

**The Argentinean Satirical Press, Post the 2001 Economic Crisis: The Case of
*Barcelona***

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, the tabloid *Barcelona* (www.revistabarcelona.com.ar) has become the most controversial product of Argentinean independent press with a circulation of 17 thousand. A group of young, middle-class, professional journalists created it. They define themselves as operating like a “rock and roll band.” Their formula includes politically incorrect humor, constant parody, a critique of mainstream media (which implies a permanent evaluation of journalistic principles), and an agenda of fictional stories, which are defined by the daily Argentinean context.

The editors of *Barcelona*¹ describe their publication as a political magazine. Their use of radical humor and fake journalistic stories testify to society’s generalized unrest, disappointment and skepticism. With more than a hundred issues, this publication responds to the Argentine 2001 economic crisis and the evolution of a traumatized country that lost its faith. . Through in-depth interviews and textual analysis, this paper explores how this counter-hegemonic publication responded on several levels to the consequences of political, economic and the social crisis.

¹ For this research, the author interviewed Ingrid Beck, editor of *Barcelona*, at the newsroom of the magazine in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in September, 2006.

THE AMBIVALENT RELATION BETWEEN POWER AND THE PRESS

The Argentinean press has published fiction for decades. The bloody dictatorship that started with the military take over of 1976 maintained strong control over the press (despite the fact that mainstream media initially supported the coup that removed Isabel Peron from power). In their *Comunicado 19*, the military declared:

“Será reprimido con reclusión de hasta diez años, el que por cualquier medio difundiere, divulgare o propagare noticias, comunicados o imágenes, con el propósito de perturbar, perjudicar o desprestigiar las actividades de las Fuerzas Armadas, de Seguridad, o Policiales” (Diario La Prensa, March 24, 1976)

This warning was part of a state terrorism plan that led to one of the crudest Dirty Wars of the region, which culminated in approximately 30,000 “desaparecidos” (missing people), among them around one hundred journalists.

Ironically, the dishonest coverage of the Argentinean press contributed to the end of the dictatorship. During the Falkland Islands War (*Guerra de las Malvinas*, between Argentina and Great Britain) the news media reported as if true the military’s lies, generating an overwhelming amount of disinformation. So the military defeat in the war surprised the Argentinean public. It resulted in the beginning of the end of the military dictatorship in 1982, and in an “embarrassing discomfort for the media.” (Alves, 1997)

Raul Alfonsín became the president of the first democratic government after the military dictatorship. During his administration, the country suffered high inflationary

²“Those who disseminate—through any medium—news, communications, or images that perturb, prejudice or discredit the activities develop by the Armed Forces, Security or Police will be imprisoned up to ten years.”

rates that forced him to leave office before concluding his term. His successor, President Carlos Saul Menem of the Peronist party, took power in 1989 and brought economic stability to Argentina. The government fixed the Ley de Convertibilidad, which stopped inflation by pegging the Argentine peso to the US dollar at a rate of one to one. In this sense, Menem “turned Argentina into one of the most adequate markets of the periphery to attract speculative capital.” (Galafassi, 2002, 331)

As a result of the convertibility law, inflation dropped, price stability was achieved, and the value of the currency preserved. The plan encouraged international investment and public service state companies were sold to the local and transnational capital. Menem’s policies included tax exemptions, the privatization of the state-owned enterprises, industrial subsidies, the deregulation of financial and labor markets, the decentralization of collective bargaining and wages tied to productivity, the privatization of health, social security, and work accidents insurance, among others. (Dinerstein, 2003, 189) These neoliberal measures were supported by the majority of the diverse social classes, which reelected Menem for a second term. While the middle classes celebrated the ‘stability’ of prices without inflation, wealth was being concentrated in few social sectors, and interest payments for the foreign debt increased significantly committing most of the public resources to them. These situations lead to increasing levels of poverty and exclusion, and to a constant state of corruption.

