

On Historical Exhaustion: Argentine Critique in an Era of “Total Corruption”

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Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

—Troilus and Cressida (I.iii. 122–27)

BANAL ILLEGITIMACY

Many observers have argued that the 2001–2002 Argentine financial crisis precipitated a crisis of legitimacy (e.g., Grimson 2004). Marked by the largest sovereign default in world history, a dramatic currency devaluation, and nationally unprecedented levels of unemployment (ca. 25 percent) and poverty (ca. 50 percent), these developments also entailed acute political disarray, with five men shuffling in and out of the presidency in two weeks. As the economic model of the 1990s revealed itself to have bankrupted the nation, and governmental agencies demonstrated themselves incapable of fulfilling even the most pressing social needs, Argentines from a variety of social backgrounds and ideological commitments demanded that the regime end. Expressed most concisely in the slogan, “Down with all of them! Let no one remain!” that demand was at once thrillingly radical and maddeningly vague, an underdetermined but wholesale repudiation of state and market institutions.

Only a few years later, the legacy of that repudiation had proved paradoxical. On one hand, the sense of imminent catastrophe had waned as day-to-day

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living had become, if not normalized, then routinized. On the other, there lingered a sense of banal illegitimacy, a widely shared sense that the veneer of quotidian routines belied a more fundamental condition of lawlessness and immorality. That sense of illegitimacy found its clearest and most common expression in the idiom of corruption. Politicians and financiers were the most widely condemned incarnations of enduring but discredited institutions. However, by the logic of contagion, the regular necessity of submitting to those institutions' bureaucratic procedures could generate a sense of complicity whenever people paid their taxes, voted, or visited the bank. Even interpersonal relations could assume a related taint of moral turpitude, as people wondered aloud whether a friend had taken advantage of them or, most surprisingly of all, whether they themselves had taken advantage of a friend. It was to this generalized mistrust that my acquaintances referred when they spoke of living in an age of "total corruption," in which social virtues had given way to the unavoidable prioritization of egoistic instrumentalism.

What could such a diagnosis have meant? This article examines the lived experience of "total corruption" among members of the Buenos Aires middle class, that sprawling and socioeconomically heterogeneous public within which so many Argentines continued to situate themselves despite decades of increasing impoverishment.¹ My analysis emphasizes both the productivity of such a diagnosis—the social relations that it produced—as well as the negativity it indexed—the social losses that it lamented. Rooted in an ethnographic exploration of corruption, conceptualized here as a folk category of critique, the argument develops a comparative approach to questions of mistrust, illegitimacy, and self-destruction as relatively understudied dimensions of social life.

To anticipate that argument: The diagnosis of total corruption marked a historical stance widely adopted within the post-crisis Buenos Aires middle class. That stance inverted the familiar idea that national history is a teleological progression toward a better future. In twentieth-century Argentina, as in so many places, that generic narrative, with its accompanying civilizational and racial imaginaries, had long posited the middle class as the protagonist of a national project oriented toward the telos of modernity. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the economic collapse seemed to many the death-blow to that long faltering project. In taking up this stance, people posited corruption as an internally driven and irreversible process of socio-moral decay that barred Argentina from ever living out its projected future. At the same time, for an impoverished middle class this historical stance constituted the grounds of an ambivalent but robust mode of national belonging, a conflictual but cohesive mode of quotidian sociality, and a discomfiting but lively structure of

¹ By "public" I mean a community constituted through attention to circulating texts (Warner 2005). People who fell beneath the poverty line were often loathe to abandon claims to middle-classness (see Kessler and Minujin 1995).

feeling. Thus, a particular historico-moral sensibility marked the idea of corruption, which bound together recent events with patterns of the *longue durée* in order to lament the impossibility of a national future: an alleged condition of historical exhaustion.

Consider a brief excerpt from a 2005 interview with a psychoanalyst who worked with middle-class analysts in Buenos Aires and poor ones in an exurban neighborhood a two-hour bus ride away. In the midst of a discussion about social inequality, Manuel turned his gaze to corruption. First, he criticized the “selfishness” of politicians and their alleged manipulation of poor voters. Both the poor and the politicians, he asserted, were responsible for Argentina’s “obscene social marginalization.” He went on, however: “It’s woven into our social fabric, but even more, the corruption is in our hearts.” Asked to clarify, he continued, “We [Argentines] are corrupt in our hearts. [...] In all our relationships we are corrupt. We’re corrupt with our parents and our children, with our friends and our [romantic] partners. We always look to take advantage. We have fake relationships. [...] We have the politicians we deserve.” Permeating every aspect of social life, corruption was the reason “Argentina cannot mature, can never be—as our dear President aspires—a normal country.”²

Manuel’s commentary began in the public realm, but moved fluidly into intimate relationships of romance and filiation. In Manuel’s telling, corruption described an egoistic but ultimately self-defeating orientation to the world. Because, he insisted, that orientation inheres within Argentine subjectivity, it erodes trust not only in public institutions, but also in the supposedly pre-political domain where trust should simply go without saying. For Manuel, corruption is not a problem to be solved: it is a compulsion toward self-destruction lodged in the interiority of even the speaker himself, whose insightful diagnosis effects no cure.³

Manuel was not alone in extending corruption in such directions and in bringing together, under a single, self-reflexively critical rubric, questions of interpersonal trust, political legitimacy, and national history. This essay interrogates the logic of that categorial extension and asks what it might say about not only the stance of historical exhaustion I have begun to sketch, but also other contexts in which people feel themselves locked in processes of self-destruction.

Pursuing that question requires an approach that does not define corruption, but attends to the pragmatics of its use. The plasticity of corruption

² “*Un país en serio*” was Néstor Kirchner’s 2003 presidential campaign slogan. My gloss emphasizes its normative connotations, but one could well translate it otherwise.

³ Psychoanalysis is a common therapeutic and discursive practice in Argentina, and readers will notice its traces in many of the commentaries I quote. For a fuller treatment of psychoanalytic and other hermeneutics of suspicion in post-crisis Buenos Aires, see Muir 2015.

demands that we treat it as a very particular kind of concept: as a folk category rather than a normative analytic, to be sure, but more specifically, as an evaluative category that inheres within and orients particular practices as well as discourses about those practices. Which practices and which discourses become oriented in this way is necessarily an empirical matter and varies according to both broad questions of socio-historical conditions and narrower questions of interactional frameworks. By neither affirming nor refuting claims like Manuel's, we can instead ask how those processes of orientation play out across different contexts. In other words, by resisting the temptation to define the concept, we can illuminate its actual, practical life—its career as an elastic category of critique that, while a “notoriously weak analytic concept” (Elyachar 2005: 113), is nonetheless a notoriously robust folk concept.

My analysis centers on three events. Each instantiated a different mode of apprehending, interrogating, and performing the stance of historical exhaustion implicated in that folk concept. All took place in Buenos Aires and its environs between 2003 and 2007 and involved people who assumed a middle-class footing. The first was an unsolicited confession offered up to me during an ethnographic interview. Here, the speaker framed her own career networking as an instance of a national propensity to exploit unfair advantages. The second event took place in my neighborhood supermarket, where a dispute over line etiquette precipitated collective outrage at the deterioration of civic decency. The third was a televised spectacle in which Diego Maradona boasted of cheating in the World Cup. That melodramatic revelation allowed the soccer star to celebrate himself as the glorious incarnation of national audacity. In each event, the recognition of corruption, and of the speaker's participation in it, grounded membership in a national public characterized by the putatively uncontrollable transgression of its own norms.

