home signalled that we are still doing more housework and care-related labour than men. More importantly to stop working provided an opening. As Marta Dillon stated: “the strike is a moment to remove ourselves from capitalist time and to make time for ourselves, to force our political imagination and think about the world outside patriarchy”. “Free time” implies the possibility of imagining other lives, other connections, and other capacities of one’s bodies. The big step of this strike was thus probably the one of unifying, without homogenizing.

More than simply resonate with recent women’s mobilizations elsewhere, this movement has helped create specific links between them. In the collective letter calling for a strike to condemn Trump’s misogyny and defend women’s right under attack written by his administration, the authors – American activists and academics, including Linda Martin Alcoff, Nancy Fraser, and Angela Davis among others – define a feminism for the 99%, (in contrast to a corporate feminism), taking inspiration in the “Argentinian coalition Ni Una Menos”. The authors emphasize that the Ni Una Menos perspective “informs our determination to oppose the institutional, political, cultural and economic attacks on Muslim and migrant women, on women of color and working and unemployed women, on lesbian, gender nonconforming and trans women.” This is not just a moment of recognition, but rather a form of transversal connection, one where “global north” women can have horizontal and common goals with women in the “global south”. This convergence can be regarded as still in constitution and an open-ended future.

The convergence of multiplicity is of course not absolutely smooth. Shortly before the International Women’s Day Strike (8M) rally began, a statement entitled “Only Three Minutes” highlighted the misunderstandings

and the little dialogue that exists between feminist and indigenous activists in Buenos Aires. The document was signed by the First Nation’s Women’s Rally for the Good Life (FNWR), coordinated by Mapuche activist Moira Millán. This indigenous collective is recent, and consolidated through the organizing of a First Nations Women’s March in March 2015, which was attended by ten thousand people (Gómez, 2014). In the document, FNWR explained that they had requested 8M organizers to speak for “only 3 minutes” when reading the consensus document during the rally for the strike. The 8M organizers explained that they would not allow this time because FNWR had not participated in the previous organizing assemblies in which the document was produced through long deliberations. The indigenous women joined the 8M march nonetheless, and made clear their active engagement. The challenges for a convergence of indigenous and racialized women’s movements in the event resonates with the tensions in the Women’s March in Washington in February 2017 and its nonconvergence with the Black Lives Matter, indicating not only the “blind spots” of an urban feminism but also the different histories, trajectories, locations, urgencies, and forms of organizing of the different groups.

In spite of the challenges to generating even stronger forms of convergence, the movement has already generated multiple forms of social transformation. Legislations and institutional restructuring are following the slow temporalities of bureaucracy but have been started, which is an important achievement. Society as a whole has a language to identify and discuss “gender violence”. The notion that “femicide” is an extreme symptom of ubiquitous violence has triggered discussions and transformation in workplaces, barrios (neighbourhoods), and inside homes, which may trigger other forms of transformation. The convergence of the different movements in the organizing of the demonstrations – in

producing collective documents and taking over the streets together – is also generating changes within each of the movements through their new shared experiences and the connections between them. The shift in the rally's slogans from the urgency of “no one less”, to “alive and free,” “alive and debtless,” “alive and happy” that marked the most recent march on June 3, 2017 as we were writing this piece signals one more turn from survival to generating new forms of life together.

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