Despite superficial well being among the middle class, Menem displeased many Argentines because his government became riddled by corruption. He faced an aggressive investigative press, in the best Watergate style. The most famous oppositional

journalist of this period, Horacio Verbitsky of the newspaper *Página 12*, denounced a series of irregularities and corruption, and published books on these topics³. In response, the government tried to intimidate the press with the threat of restrictive laws, suits, and attacks against journalists (Verbitsky, 1997). However, during this period the press reconciled with the Argentine audience. It adopted a watchdog role and readers considered it much more “reliable” than other national institutions.⁴

In 1999, the newly elected President Fernando de la Rúa faced a country where unemployment rose to a critical point, and Argentina entered a recession. When the economic crisis worsened, the middle class criticized government policies. In 2001, people began withdrawing large sums of money from their bank accounts causing a run on the banks. The government enacted a set of measures, which included the devaluation of the national currency (it ended the pegging of the Argentinean peso to the dollar). The infamous *Corralito* effectively froze all bank accounts, allowing only minor sums of cash to be withdrawn. This led to a popular insurrection that took its most critical point in the violent incidents of December 19 and 20, 2001. President De la Rúa declared a national state of emergency, when in Buenos Aires and some other large cities people took the streets in a popular protest known as the *cacerolazo* (banging pots and pans). Thousands, mainly middle-class Argentines, gathered in the historical Plaza de Mayo. During confrontations there between the demonstrators and the police five people died. More than 20 others died in other areas of the country. Their slogan was “Qué se vayan todos,”⁵

³ An essential book on Menem’s relation with the press during the nineties is *Un mundo sin periodistas. La tortuosas relaciones de Menem con la prensa, la ley y la verdad* (Verbitsky, 1997)

⁴ A study done from December 1993 to mid-1995 revealed that “almost 50 percent of the people polled considered the media to be reliable and very reliable. It was an outstanding result, especially when compared with the low confidence levels earned by labor unions (six percent), political parties, the judicial system (22 percent) and the Armed Forces (35 percent)” (cited in Alves, 1997)

⁵ Dinerstein (2003) elaborates on the diverse meanings and interpretations of the popular slogan “*qué se vayan todos*” as a condensation of Argentines frustration.

(“Out with them all”) and it not only included the political class, but also the mainstream press⁶. The press was no longer respected by the public. It was considered part of the institutional complex that brought Argentina to a critical situation, a business more committed to generating money than to play its watchdog role.

Within two weeks, several presidents took power and had to resign almost immediately. In January 2002, Eduardo Duhalde was elected as provisional president. At that time, according to the INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas), poverty included 57% of the population; extreme poverty was 27.5%, and unemployment 21.5%, all of these record levels in the country. The Argentinean media also suffered the crisis. From 1998 to 2002, the circulation of the Argentine press decreased by 36% (Rey Lennon, 2002).

Obviously, the crisis had a dramatic effect on Argentina’s middle class, which has a tradition of being the strongest and most educated in Latin America and enjoys a solid national identity. As one of the biggest economies in the continent with a European cultural heritage, “the myth of Great Argentina has played a significant role throughout the country’s history, and the middle classes have been particularly attached to it.” (Armony, 2005, 47) The middle class role is essential not only to understand the political, social and cultural responses to the crisis, but also the recovery process and the need of collective healing.

Argentina, with a population of 38.2 million people, records the literacy rate⁷ at

⁶ Vinelli (2004) gives several examples of counter-information and alternative communicational practices in the Argentinean context.

⁷ The definition of “literacy” varies from country to country. Most of the times, “literacy” means the

97.2 %. According to the latest World Bank Report (2006) the G.N.I (Gross National Income) per capita is US \$4,470. The economic crisis reduced the “middle class” to 52.3% of the population, according to the 2004 report by the CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe), which considers “middle class” those who earn between US \$1,100 and US \$10,000 per year.

By the end of 2002, the Argentinean economy began to stabilize due to a drastic devaluation of the currency. In 2003, President Néstor Kirchner was elected and since then the country has had a period of constant economic growth. At that moment, the first issue of *Barcelona* appeared.

A *BARCELONA* IN BUENOS AIRES

Because of the 2001 economic crisis, a great number of Argentineans wanted to leave the country. One of their main destinies: Spain. “People did not have jobs; they were waiting in lines at the embassies to get a visa to anywhere. Barcelona was considered a capital of art and many wanted to go there. We decided to make our *Barcelona in Buenos Aires*,” says Ingrid Beck, editor of the publication. And for the magazine they used as a slogan “a European solution for the problems of Argentineans.”

Nevertheless, the launching of the magazine was delayed, because in the middle of the crisis the price of paper increased constantly due to inflation. By the end of 2002, the editors took up the project again, and thanks to a family loan of 5,000 Argentinean

ability to read and write at elementary levels, but it does not necessarily indicate ease in navigating sophisticated written material.

pesos (around \$1,500 U.S. dollars) they published the first two issues. *Barcelona* was distributed in Buenos Aires and issues sold out. “When *Barcelona* appeared, the kioskos (newsstands) were still almost empty. With the crisis, many magazines suspended publication, and some disappeared. The people could barely afford to eat and a magazine was a luxury item,” says Beck.