At first glance, the idea of corruption might not seem to obtain to any of these three events. Nonetheless, in each case people seized the opportunity to mobilize the category of corruption in the service of evaluative claims about self and other, individual and nation. While the valence of those claims varied, in each case people denounced corruption in the same breath as they voiced their complicity with it. To return to my earlier formulation, these events were *productive* in that they grounded membership in a national public. At the same time, they indexed a *negativity* that we cannot simply gloss over, for the logic of each event hinged on an historical experience of loss particular to the Argentine middle class.

That negativity—played out across the levels of interpersonal mistrust, institutional illegitimacy, and historical exhaustion—has had important consequences for the terrain of political possibilities in contemporary Argentina. I address those consequences in the conclusion, where I also sketch some of the methodological implications of my argument for other contexts. In moving toward that endpoint, the article takes three broad turns through the

conceptual, social, and historical dimensions of corruption. Across these terrains, it explores the dynamics of corruption as the evaluative category through which people grappled with a particular sociohistorical experience of self-destruction.

APPROACHING CORRUPTION

I would begin by emphasizing the polyvalence of corruption in post-crisis Buenos Aires. An abiding preoccupation of the middle class, but also a relevant term in the everyday conversations of the poor, corruption figured routinely as the culprit for any number of political, economic, and social ills, from the crisis itself to the nation's rising Gini coefficient, its crumbling transportation infrastructure, and its entrenched political dynasties. As to the term's referent, corruption certainly described former President Menem's (1989–1999) embezzlement of 60 million dollars from prison construction projects. It also easily encompassed his arms-smuggling ring, his laundering of drug-trafficking funds, and his eagerness to turn the privatization of state companies toward the enrichment of himself and his allies. Indeed, Menem and his neoliberal structural reforms stood in post-crisis Argentina as the very epitome of corruption, all the more so since his alleged crimes had gone unproven in a court of law.⁴ However, the category extended to the often unspoken favors between lawmakers and business elites and to those between politicians and poor voters.⁵ It named not only petty bribes but also tax evasion. It could describe employment secured through personal connections and even the subtle manipulation of loved ones. Popularly understood as a vicious and intractable problem responsible for the disintegration of social institutions ranging from democratic representation to the family, it was a category that, in its diffuse application, might have seemed to risk meaning nothing at all. Nonetheless, a tripartite logic cut across the otherwise sundry acts it encompassed and granted corruption a highly flexible, practical cohesiveness.

First, a decade's worth of bribery and clientelist scandals (to which I will return) grounded the concept of corruption in the illegitimate conversion of value between the fields of the economic and the political. That model proved iterable, since people commonly extended it to other social fields, such as the domestic, as in the nepotistic abuse of bureaucratic authority and even the strategic manipulation of familial sentiment. A social worker, for example, once described one of her clients to me as "corrupt: She uses her

⁴ In 2013 (well after the period this essay examines), Menem was convicted of arms smuggling but not of other alleged crimes.

⁵ Although dismissals of clientelism as corrupt are closely associated with the middle class, they are also commonplace among poor people in Argentina. Considerable evidence suggests these critiques are correlated with the speaker's social distance from political brokers, not with socioeconomic status per se (see Auyero 1999).

son's success to gain influence over the other mothers." A first feature of corruption, then, was the self-serving and unsanctioned conversion of value from one social field to another.

Second, unlike straightforward appropriation, corruption required the graceful imitation of legitimate practices, a requirement people indicated with terms like "fake," "counterfeit," and "dishonest." My interlocutors made clear that euphemisms such as "help" and "favors" were crucial to the felicity of a corrupt transaction. So, too, was the appropriate selection of person, request, and mode of reciprocity.⁶ Corruption therefore demanded ongoing interpretive labor to discern the logic of even trivial interactions. "Don't trust anyone," an unemployed daughter of former factory workers warned me wryly, in reference to a revoked birthday party invitation. Over and over again, people corrected my glaring naïveté about the unfathomable depths of quotidian life.

Third, people insisted that false and illegitimate transactions did not merely coexist alongside their true and legitimate counterparts. Because corrupt practices imitated legitimate ones, they had penetrated the social world and consumed it from the inside out. The logic of illegitimate and egoistic instrumentalism had become not merely common, people declared, but unavoidable. As a restaurateur explained to me, "The bribes were absolutely necessary to open the restaurant. If I didn't pay, the situation would be one of unfair competition." The instrumentalization of the world appeared so complete as to compel complicity with its logic, threatening what one sociologist called "the disappearance of society" (Simonetti 2002: 47).

Thus, the logic of corruption granted it a particular historical directionality: its origin may have been inscrutable (people routinely wavered between culturalist and individualist explanations, often in a single utterance), but its advance through the body politic was supposedly inexorable.

In considering corruption corrosive to projects of political legitimacy, economic welfare, and social cohesion, my interlocutors echoed a consensus consolidated over the past several decades among international governing bodies, NGOs, and the academic analyses that inform their policies. That consensus is epitomized by Transparency International, a global monitoring agency, the founder of which has declared, "corruption is one of our epoch's capital sins" (Eigen 2004: 15). Understood to erode civic trust and regime legitimacy and to inflate the costs of business transactions, corruption does not appear in these globally popular accounts as a problem of mere logistics or incentives; rather, it violates universal moral standards. That consensus has found fertile ground in Latin America, where academic and popular analyses alike routinely

⁶ Predictably, delayed reciprocity usually occurred across relatively minimal social distances and further bound the parties together, while prompt reciprocity, usually monetized, both presumed and entailed shorter-lived transactions between parties at greater social distance.

lambast machine politics and quid-pro-quo relationships between political and business elites. In post-crisis Buenos Aires such criticisms routinely presupposed a middle-class footing, an implied position of ethical clarity, from which elites and poor alike were allegedly alienated.

One corpus of anthropological literature has challenged that consensus by reframing certain favors, prestations, and alliances as culturally attuned forms of sociability and by emphasizing the disjuncture between bureaucratic-administrative and socio-cultural norms, especially in postcolonial contexts (Gupta 1995; Hasty 2005; de Sardan 1999). This literature joins a chorus of social scientists who have foregrounded the historical and sociocultural specificity of normative frameworks associated with processes of state formation that obtained in modern northeastern Europe, but were absent in other contexts, including Argentina (Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 2004; Corradi 1985; Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Mbembe 2001; O'Donnell 2007). These analyses parochialize bureaucratic norms and reject facile assumptions of criminality, aberrance, and dysfunction. However, the Argentine case disallows a ready distinction between bureaucratic and cultural ethics. Instead, as we saw in Manuel's remarks, a category of bureaucratic dysfunction seems to have extended to include even the vagaries of the human heart.

A related literature resituates the concept of corruption with respect to its contrastive partner, transparency (Jackson 2009; Mazzarella 2006; Morris 2004). These analyses frame transparency and corruption as the mutually constitutive poles of a far-reaching regime of visibility, the tensile logic of which undergirds the political and economic projects that corruption's critics seek to safeguard (Ferre 1999; Sanders 2003). In Argentina, that regime of visibility was crucial to the historical transition from the last military dictatorship (1976–1983)—marked by state terrorism, arbitrary “disappearances,” and authoritarian decrees—to democratic rule, and it has since been integral to pursuits of justice and human rights (Barrerra 2013; Gandsman 2009). However, when it came to corruption in post-crisis Buenos Aires, calls for transparency, accountability, and publicity resonated poorly. Instead, as Manuel's remarks suggest, a regime of visibility seems to have imploded, leaving behind only the negative pole of corruption.

