

The Argentine economic crisis of 2001 was the culmination of a much longer process of economic decline that many observers and commentators have attributed to the failings of the neo-liberal economic model as well as the specific failures of global institutions such as the IMF and of the national government to identify the source of the crisis and devise measures to contain it. The period leading up to 2001 saw significant increases in unemployment resulting in the first instance from the privatisation of utilities and state-run companies and subsequently to the collapse of enterprises. Consequently, it was estimated that in 2002, 50% of Argentines were living below the poverty line. From the perspective of 'society' a strong response to this situation ensued through various kinds of initiative: the occupation of failing factories and the establishment of workers' co-operatives, the emergence of trading networks that involved non-monetarised transactions of goods and labour, and the organization of the unemployed regionally and nationally in an effective movement of protest. The overall effect has been an extreme politicization of work and the economy.

The spiralling process of decline also prompted debates and reflections regarding the failings of 'the model' and explorations of alternative formulations for the relationships between state, society and the international community. These positions have been described as the Phoenix Plan, promoted by economists and political scientists and the Prometheus Plan, supported by the various movements within civil society (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2003). The first envisages a renewed role for the state in re-structuring the economy in the direction of greater transparency and efficiency, arguing for the compatibility of the welfare state and contemporary capitalism. The second calls for a more radical redefinition of the state as well as of the relationship between state and civil society, envisaging widespread participatory democracy and a radical opposition to (and search for alternatives to) the international financial institutions and the dominant economies.

In the event, what seems to be emerging in Argentina is a hybrid process, where elements of both of these projects come together and sometimes collide. Considerable research is being carried out with the movement of the unemployed and with the occupied factories. Another useful site from which to explore the different issues and perspectives relevant to the debates outlined above is the intermediary space of government supported yet independent organisations intended to support economic activity. One such organism is the National Institute for Industrial Technology. In 2002, the head of the Institute issued a statement designed to justify to its members and supporters the need to respond to the national crisis and the new challenges posed by globalization. The institute has its roots in the developmentalist policies of the 1940s and has historically supported national industries in relation to technological development and technical advice. In 2002 the entity employed 1200 people and contracted others through a system of centres located throughout the country. A key feature of the institute is the work of businessmen and scientists who, on a voluntary basis, provide advice and support specific initiatives within their area of expertise. For some, this is an important part of their self-identity as Argentine citizens and (in some cases, socialists). What the head of the Institute, Enrique Mario Martinez, was proposing was a change of emphasis away from research and

development of pathbreaking technological innovations and towards fomenting small-scale enterprises, largely derived from existing, largely precarious, activities, many of them family based. This was met with concern. For many members of the organism the shift was considered dangerous: could this result in the deployment of energies away from cutting-edge developments? If so, what possible consequences could this have for national industry and its already difficult task of competing on the international market?

In 2003 the Institute organized a conference, held in the ornate early 20th century building of the National Bank, where the Institute's efforts to support a range of small-scale enterprises were presented by a large number of panels constituted by the teams of workers, entrepreneurs and technical experts. The emphasis in most panels was on the efforts to work from the grass-roots, to understand local needs and markets and the capabilities already in place. From this position, the technicians role was to advise, for example with regard to health and safety and complying with regulations, especially in the food industry, or assist with the design of and/or training for low cost technological solutions. The crowds that listened attentively were composite and ranged from long-standing supporters of INTI, including well established scientists and businessmen, to a newer public of men and women from the outlying suburbs or the interior of the province, as new clients/entrepreneurs, for whom this was an entirely novel experience.

This paper will explore the tensions experienced in the midst of INTI with regard to the tensions experienced more widely as a result of the Argentine crisis, that is to say, the tensions between the global market, the pressures and requisites of globalization on the one hand, and internal priorities, in particular the problems of unemployment and of marginalisation on the other. These tensions also speak to the two models outlined by Petras and Veltmeyer (2003) and reflect other contradictions, all too often co-opted by political discourse, between the model of the factory based enterprise and the small-scale unit as sites of production and growth, employment and/or exploitation. The discussion anticipates some of the broader issues relevant to research due to be carried out in Argentina in October 2006, that will explore the social context of small-scale units and their relationship to INTI and the market, focusing in particular on the intersections and overlaps of personal, political and professional inputs of those concerned..