After the third issue, *Barcelona* became a weekly supplement of the magazine TXT, which no longer came out. In 2004, they went solo again. Since then, it publishes every two weeks, and costs 2.90 pesos (around one U.S. dollar). *Barcelona* records a circulation of 17,000, distributed in several cities. Instead of advertising, the magazine survives thanks to readers.

THE CRITICAL HUMOR TRADITION

The first issue of *Barcelona* appeared on the streets of Buenos Aires at the end of April, 2003. Its cover summarized the public discourse of the previous two years: “*La Argentina se estaría yendo a la mierda*” (“Argentina might be going to hell”). Its formula has been a bitter critique of the establishment through a politically incorrect humor that questions the functioning of power in society. This critique focuses on all levels: local politics, international politics, religion, show business, sports, polemic laws, tragedies, sex, the dictatorial Argentinean past and the military repression, and social values in general.

Followers of the famous French tabloid *Charlie Hebdo*, *Barcelona* has also been

likened to *The Onion*, and their style is close to other Latin American magazines, like *The Clinic* in Chile. Its predecessors in Argentina are defunct magazines like *Tía Vicenta*, *Todo por dos pesos*, and especially *Humor*, a satirical magazine founded in 1978 and published during the military dictatorship. It did critical coverage and was a space of resistance, creativity, and expression⁸. From a different perspective, other important Argentinean referent is *Página 12*. Founded in 1987 by famous Argentinean journalist Jorge Lanata, this newspaper began with 12 pages, a left wing inclination, an intelligent use of humor, and included articles by a select group of writers. While *Página 12* became one of the current mainstream newspapers and softened its critical coverage, it left an important mark in the Argentinean history of journalism.

Barcelona's news material (agenda) revolves around current affairs. It is inspired by the traditional media.

“The big media in Argentina do not practice good journalism. This is not necessarily linked to censorship. It has to do with laziness, business, and ineptness. For example, newspapers do not want to spend money, and do not hire skillful journalists. They have newsrooms full of interns who do not know what to do. The stories are poorly written. They do not inform well. This is why *Barcelona* is the parody of a newspaper. There are friends who get together to play Playstation; we used to get together to read *Clarín*, and laughed for hours,” says Beck.

THE DECALOGUE OF *BARCELONA*

“From the beginning, we decided to make a magazine that we would like to read, one that does not need advertising to subsist, and that does not require us to talk with anyone to write a story, nor to make an audio tape transcription. In fact, at the beginning

⁸ See “La revista *Humor* como medio de oposición a la dictadura” (Lafaurcade, 2004), or *La revista Humor y la dictadura* (Cascioli, 2005)

we did not even have a telephone,” the editor says.

Despite its apparent distance with the sources of information, *Barcelona* maintains a clear and critical dialogue with the principles of journalism. Journalist Adriana Amado summarized *Barcelona's* principles:

- If there is a doubt, reproduce the rumor (an opportune denial transforms into news what was nothing else than a false announcement).
- Oral and visual sex (any allusion to the hidden parts of human anatomy assures the attention of the audience)
- Freedom of conditional expression (news is something that might be occurring or not---and if it really occurs becomes breaking news. For this, we always have conditional verbs).
- The certainty of the common place and cliches (something obvious taken to the headlines and covers becomes a revelation)
- The use of the creative retouching (photoshop is a valid journalism tool)
- The strength of generalization (the opinion of a few is news if it is presented as a survey)
- The unnecessary quote (a declaration does not need to be relevant. If it appears between quote marks, it might look important).
- The pseudo-deep interpretation (a personal opinion might be presented as an essential contribution to humanity, when it pretends to uncover something that was never hidden).
- “It is said” (it is not relevant to quote the source. The important thing is to show

that something is being discussed a lot).

- The importance of social debate (violence in schools, corruption, new politicians, every debate should have no more than 5 minutes of analysis). (Amado, 2006, p20-21)

These are in general terms the critiques that, through parody, *Barcelona* makes of the mainstream local press. At the same time, these resources taken to the limit have become the magazine's style.

“WE ARE LIKE A ROCK BAND”

As in most of these publications, the members of the *Barcelona* team are a group of middle class friends who share the craft of non-conformist journalists. They worked for the rock magazine *La Garcia* and the cultural magazine *La Maga* (both were famous local independent publications that do not exist anymore). They also formed a rock and roll band, in a country where the so-called national rock has been widely linked to politics (Pujol, 2005).