These works all share a concern with demonstrating the systematicity of corruption. That emphasis is welcome, because understandings of corruption tend to suffer from both methodological individualism and its inverse, culturalism. Both obscure the reasons corruption has become an object of especially intense academic scrutiny and popular concern around the world in recent decades, when structural adjustments and related transformations have destabilized extant political-economic institutions and opened vast extralegal spaces of possibility for appropriation and influence (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Roitman 2004; Smart 1993). The exploitation of those extralegal spaces of possibility has set in motion new dynamics of political and economic inequality in

places ranging from the United States to Brazil, from the European Union to China and the former Soviet Union (Gledhill 2003; Humphrey 2001; Osburg 2013; Shore 2005). Confronting those dynamics, analysts have illuminated the mechanisms through which corrupt practices become commonplace, with a host of negative effects that are distributed unequally, typically placing the greatest burden on those with the fewest resources (Bähre 2005; Gupta 2014; Smith 2008). Others, in parallel fashion, have shown how anti-corruption movements have become the culturally appropriate vehicle for combating those intensified inequities, a vehicle that opens up possibilities of critique while simultaneously constraining the grounds of critique by reasserting the normative oppositions (i.e., between the economic and the political, the private and the public) presumed in the first place by the neoliberal wave of structural reforms (Ansell 2014; Lazar 2005; Schneider and Schneider 2003). As a result of this dialectic, as Morris has argued with respect to contemporary Thailand, “wherever the discussion of social inequality was once explained by reference to the structural inequities inherent in [...] capitalism, it has been replaced by a rhetoric of transparency and corruption” (2004: 227). The discourses and practices of corruption in post-crisis Argentina partook of just these sorts of systematicities (see Astarita 2014). However, they also require attention to a rather different systematicity—that of self-destruction.

Lomnitz has argued that analyzing corruption requires attending to three levels: the functions and interests corrupt practices meet; the circulation of discourses of corruption; and the moral sensibility it occasions or, “how discourses and practices of corruption affect personal attitudes, definitions of self, and how corruption is cleansed or avoided” (1995: 38). This essay dwells on the last question, for two reasons. First, as Granovetter has remarked, the problem of normative judgment “has been given surprisingly little attention” in studies of corruption (2007: 166–67). Second, the moral sensibility indexed by corruption was remarkable in post-crisis Buenos Aires. People took up a category normally used to condemn dysfunctions in public bureaucracies in order to name breaches of interpersonal ethics. People mobilized a concept normally reserved for castigating others in order to fault themselves. They attempted to “cleanse or avoid” that moral taint, but routinely judged those attempts insufficient in the face of an insidious force that had infected every part of the body politic. Here, then, the practices and discourses of corruption evoked a complex experiential logic in which people understood themselves to be the agents of their own undoing.

Couched in these terms, it is only logical to turn to the study of witchcraft.

WITCHCRAFT AND RADICAL NEGATIVITY

A dominant motif in anthropology’s century-long engagement with witchcraft has been its capacity to display, actualize, and police social norms. From this

perspective, witchcraft is a cultural idiom through which a given society expresses its organizational structure and enforces the values its members must adopt if that structure is to endure (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Beliefs about witchcraft, discursive practices such as gossip and accusation, and procedures of adjudication all, then, perform the labor of sanctioning certain behaviors and curbing the particular temptations that a given society provokes but cannot abide (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Wilson 1951). This is especially true with respect to the (de)legitimation of historically shifting modes of authority and accumulation, where witchcraft provides a potent way for people to negotiate the distribution of power and wealth and to explore the relation between hidden and visible modes of (re)production (Geschiere 1997; West 2005). As such, witchcraft has long served as a privileged window onto a social world, its moral philosophy, and its political disputes, as well as a privileged site for cross-cultural comparative analysis (Austen 1993).

At times deemphasized in such analyses are the terrifying dynamics of witchcraft, a theme that enjoys pride of place in histories of early modern European witch-hunts. As these latter accounts make clear, witchcraft is not (necessarily) a reliable mechanism of social reproduction, but (also) a desperate means of struggling with social dislocations and transformations (Levack 1987; Scarre and Callow 2001). It is in such contexts that witchcraft trials take on a self-perpetuating logic, with the search for the guilty expanding uncontrollably (Behringer 2004; Robischeaux 2009). Because that process plays out through intimate networks of kith and kin, it violates deeply held intuitions about trust and obligation—hence the recourse in the literature to terms like “craze” to evoke the sense of antisocial, irrational violence that infuses both the alleged actions of the witch as well as attempts to quell those actions (Hutton 2004; Trevor-Roper 1969).

The literature on witchcraft is copious. Nonetheless, even so brief a sketch as this brings into view parallels with corruption. As with witchcraft, the discourses, practices, and morality that comprise corruption offer key insights into the production and negotiation of normative frameworks, particularly those that orient the fields of politics and economics (Bratsis 2003; Corbin 2004). Also as with witchcraft, because institutions of trust are at stake, it incites the mobilization of tremendous energies in efforts to counteract it (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Hetherington 2011).

There is another dimension to witchcraft that is especially relevant to corruption as it figured in post-crisis Buenos Aires, and that is the logic of what I call, following Munn, “radical negativity.” In developing a model of the practices through which people produced and transformed value on the island of Gawa (Papua New Guinea) in the late 1970s, Munn situates the witch as the emblem of intense egoism and secretive rapaciousness. Feeding a boundless appetite, the Gawan witch’s predation exceeds simple theft. Rather, it entails the mimicry of the dialectic of food transmission and consumption, that

prototypical set of practices that constitutes Gawan self and society. Witchcraft produces a “destructive, subversive value” that emerges out of but exceeds that normal dialectic of positive and negative value (1992: 13). As such, witchcraft constitutes “a hidden world of its own [...] that dissolves and disorders the overt [...] order of Gawan existence” (ibid.: 213). Thus, the witch’s limitless greed constitutes a form of cannibalistic reciprocity that threatens to “consume the community’s capacity to exist” (ibid.: 227).

In recent years, a handful of other analyses have approached witchcraft in congruent ways. Interrogating the killing of scores of alleged witches in post-Suharto Indonesia, for example, Siegel rejects the functionalist tenet that the “truth” of witchcraft lies in its capacity to safeguard social functions, just as he refuses the notion that witchcraft names “sources of violence that serve no social purpose” (2006: 1, 30). Transcending that opposition, Siegel argues that witchcraft points to “a violence that inheres in the social and that turns against it” (ibid.: 2). Neither reaffirming the social nor exemplifying that which lurks beyond its borders, witchcraft names “a negativity that [...] produces no community and yet has effects” (ibid.: 4). In related fashion, Geschiere draws on Freud and Simmel to locate post-Cold War Cameroonian witchcraft in the most intimate of domains, where it amounts to an eruption of mistrust, jealousy, and ill will that threaten “to become all-pervasive and ‘run wild’” (2013: 100). In terms that resonate with both Siegel’s and Munn’s, Geschiere argues, “The implicit message of [witchcraft is] the warning that seeds of destruction are hidden inside social relations as such, even though these are vital for any human undertaking” (ibid.: xv). Similarly, Piot frames witchcraft in contemporary Togo as an ambivalent way of grappling with the inequalities, opacities, and transformations of contemporary forms of power and wealth, which inspire both “admiration and critique” (2010: 127).

Together, these analyses posit a radical negativity that inheres within and threatens to consume sociality itself. Named “witchcraft,” that negativity is at once inextricable from and yet destructive of everyday social relations. It does indeed occasion efforts to reassert transgressed norms and reconsolidate social forms, but it exceeds the dialectic of social reproduction. Conjuring a powerful and uncanny realm, witchcraft arises out of, imitates, and threatens legitimate practices of exchange, recognition, and trust. Witchcraft, then, is not asocial; it is a self-destructive mode of sociality, a way of being that imperils its own conditions of possibility.

Like witchcraft, corruption in post-crisis Buenos Aires named a mode of radical negativity. With this concept, people grappled with the intuition that they harbored within themselves an uncontrollable force, at once foreign and yet deeply familiar, that threatened to erode the very grounds of sociality. The following sections trace three progressively more robust but incomplete attempts to, in Lomnitz’s phrasing, “cleanse” people of that force.

THE CORRUPTED SELF

Throughout fieldwork, in casual conversations and formal interviews, friends, acquaintances, and informants offered innumerable—and, at first, utterly surprising—confessions of their corruption. In the midst of parsing blame and victimhood for societal ills, my interlocutors turned their critique back upon themselves. Confessing their own wrongdoings and comparing themselves to the very politicians they had just been denouncing, they offered themselves up to me as the morally fallen instantiations of a corrupt society. In so doing, they framed their articulations as the profoundly private unveilings of a painful truth about a society in which basic orienting frameworks had been upended, each individual had become compelled to act counter to the common good, and the very possibility of sociality was threatened.

One such confession occurred during a 2007 interview with a thirty-seven-year-old woman who worked as a social worker at a foundation that offered cultural activities, a soup kitchen, and other services to poor people in Buenos Aires. Seated in the kitchen of her modest apartment in a comfortably middle-class neighborhood of the city, Ana was describing the ways the crisis had changed her job: The dramatic increase in the number of people seeking help. The sight of well-educated people unable to buy food, much less find a stable job in their fields. The way each encounter would provoke anxiety about her own situation and the difficulty of realizing the future she had imagined for herself.

All this had an identifiable cause, she proclaimed: “The real problem is corruption. You probably won’t understand, because you’re from the First World, from the U.S., but here the political class is completely corrupt, and that’s the fundamental problem.” Outraged, she went on to explain how illegitimate alliances between big business and the “political class” had sold off the country’s “patrimony,” destroying the nation’s productive potential and throwing millions into poverty-induced dependence on the meager hand-outs offered by those same politicians. “They destroyed us. They destroyed the country and they don’t care. We, the middle class, almost don’t exist today,” she said plaintively,

Only the ruling class and the humble people who sell their votes to survive. They don’t understand the true value of the vote. Today, middle-class values don’t have importance. I’m from a middle-class family, but not now. It’s a shame, but don’t pity us. We’re the corrupt ones. There’s a saying here: “Every country has the president it deserves.” We deserved Menem and we deserve the politicians we have now. They come from us. From all of us. They don’t exist in some far off place. They’re from here, and they reflect us.

She paused and looked down, took a sip of tea, and then looked up at me again, her jaw rigid and her eyebrows raised, as if challenging me to respond. Fumbling, I asked her what, then, she thought might be done. What kind of

change might be possible? “I don’t see any possibility of change,” she responded, “because it’s impossible not to be corrupt here.” She pointed her finger at me, proclaiming, “I’ll show you how it is. This will surprise you, but with this you’ll understand Argentina: I work in civil society, and even there, where supposedly everyone works to help others, there is a lot of corruption.” She went on to decry the personal networks that had allowed her to secure employment and cited them as evidence of a “fundamental corruption” that had warped her most basic values: “I’m from a middle-class family, and I studied hard and I work hard, and I would want to get a job because of that, not through some personal relationship. It’s pure corruption.”

At this point, Ana’s voice had reached the point where she was almost screaming. She paused and proceeded more calmly, “You see, there’s no way to get a job without taking advantage of your friends. [...] I can’t escape it or I’d be left without a job. But more than that, I don’t escape it because we’re corrupt. Because the Argentine always seeks to take advantage. We take advantage of each other, of friends, of lovers. It’s the famous creole cunning. It’s the way we are.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s part of us. We’re not a moral people. We’ll never have justice. A hundred years ago we were supposed to become as rich as the United States. That will never happen. The Argentine mind can’t change. The epoch of middle-class values is gone now. It’s as if we have no future.”

There are several features of Ana’s confession that warrant attention. Chief among them, for my purposes here, is its discursive structure, through which she revealed the alleged “public secret” (Taussig 1999) of corruption and, especially, of her own complicity. Drawing attention to its own performance as much as to its content, that revelation took place through the medium of Ana herself. Simultaneously heroine and storyteller, her “I” was never unitary; it was alternately narrated and narrating, evidentiary and interpretive, national and personal, confessional and condemnatory.⁷ Moving across these “I’s, Ana established herself as a representative member of the nation, claiming to stand as both evidence and interpreter of its corruption.⁸

Crucially, the arrogation of interpretive authority only took place by virtue of a third category—the middle-class “we”—which mediated the relationship between speaker and nation. If Ana’s critique mobilized a complex series of identifications and differentiations between herself and the nation, it was her proclaimed middle-classness that explained the fact of her utterance. Most of

⁷ As we might expect, following any number of analyses of self-narration, the polyvocal “I” stood as the point of inflection between these various dimensions of the narrative, transitioning it, for example, between the historical and the autobiographical. See Bauman 1986; and Hill 1995.

⁸ In other words, Ana posited herself and the nation as scalar isomorphisms, in a relation of fractal recursivity with one another (see Gal and Irvine 2000). Throughout, Ana’s revelation hinged upon the “dequotative I” (Urban 1987) by which she rendered herself an indexical icon of the nation.

the time, people in post-crisis Buenos Aires did not frame activities such as routine career networking as corruption, as if every aspect of life needed to abide by the artificial virtue of justice. However, an encounter with a U.S. anthropologist constituted an invitation not only to opine about the national predicament, but also to assert a very particular mode of distinction. Ana's narrative was no casual conversation or everyday chat, but a pedagogical event through which she instructed a foreigner who was not only naïve, but also a token of the United States and the "First World": of a society that was supposedly not fundamentally corrupt, of the sort of society Argentina should have become, in which both justice and economic prosperity existed. Her confession was therefore an exaggerated performance of the difference between the "I" and the "you," between the corrupt and the non-corrupt, Argentina and the United States. At the same time, the dismay she expressed served to construct similarities between her and me at the level of presumably shared moral values, which her narrative associated with a middle-class identity that had become impossible to realize in Argentina. Precisely by emphasizing her inability to refrain from corruption, she reasserted her identity as someone who held "middle-class values," who understood the value of a vote, the goals of justice and equality, the importance of hard work, and who was trapped in a country where that identity and those values were present only as the ghostly remainders of a lost era.

Long the most disposed to embracing liberal proceduralism, the Argentine middle class, routinely invoked as the embattled victim of the 2001–2002 crisis, came to occupy a privileged position with regard to post-crisis corruption critiques. What is more, this middle-class populism often mobilized a disdain for the poor inextricable from anxieties about racialized threats to national progress (Guano 2004; Milanesio 2010). All this is quite apparent in Ana's discussion of "humble people who sell their votes" (a phrase that conjured images of poorer, darker hued, marginalized masses—a stereotypical mainstay of Argentine political discourse) and in her eulogy for an "epoch of middle-class values" that could have grounded the national project.

However, my interest goes beyond highlighting the ways in which corruption critiques offered a mode of social distinction. While that dynamic was essential, it does not fully account for the insistence upon a dysfunctional practical logic through which individuals found themselves compelled to undermine the very institutions they valued so highly. In order to bring that logic into clearer focus, I situate Ana's confession alongside two other genres through which people performed that experience of complicity.

HYPER-CORRUPTION

While confessions such as Ana's surfaced regularly in my interviews, they were by no means a common feature of public discourse. Nonetheless, the sense of a community defined by negativity did emerge regularly in another guise: in

face-to-face condemnations of the sorts of mundane breaches of etiquette one routinely suffers in the course of navigating any busy urban landscape.

In post-crisis Buenos Aires, it was exceedingly common for people to comment on “the lack of norms” when reprimanding one another for failing to abide by the unwritten rules of thumb that enable everyday social coordination. This was especially the case between strangers in public places, whether pedestrians on the sidewalk, motorists on city streets, or audience members in a movie theater. The repetitive form—the constantly outraged bemoaning of the loss of proper standards of behavior—made it apparent that the point of these interactions went far beyond the content of their message. Everyone already knew that standards had been lost and that society was on the brink of collapse. Constantly articulating this truth was a way for strangers to instantiate a community defined by particular standards of ethics and etiquette, precisely by lamenting their absence.