They still retain a grain of the band philosophy. Only they write the contents for their magazine; they do not accept any collaboration. From public, they just publish letters to the editor, which include a lot of messages from people annoyed by *Barcelona*'s contents. In extreme cases, some angry readers took action, like a religious woman who bought many of the copies of an issue in which *Barcelona* announced the romance of the year between the Pope and Terri Schiavo (a comatose American woman whose case

promoted a debate on right to die).

There were other controversial topics, like those on the Middle East. A cover headline of Barcelona stated: "Tolerance. A Jew and a black decide the future of humanity." (*Barcelona* #88) A photo of Ehud Olmert, Prime Minister of Israel, and U.S. Condoleeza Rice appeared below it. The editors received many letters complaining about the cover, especially from the Argentinean Jewish community, and also from abroad. In the next issue (*Barcelona* #89), the editors published those angry letters, but also the ones that celebrated the cover as a criticism of Israeli and US foreign policies accused of promoting discrimination. In the same issue, the editors included interviews with alleged Palestinian "terrorists" describing "how they would like to explode."

This politically incorrect attitude treated similarly local debates, like the back-cover on abortion. An image of a pregnant girl with Down's syndrome holding scales as a symbol of justice appeared with the headline: "No to abortion. Yes to Justice." Other headlines on controversial topics were: "Bush says that Chavez is 'a terrorist who tries to impose his crazy foreign policies on the world';" "After the frustrated bomb attempt in London, members of Al Queda ask their leaders to resign: *qué se vayan todos*;" "European Union demands the immediate end of Israeli attacks over Lebanon, so they can begin with the great business of reconstructing Beirut;" "After quitting drinking, Lula would like to quit corruption;" "Kirchner: 'I made a fortune during the dictatorship to prevent the military from having that money,'" "U.S. prepares 100,000 Marines, several planes, and three nuclear bombs to help the democratic opening of Cuba;" "A new controversy on a recurrent topic: Should people swallow or spit out the semen?;"

“Spaniard leftist Zapatero rejects nationalization of gas and oil in Bolivia, but supports gay marriage;” “Exclusive interview with the prisoner with AIDS who sleeps in jail with Etchecolatz.”⁹

Despite its provocative content, the editors say that they have not suffered any sort of censorship. “It is maybe because powerful people do not take us seriously,” Beck says. However, the publication is commented upon, quoted and reviewed in the major mainstream media, like *Clarín*, *Página 12*, and others. It provides a reference point in the journalism environment and is news in itself.

The journalists who work with *Barcelona* developed an original use of colloquial language, crude expressions, and “porteño” slang. They published *Puto el que lee* (Editorial Gente Grossa, 2006), an illustrated 254-page dictionary of insults and local expressions. It is now in its second issue. With this language, *Barcelona* is trying to expand to other media. Editors already have a pilot program for radio and TV, which keeps their particular style of erasing the border between fiction and reality. “All the tradition of the Argentinean print press related to humor has a space for serious opinion. Usually people make an explicit distinction: here is humor, and here it is not. In *Barcelona*, we do not have those limits,” Beck says.

CASE DISCUSSION

Barcelona magazine responded on several levels to the consequences of political,

⁹ Miguel Etchecolatz is a former police agent that took part in the repression by the military dictatorship, and is now in jail. He was directly responsible for the so-called “Noche de los lápices”.

economic and the social crisis that Argentinean society suffered in 2001 and 2002. In spite of recovery (an economic reactivation of the country since 2003) the crisis left a structural and traumatic trace, especially among the middle class. It produced a general questioning of national institutions and the hierarchy of power. This criticism also targeted the traditional press, and the way it reported news. *Barcelona* condenses all these responses and worries through a satiric press that takes advantage of fiction to give an interpretation of a corrupt reality. They also question society's values and taboos through a politically incorrect humor on topics like sex, race, class, wars, and terrorism, among others.

When defining itself as a political magazine, this counter-hegemonic publication assumes a decisive critical attitude. The fictionalization of "the real" (understood as the news events) reflects skepticism about the official discourse and the construction of authorized voices in the public discussion. *Barcelona* reflects this through satire. It uses format, genres and resources of journalism, which also implies a critical dialogue with the practice of the profession in Argentina. It also demonstrates the thorough knowledge by *Barcelona's* editors about journalism principles: effective parody requires a solid understanding of how it "should be". *Barcelona's* parody expands indiscriminately to all newsworthy topics. All news is vulnerable to criticism.