This was never clearer to me than one afternoon in mid-2003 when I was waiting in the cashier’s line in my neighborhood’s overcrowded “hypermarket.” It was a Saturday, always a terrible day to go grocery shopping, since it was the day that families stocked up on supplies for the week and prepared to host weekend get-togethers for friends and relatives. Interminable, scarcely moving lines snaked around the store, crisscrossing one another and blocking aisles. Exasperated mothers admonished their children not to scamper between the carts. People grumbled to one another about the absurdity of submitting to the frustrations of line-waiting simply in order, as the woman in front of me in line put it, “to give our money to a giant company.” Meanwhile, a gaggle of young men, getting ready to watch the evening’s soccer game, stood proudly over their carts, chock-full of beer and snack food, preening and roughhousing. In sum, the atmosphere was equal parts festive and grouchy.

Behind me in line, a young couple in their mid-twenties was debating whether they should go back and get toilet paper and seltzer water. After a tense exchange with one another, they agreed that each would go off in search of one of the two items and that they would meet back at their cart, which they would leave in the line. Having watched all this out of the corner of my eye, I turned my attention to other shoppers, peeking into an elderly lady’s cart and wondering what it meant that she was buying only rice, a single steak, and a few containers of yoghurt.

Daydreaming about her purchases, I belatedly noticed increasingly curt voices behind me. I turned around to see that the young woman who had gone off in search of the toilet paper had now returned, but that another couple, who looked to be in their forties, had pushed the cart aside and taken their place in the line. The two women had already passed through any tentative stage of their negotiation and were clearly incensed with one another. The older woman declared, in reference to leaving the cart as a placeholder in the line, “It’s not what’s done!” and “You can’t do that!” The younger woman protested,

exclaiming that she had only been gone “for a moment” and only “to look for one little thing.” Their voices got louder and louder. The older woman maintained that “it’s about a lack of respect,” and insisted, “There are norms; there is civilization!” The younger woman, incredulous, shot back, “Where is there a rule like that? Where does it say that?” The older woman, grasping for an ultimate grounding for her declaration, stated, “I’m a lawyer. I know. There are rules. You can’t do that.” The younger woman was not convinced, and the fight went on. Meanwhile, the younger man had returned with the seltzer and, having looked on somewhat bewildered for a moment, engaged the older man in the dispute.

Everyone within earshot was by now watching the argument, and every once in a while one of the four disputants would appeal to the crowd of entranced onlookers, turning to the audience and asking, “Right?” After a few minutes, a man in his fifties from a neighboring line took it upon himself to intervene. Taking the side of the older couple, he began screaming at the younger couple, repeating many of the same phrases: “You can’t do this,” “You have to respect the rules,” and “That’s the problem with this country, a lack of respect for norms!” Others discussed the event amongst themselves. Eventually, and for no clear reason other than perhaps fatigue and embarrassment, the younger couple retreated and moved to the back of the line, but not without a fair amount of eye-rolling, muttered insults, and passive-aggressive comments. As the crowd quieted down, people continued to discuss the event and, from what I could hear, nearly everyone took the side of the victorious, older couple, declaring that it was indeed a breach of norms to leave your shopping cart to hold a place for you in line and that, as the woman in front of me put it, “This country will never advance because we refuse to respect decent norms! We live in a complete corruption.”

Relating this incident to one of my neighbors, whom I ran into on my way home, she nodded emphatically, agreeing with the last woman’s comment and adding, for good measure, “I know you are interested in corruption. You can find corruption everywhere here: if you walk through the streets, if you drive a car, even in supermarkets! Everyone is seeking to take advantage.” As she suggested, complaints about people’s conduct in public space—pushing and shoving their way through crowds, refusing to clean up after their dogs, cutting others off in traffic—surfaced regularly in conversations and newspaper editorials. Standing as the mundane evidence of a degenerate nation, such acts often prompted strangers to collectively shame the wrongdoer.

Take, for example, a similar incident on a bus when an elegant middle-aged woman pushed an older, somewhat unkempt man in an attempt to get a seat. The wronged man brought the scandalous action to the attention of everyone on the bus by shouting at the woman, who responded by shouting about “chivalry.” Soon the entire bus was loudly reprimanding the woman and talking to one another, saying things like, “How will we survive in this

country if we can't even be on a bus without drama?" or "These things never used to happen. What has happened to us?"

Not dissimilarly, commercial exchanges were routinely characterized by what one friend called "the continual war for small change." A shortage of coins compelled customers and cashiers to hoard what they could and engage in elaborate rituals of dissimulation, during which both parties would pretend only to have large bills. During one such encounter, in which I was trying to make a purchase with a large bill, the woman behind me in line turned to me and said loudly, "This shitty country! Together we could force her [the cashier] to give us change. The Argentine mind is incredible." The cashier suddenly found that she could indeed complete the transaction.

In each of these encounters, a decidedly ambivalent relationship emerged between the shamed wrongdoer and the ad hoc community of shamers. The act of shaming framed the younger couple in the hypermarket, the woman on the bus, and the cashier in the store as the willful perpetrators of illegitimate behavior. Yet, at the same time, by moving from a particular incident to an evaluation of national essences, the shamers implicitly included themselves as objects of critique and underscored the impossibility of expelling corruption from the body politic. As with Ana's confession, this ambivalence inhered within the performative structure of the encounters, which linked individual behavior to an implicitly classed and racialized civilizational rubric of "decency," "chivalry," and "progress." Unlike the ethnographic confessions I heard, however, these events mobilized not a mode of distinction predicated on identification with a "First Worlder," but instead a mode of publicity predicated on the shared recognition of illegitimacy. Public condemnations thus operated similarly to Turner's Ndembu "rituals of affliction." In Turner's analysis, the deeply conflictual Ndembu society emerged as "a transient community of suffering," brought into being in punctuated moments of ritual, "each couched in the idiom of unity through common misfortune" (1957: 289, 301). In post-crisis Buenos Aires, a differently conflictual society emerged out of these intermittent shaming rituals, not a community of suffering, but a community of suspicion united in the understanding that the national predicament demanded generalized mistrust. In this way, ad hoc communities of public condemnation instantiated a paradoxical national public, grounded in the recognition of a sustained process of corruption that had rendered the nation a failed and, indeed, impossible project.

THE LEFT HAND OF GOD

The ethnographic confession and the face-to-face condemnation both unfolded in a register of moral outrage. There were, however, instances in which talk of corruption elicited humor and even affection. That was the case in late 2005, when Diego Maradona used his new primetime talk show as a venue to announce that he had cheated in the World Cup some nineteen years earlier.

The event he was referring to was well known. It was the 1986 quarter-finals in Mexico City, and Argentina was playing England. Only four years prior, the British navy had roundly defeated Argentina in a brief war over the *Islas Malvinas*/Falkland Islands. The soccer match was thus widely seen in Argentina as a chance to defeat an imperialist bully. Fifty-one minutes into the game, with the score at 0–0, Maradona jumped into the air to intercept the ball. His head did not quite reach, however, and he used his left fist to pound the ball into England's net. The referee failed to see the illegal move and, ignoring the protestations of the English team, allowed the goal to stand, putting Argentina ahead 1–0. Minutes later, Maradona scored another goal so astounding that members of the International Soccer Federation later judged it to be “The Goal of the Century.” He intercepted the ball and dribbled it almost the entire length of the field in ten seconds, all the while touching it with only his left foot and eluding the frantic English team with daring footwork and sudden feints.

After the game, reporters flocked to Maradona, seeking a memorable declaration. Maradona complied. In the face of accusations that the first goal was a “handball,” he defended it, telling the press that he had made it “a little bit with the head of Maradona and a little bit with the hand of God.” This ambiguous statement—which at once admitted the truth of the English team's allegations, declared the goal the miraculous result of divine intervention, and rendered Maradona and God equivalent actors—became belovedly famous in Argentina, where the goal became known as “The Hand of God.”

Over the following years, Maradona's status in Argentina only grew. His stunning 1986 World Cup performance grounded his identity as the embodiment of a decidedly non-middle-class vision of the nation: A boy born into a humble family in a poor suburb of Buenos Aires who went on to achieve greatness on the world stage, drawing only on talent, cunning, and a bit of luck (or Fate, or Divine Providence, as it were) to defeat an imperial power. It became commonplace to liken him to a particularly virile Jesus, both of them unlikely heroes, at once fully human and yet fully divine. There even sprang up the lovingly parodic “Church of Maradona,” which aims “to keep alive the passion and the magic with which our God played soccer” through prayers and creeds modeled on Catholic liturgy (“Our Diego, who art on Earth, blessed be thy left hand...”).

It was, therefore, with a great deal of fanfare that in 2005, having lost 120 kilograms, undergone gastric-bypass surgery, and recovered from a debilitating cocaine addiction, Maradona began his primetime talk-show. For weeks leading up to the debut, advertisements blanketed the airwaves, retelling the familiar story of Maradona's life, from birth (when “a chosen one came to Earth”), to his first childhood soccer team (for whom he performed feats “that seemed like miracles”), and culminating with the “Hand of God” goal. On the premier episode, Maradona sang the popular song, “The Hand of God,” written several years earlier by Argentine rock star Rodrigo Bueno.

The lyrics compare Maradona to Jesus, portraying their births as “the wish of God,” describing how the “immortal” soccer player “sowed joy among the people” and “watered the land with glory,” and likening Maradona’s cocaine addiction to Jesus tripping while he carried the cross. In Maradona’s televised performance, the third-person hagiography became first-person testimonial, with Maradona celebrating himself as a gift from God, sent to save Argentina from mediocrity. Gigantic television screens showed highlights from Maradona’s career, confetti filled the air, half-naked women danced behind him, and a studio of cheering fans clapped, danced, and sang along.

It was in this ecstatic context that Maradona declared on the air what everyone had known all along: “For the first time I’m going to say that I did it with my hand. [...] It’s something that came from deep within me, from having done it in Fiorito [the town where he grew up]. [...] Honestly, I meant to do it with my hand and I’ve never regretted it. My teammates came up to hug me, but as if they were thinking, ‘We’re stealing.’ But I told them, ‘He who robs a thief receives a hundred-year pardon.’” Arguing that the goal constituted legitimate revenge against the English for their “theft” of the *Islas Malvinas*/Falkland Islands in the 1982 war, Maradona thus justified his action while simultaneously framing cheating and trickery as practices rooted within himself as the product of a rough-and-tumble locale.

The next day, Buenos Aires was alive with talk of Maradona’s unrepentant revelation. In conversations with friends, people remarked to me, usually registering some wry alloy of amusement, pride, and mild embarrassment, that the confession stood as further evidence that Argentines were “a nation of corrupt thieves.” Some acquaintances exclaimed that “corruption can never be justified because [it is] a cancer.” Most, however, told me laughingly that “our corruption comes out of our creole cunning,” and that, in Maradona’s case, “it was a justified corruption,” retribution for British imperialist crimes. The discussion proceeded as if Maradona’s spectacularized revelation was novel. In fact, however, he had revealed this secret some five years earlier, in his best-selling autobiography, *I Am Diego*, where he stated, “Now I can tell what I couldn’t back then, about the moment known as ‘The Hand of God’ [...] What hand of God? It was the hand of Diego! And it was like stealing the English team’s wallet” (2000: 32).

Everyone I spoke to asserted that they had always known that The Hand of God was a handball. Why, then, did this doubly redundant confession precipitate such frenetic commentary? A thirty-year-old doorman told me, “This is why we love Maradona. We love the beauty of the deceit. We love Maradona because he is us. We are him. The confession is just one more level of deceit.” According to the owner of my local laundromat, “Maradona’s confession gave us the opportunity to talk about something we all know, but which we don’t always want to say—the profound corruption of this nation, something we’re both proud of and ashamed of.” A young banker told me, “We love to have

an opportunity to talk about our flaws. But also about the history that denied us a just position in the world. Maradona brings all that together, and allows us to have hope for a just position, a glorious position.” Or, as a middle-aged cleaning woman put it, “Maradona permits us to argue that our corruption is a divine corruption, even though we know that’s not the case. With him, we pretend our corruption is that of a god, although it’s really that of a pathetic nation.”

I take these reflections to be apt. Maradona’s staged revelation allowed people an opportunity to discuss issues of corruption and lawlessness. However, what was essential was the tone of these conversations, a tone made possible because Maradona’s “corruption of the game” was understandable as both justified (given Argentina’s history with Great Britain) and successful (given that Maradona helped propel the Argentine team to victory in the World Cup). His “theft” stood as a clear-sighted act of daring that “watered the land with glory” and recapitulated an often-asserted Argentine exceptionalism. As a young architect remarked, people enjoyed the revelation “because he is an Argentine god. Because we are that way: an audacious but hard-working nation, deceitful but sincere.”

Thus, Maradona’s televised revelation offered a rare moment when the national stereotype of deceitful cunning could be celebrated rather than lamented, an uncommon instance of carnivalesque reversal that actually served “the nation.” In no small part that reversal was possible because he had always, quite skillfully, instantiated a decidedly non-middle-class, autochthonous subversion of the “civilizational norms” and “middle-class values” with which Ana and the lawyer in the hypermarket identified so intimately. With Maradona, it was as if corruption were a form of what Bataille called the “left hand sacred,” in which a doubled transgression (Maradona’s theft from the thieving Brits) did not return the world to the status quo ante, but unleashed a potentially glorious but supremely risky form of social energy, capable of unraveling but also elevating the bonds of national belonging into a transcendent realm of autonomous sovereignty (Bataille 1991). If, after the crisis, acts of egoistic instrumentalism routinely required harsh and universal condemnation, Maradona offered an exceptional experience, in which charming, felicitous, and spectacular forms of corruption could redound upon and be celebrated by the nation as a whole as—in the words of Geschiere describing witchcraft in post-colonial Cameroon—“not just something evil ... [but also] thrill, excitement, and the possibility of access to unknown power” (1997: 1).

THE HISTORY AND HISTORICITY OF CORRUPTION

Moving across the above three events, each achieved a more expansive, open-ended public and a progressively fuller, more successful attempt to rid participants of the moral taint of corruption. We see evidence of that progression in the range of discursive registers and affective tones associated with each event. (We move from Ana’s mournful, self-revelatory fatalism to the frisson of

scandalized denunciation in the hypermarket, and finally to the wry ecstasy authorized by Maradona's tricks.) In related fashion, the classed and raced dynamics of the events shift (from Ana's disdain for the uncomprehending poor to Maradona's self-stylization as an emblem of autochthony). The movement across that trajectory of genres—from ethnographic confession to face-to-face condemnation, and culminating in televised spectacle—was not chronological in nature, but interactional. Throughout the period at issue in this essay (2003–2007), events such as the hypermarket dispute occurred regularly and I received countless ethnographic confessions; meanwhile, opportunities for celebration such as the one Maradona afforded were decidedly scarce. Moreover, even Maradona's divine capacity to "water the land with glory" did not neutralize the radical negativity of corruption. In fact, the joyful embrace of Maradona's supposed corruption was not opposed to, but of a piece with the routine insistence that corruption had triumphed definitively over virtue.

Fully accounting for the emergence of this understanding of corruption lies beyond the scope of this essay (see Muir n.d.). That said, its material scaffolding lay in a two-decade-long process that dramatically transformed the nation's political and economic institutions and produced an astoundingly low economic growth rate of .02 percent and a decline in real salaries of roughly 25 percent (Llach 2004). Those two decades began with the transition from military rule (1976–1983) to democracy. The military regime had legitimated its claim to powers and its so-called "Dirty War" (a campaign of clandestine state terror) as necessary to protect the nation from communists and allied threats to "Christian civilization" (see Feitlowitz 1998). It pursued a deregulatory trade policy and oversaw intensified economic woes, including a dramatically increased foreign debt and currency devaluation, but it did not definitively lose its claim to legitimacy until the war over the *Islas Malvinas*/Falkland Islands (the event that became the backdrop to Maradona's World Cup performance). At that moment, democracy as such came to seem the antidote to the military's many failures. Public debate would allow the will of the people to emerge, journalism and political parties would ensure an open, competitive field for that debate, and voting would hold officials accountable to the general will. These institutions were charged, then, with ensuring the equation of democracy and social welfare. In the words of Raúl Alfonsín, the first president of the new democracy, "With democracy, we eat, we educate, we cure" (quoted in Palermo 2012: 133).

However, the equation of democracy and social welfare proved difficult to realize, and Alfonsín's presidency (1983–1989) was hobbled by economic difficulties, including a plummeting GDP, a crippling foreign debt, and hyperinflation rates that reached 20,000 percent. In the face of a series of rebellions by disgruntled sectors of the military and then a wave of supermarket looting, Alfonsín passed the presidential baton to President-Elect Menem (1989–1999) some five months early. Menem granted immunity to military officials in

exchange for their accepting civilian authority and launched a project of structural reforms; the measures were necessary, he insisted, in order to save the nation from civil war and economic destitution. Over the next several years those reforms produced economic gains for a few privileged social sectors. They also resulted in the disinvestment of previously robust organs of social welfare such as schools and hospitals, the disappearance of massive numbers of jobs in state companies and bureaucracies as well as small private businesses, and a dramatic rise in socioeconomic inequality (Svampa 2005). Political parties responded to and accelerated that process by shifting from corporatist to clientelist modes of organization, thereby marginalizing already weakened unions and other corporate actors and empowering individual political operatives with heightened discretionary capacities to distribute state resources (Levitsky 2005; O'Donnell 1992).

If the popular lesson drawn from Alfonsín's presidency was that formal democracy alone was insufficient, for many it was the *menemato* (Menem's presidency) that clarified the reason for that insufficiency: corruption. Corruption scandals surrounding Menem's reforms began appearing in the press as soon as 1990. By 1994, the opposition's (eventually failed) presidential campaign was prioritizing "moral authority beyond all reproach" and "eliminating corruption at its roots" (FREPASO 1994: 12). In the second half of the decade, scandals appeared with dramatic frequency, and by 1998 *Clarín* (the largest circulating newspaper) was publishing an average of three articles every day about corruption, in seemingly every governmental apparatus. However, the notion of total corruption only truly coalesced with the 2001–2002 crisis, when it became commonsensical not only to talk about particular corruption scandals, but about corruption in general as "the principal force eroding [...] the normative order" (Sautu 2004: 27).

Coursing through post-crisis Buenos Aires were attempts to develop a self-reflexive understanding of this recent history. Because of their historical role in the consolidation of the Argentine middle class, public schools were the paradigmatic site of those attempts, both symbolically and materially. Whereas previous generations had sent their children to public schools reputed to rival their European counterparts, over the 1980s and 1990s people with means increasingly sent their children to private schools. The most frequently cited reason for that shift was "lack of investment." As the number of children in private schools increased, so too did those schools' government subsidies, and funding for public schools fell further. A newly decentralized regime of accountability, aimed at improving the quality of the schools, created an array of novel encounters between bureaucrats and businessmen, and the system leached money through the new extralegal points of contact. These problems further incentivized parents to seek out private alternatives, even at the height of an economic recession that made those alternatives less affordable (Minujín and Anguita 2004). Thus, middle-class families were

both participants in and victims of a self-reinforcing process of disinvestment that progressively eroded an institution that had been crucial to the formation of the middle class. By the time of my fieldwork, people could capture this dynamic in the idiom of corruption. As one mother of young children put it, “If we all sent our kids to the public schools, they would improve. But you can’t because they are abandoned—by the politicians who steal their funds and by the middle class, [for] we have to be selfish and educate our own children however we can. That’s what corruption is and that’s what will end this middle class, this country.”

As this example shows, many in the middle class marked their moment in time as the culmination of a long process through which the pursuit of individual advantage had undermined the fields of practice that enable such pursuits. From this perspective, the cannibalistic logic of corruption meant that particular practices (e.g., educating one’s children) did not merely fail to fulfill their putative ends (e.g., a cultivated mind, a respectable job, an informed national citizenry), but had actually undermined those goals by weakening the institutions (e.g., the public schools) that were their condition of possibility. In other words, corruption named a historically situated experience of radical negativity, one that played out as a felt complicity with the destruction of the very social institutions upon which one most depended.

Invoking this institutional history and its attendant sentimental education, post-crisis condemnations of corruption drew upon but inverted the promises of the 1980s transition to democracy and the 1990s turn toward structural adjustment. Despite the differences between these two turns, both had promised to ensure social well-being through the transparent institutional mediation of individual demands, whether political or economic. In 2001–2002, however, these institutions were paralyzed. Coinciding with Néstor Kirchner’s presidency, the period I am discussing (2003–2007) was characterized by political stability and economic growth as well as the widespread sense that the crisis had ended the “liberal and neoliberal economics that began [with the military coup] in March 1976” (Llach 2004: 148). Even so, many people were quick to warn me, as did an unemployed bus driver, that nothing had changed except “we have perhaps finally woken up to our own nature, to our inability to progress, to our place in the world.”

The category of corruption thus drew upon but differed in kind from its precedents in a long discursive history inaugurated by Sarmiento’s 1845 *Facundo or, Civilization and Barbarism*, which defined Argentina as riven by those two warring principles—the first associated with Europe, liberalism, urbanity, and prosperity and the second with autochthony, authoritarianism, rurality, and destitution (2003 [1845]). In many other Latin American contexts, racialized and classed anxieties about national character and civilizational progress generated ideologies of *mestizaje*. In Argentina, though, sustained governmental policies aimed at “whitening” the population and “invisibilizing”

the indigenous rendered *mestizaje* nearly inconceivable (Gordillo 2003; Ramella 2004). Instead, there emerged an ideology of irreconcilable dichotomies, which people have reanimated time and again in order to diagnose alleged national dysfunctions.⁹

The outlines of this discursive history are clearly visible in the category of corruption I have been describing. Yet participants in the above events were describing something else—an Argentina in which that historical conflict was all but over, in which corruption had exhausted any conceivable opposition. As such, the category of corruption may have provided a potent idiom for the critique of neoliberalism, but it simultaneously mobilized racialized and classed conceptions of national progress in the service of a stance of historical exhaustion.

That stance partook, most immediately, of an often explicitly voiced impulse to come to terms with the recent past. It also posited the crisis as the definitive end of a frustrated project of national progress. A vast literature attests that, throughout the twentieth century, the teleological orientation of that project laminated civilizational, racial, and class imaginaries onto one another, allowing the middle class to become a privileged national subject, identified with normative ideals of whiteness and modernity (Adamovsky 2009; Garguin 2009; Visacovsky 2009). The diagnosis of total corruption declared that project defunct, the victim of an essential and ineradicable national trait: a duplicitous and self-serving cunning that had slowly but unavoidably eroded social life, leaving behind a barbaric hyper-individualism from which no collective future could be projected. For some, this unenviable predicament could be traced to the presence of non-European (or even non-northern European) elements within the body politic. For others, it could be summed up in the idea of “savage capitalism,” and its etiology lay in the injustices implicit in the narrative of progress to which I have just gestured. In the broadest of strokes, these two positions characterized “conservative” and “progressive” positions within the post-crisis middle class. Undergirding that opposition, however, was the shared supposition that the nation had from the beginning carried with it the seeds of its undoing.

HISTORICAL EXHAUSTION

When he assumed the Presidency in 1989 amidst a hyperinflationary recession, Carlos Menem proclaimed that Argentina’s future depended on a linked strategy of radical structural reforms and austerity measures: “major surgery without anaesthesia” on the body politic and “carnal relations” with the United States, meaning acquiescence to its every policy demand (Di Tella quoted in Munck 2001: 73). Some fifteen years later, after years of exile in

⁹ On the legacy of the Sarmiento schema in Argentina, see Sorensen 1996.

Chile, house arrest in Argentina, and the threat of trial for corruption, he returned triumphantly to Buenos Aires to be sworn in as a senator and thereby (temporarily) immunized against criminal prosecution. Upon hearing Menem's name, then President Néstor Kirchner reached behind himself and, raising his eyebrows, touched the wood of the Senate dais. That evening, as the nightly news recounted Menem's swearing in, millions of Argentines mimicked their President in a more vulgar fashion: With their right hands, men touched their left testicles and women their left breasts. Infuriated by Menem's notoriously corrupt administration and convinced that it caused the 2002 crisis, they touched wood, testicles, and breasts in an effort—at once sincere and farcical—to save themselves from further devastation at his hands.

Meant to ward off "bad luck" or "the evil eye," the symbolism of these touches was hardly subtle. As people variously explained it to me, wood is "strong," "pure," and "reliable." In a related sense, testicles and breasts are "the essential thing that defines a sex," and the locus of "virility or femininity." Touching these objects whenever someone uttered Menem's name thus "protect[ed] against bad luck" by mobilizing some of this reliable, essential, and pure power at a "threatening moment." In the case of testicles and breasts, the touch also served to shield these potent but "delicate" body-parts. The gestures thus pointed up a negative relationship between corruption and socio-sexual reproduction and put forth an embodied argument about the falsehood of Menem's early promises: Instead of generating a stable and prosperous nation, his carnal relations had made the national body politic complicit in its own evisceration.

From Ana's confession to the hypermarket condemnation, from Maradona's revelation to Menem's uncanny return, these events all exhibit an uneasy tension. In recognizing the erosion of social norms, people performed those very norms, effecting a paradoxical but analytically legible, if popularly denied, mode of sociability. And yet that tidy dialectic of social (re)production does not capture the entirety of these engagements, for it dismisses without interrogating the lived experience of irrecuperable loss, both the particular, material losses as well as the loss of the nation as a middle-class project (with the racial and civilizational imaginaries that entailed).

In order to bring into view both dimensions of these events, this essay has traced the contours of a historico-moral sensibility, an understanding of corruption—akin to witchcraft—as an unavoidable logic that had inhered within but progressively undermined the framework of sociality. The logic of radical negativity is by no means ineffable, asocial, or beyond analysis; it is not simply "excess." However, it does require theorizing the possibility of self-destructive social processes. In other words, it requires identifying fields (e.g., education) in which people find themselves compelled to dismantle their own conditions of possibility. Further, it requires attending to the extraordinarily wide variety of forms that experience can take.

For students of contemporary Argentina, this approach can offer insight into the continuities and discontinuities between the immediate post-crisis period and the years thereafter. During the 2003–2007 period at issue in this essay, the 2001–2002 crisis served as a collective touchstone, allowing a broad swath of society to establish a consensus that the *menemato*'s neoliberal reforms were the epitome of corruption. That consensus, in the context of a substantive economic recovery, gave Néstor Kirchner's administration a fair degree of latitude to enact new social welfare programs and economic policies, new political alliances and modes of social mobilization. By contrast, the period immediately following (2008–present) has been characterized by dramatic political polarization and the consolidation of an oppositional bloc (frequently figuring itself as “the middle class”) that has resisted the agenda of Néstor Kirchner's wife and successor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Analysts have tended to explain the rapid polarization of public culture by pointing to some combination of increasing temporal distance from the shared experience of 2001–2002 crisis, less favorable global economic conditions, and the more heterodox and populist policies of Cristina Kirchner's administration. However, that polarization had been developing all along, and given the status of corruption as a folk concept in post-crisis Buenos Aires, it is hardly surprising. A sense of banal illegitimacy, couched in the language of corruption, made it difficult for many in the middle class to envision not merely how, but *whether* a legitimate national project was possible.

More saliently for most readers, this approach also opens up possibilities for comparative analyses of corruption that necessitate neither defining the concept nor adopting it as an analytic. By focusing instead on the pragmatics of corruption as an evaluative category that orients practices and their critique, a host of questions appear in a different light. For example, we need not determine whether the *menemato* was in fact more corrupt than the dictatorship (a topic of some debate in post-crisis Argentina), and can instead inquire into the processes that produced a historical stance that cast the national experience as one of intensifying self-destruction and irreversible corruption. Looking further afield, we need not ask whether, for example, “the criminalization of the state” in Africa has effected a “definite rupture” with modes of governance characterized by mere corruption (Bayart 1999: 25), and can instead ask how specific configurations of sovereign debt and structural reform produce different experiences of social loss and different evaluations of political (il)legitimacy. Pursuing these questions, we can inquire why witchcraft and corruption commingle so freely, with corrupt actors frequently “depicted almost like modern witches, with their fraud and rapacious looting serving purely selfish purposes” (Smith 2008: 163; see Apter 1999; Blunt 2004). In this sense, corruption can serve, like witchcraft, as a privileged site for the comparative analysis of struggles over the grounds of legitimate modes of accumulation and authority.

I have explored here one such struggle, characterized by a particular historico-moral sensibility that brought together, in an unstable amalgam, intuitions of complicity and feelings of victimhood, criticisms of inequality and racialized distaste for the poor, not to mention a full-throated repudiation of neoliberalism and a fatalistic rejection of political-economic alternatives. In holding those divergent intuitions together, the category of corruption allowed members of the Buenos Aires middle class to articulate themselves as the iconic instantiations of a social world that had exhausted its history. Of course, the post-crisis period was full of what one might understand, from any number of perspectives, as “history.” But the widespread insistence to the contrary betrayed a profound suspicion about their possibilities. It is precisely by attending to the minutiae of that suspicion that we can bring into view both what was at stake in the events of 2001–2002 and how those events became emplotted in a narrative of “crisis” as the apotheosis of corruption.

In the words of Pocock, who reads a remarkably similar narrative of corruption in Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, “virtue itself ... becomes cannibal—Shakespeare’s ‘universal wolf’ that ‘last eats up itself’” (1975: 204).

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Abstract: This essay examines the experience of corruption as an unavoidable and self-destructive dynamic of everyday life in post-crisis Argentina. Embedded in both everyday practices and popular evaluations of those practices, corruption in this context of neoliberal crisis operated as a folk category of socio-moral critique much like witchcraft does in some other settings, for it named a cannibalistic logic that imperiled the very framework of sociality. In order to grasp the reflexive pragmatics of this category, the essay attends first to the conceptual, then to the ethnographic, and finally to the historical dimensions of its practical life. Moving across these three dimensions, it argues that corruption indexed a very particular moral sensibility, marked by the sense of exhausted historical possibilities and inevitable national crisis.