Self-Expression in Spray Paint: Graffiti as a Popular Tool for Democratization in Argentina

Anne Buckley
University of Colorado Boulder

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SELF-EXPRESSION IN SPRAY PAINT: GRAFFITI AS A POPULAR TOOL FOR DEMOCRATIZATION IN ARGENTINA

By:
Anne Buckley
Department of International Affairs, University of Colorado at Boulder

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

GENERAL HONORS

April 9, 2014

Primary Thesis Advisor
Gregory Young, Department of Political Science

Committee Members
Nina Molinaro, Department of Spanish, Honors Program
Donna Goldstein, Department of Anthropology
Abstract

This thesis will argue that graffiti and street art increase the democratic self-expression values that Christian Welzel’s (2008) democratization theory argues are integral to the process of democratization. In countries where a repressive authoritarian regime allows little room for the population to express themselves, graffiti and street art offer a venue for the voicing of self-expression values, which lead to an increase in democratic values and culture. Growth in a society’s self-expression values, facilitated by the creation or exposure to graffiti, leads to mass pro-democratic attitudes. This thesis will use the case of Argentina’s democratic transition following the end of the “Dirty War,” when graffiti played a crucial role in the transition from a brutal authoritarian regime to democracy. Graffiti in Argentina has been integral during the transition to democracy, and this thesis will argue keeping the atrocities of the “Dirty War” in the public eye and collective memory through commemorative graffiti, street art, and demonstrations was extremely valuable to the initial success of the democratic transition.

The importance of political graffiti and street art to the culture of Argentina cannot be debated as the streets of Buenos Aires are covered with colorful slogans, stencils and murals. This thesis finds that political graffiti played an integral role in creating and fostering the Argentine population’s self-expression values, therefore increasing the democratic culture, and keeping the atrocities of the Dirty War in the country’s collective memory. Political graffiti has been an effective tool for democratization in Argentina.
Table of Contents

I. Introduction..................................................................................................................4

II. Theories of Democratization.....................................................................................5

III. Graffiti.......................................................................................................................10

   The Politics of Art........................................................................................................10
   Visual Aspects of Political Graffiti.............................................................................12
   Graffiti as a Measure of Mass Attitudes.................................................................13
   Motivations for the Production of Graffiti..............................................................17
   Efficacy of Graffiti and Street Art..............................................................................20

IV. Case Study: Argentina...............................................................................................21

   Madres de la Plaza de Mayo......................................................................................24
   Graffiti and the Return to Democracy: An Integral Tool........................................26
   Dirty War Criminals on Trial: The Power of Collective Memory...........................29
   “Redemocratization,” Argentine Culture, and Graffiti..........................................37
   Measuring Democratic Values and Culture in Argentina During the Transition......39

V. Conclusions...............................................................................................................41
“All democracy needs, aside from its basic institutions, are democratic subjects; men and women who have internalized the values of freedom, solidarity, tolerance, public commitment and justice, and who will not break the rules to gain their ends.” – Raul Alfonsín 1992, (President of Argentina 1983-1989).

I. Introduction

For decades scholars and politicians have argued that democracy is the best form of government. However, efforts to implement democracy in countries with a long history of authoritarian rule have been varied in their success. Political scientists, anthropologists, policy makers and politicians have all struggled to identify why democracy develops in some areas rather than others, and why democracy flourishes and survives in select countries. This thesis will apply Christian Welzel’s work on theories of democratization, which emphasizes that the key to democratization is mass mobilization based on mass attitudes, to argue that graffiti and street art are political tools integral to facilitating this mobilization toward democratization. In the past century the world has seen a shift toward democracy, often characterized into three distinct waves as first theorized by Samuel Huntington. In Argentina, there has been a specific period of democratic opening led by a dissident mobilization of the people, and this thesis will argue that graffiti has played an essential role in the process. In authoritarian regimes where a regular citizen’s voice has little opportunity to be heard, graffiti and street art can be used as a political tool to rally the masses. Graffiti and street art, which require no special training or knowledge to understand, and which can be quickly created destroyed, offers an alternative form of political participation. In a society where it can be gravely dangerous to voice opposition to the ruling regime, graffiti offers an anonymous rallying cry for the masses. This thesis will incorporate several disciplines in constructing graffiti’s role in democratization, including
theories of art as communication, theories of the role of collective memory, political science, sociology and anthropology.

II. Theories of Democratization

Delineating the process of democratization has been the cause of extensive debate, and determining when a country has achieved a democracy poses a great challenge. Among political scientists, scholars, and politicians, there is not one set definition of democracy. Most define democracy as a country in which free and fair elections are guaranteed, where people have the right to decide who leads their country. According to democracy theorist and scholar Larry Diamond, one can think of democracy in terms of either a “thin” or “thick” definition, where the most simple of democracies need free and fair elections, and are generally characterized as “electoral democracies” (Diamond 2009). A democracy that goes even further to encompass individual freedoms, rights, an independent judiciary, transparency, and other liberal values in addition to free and fair elections can be classified as a “liberal democracy.” Ultimately, democracy can be evaluated on a scale, where the most simple of democracies have free and fair elections, and the most “consolidated” or “liberal” encompass many more rights and freedoms. Diamond (2009) argues that democracy is a “truly universal value,” and for the purposes of this paper a system will be considered democratic or in the process of democratization if it falls anywhere on the spectrum, from electoral democracy to an established, liberal democracy. This thesis will focus on the transition period and democratization process from an authoritarian regime to a democratic regime in Argentina.

While the term “democracy” is nuanced and complex, the process of democratization, and the theories surrounding how, why and when a country will democratize are just as complicated. According to political scientist and democratization theorist Christian Welzel, “technically
speaking the emergence, the deepening, and the survival of democracy are strictly distinct aspects of democratization. But they merge in the question of sustainable democratization, that is, the emergence of democracies that develop and endure” (Welzel 2008). Welzel emphasizes the “positive role of non-violent mass opposition in knocking over authoritarian regimes and establishing democracy,” and argues that efforts to democratize are most successful when the masses mobilize as a large, coherent group that cannot be suppressed and quieted by the regime. Welzel argues that the desire for democratic freedoms and the belief in the illegitimacy of the ruling authoritarian power are variables, and when they are stronger, “they provide a powerful motivational force for the mobilization of mass opposition in authoritarian regimes as soon as opportunities occur…repression cannot isolate authoritarian regimes from the destabilizing effect of eroding legitimacy and rising mass demands for democracy” (Welzel 2008). The mass populace is capable of banding together and demanding democracy, even when it may be dangerous to do so under a repressive regime.

Many scholars have theorized that growing economic resources in a society can cause mass movements calling for democracy; however Welzel, along with sociologist Doug McAdam, argue, “social movements must be inspired by a common cause that motivates their supporters to take costly and risky actions. This requires ideological ‘frames’ that create meaning and grant legitimacy to a common cause so that people follow it with inner conviction” (Welzel 2008). Welzel argues that the success of mass mobilization depends on the intensity with which the population values democratic freedoms, and that their support for democracy must be motivated by emancipative or self-expression values. Welzel, Inglehart and Klingemann (2003) construct a theory of human development, which emphasizes the importance of these emancipative cultural values to the process of democratization. Many scholars have theorized about the contribution of
socioeconomic development to democratization, most notably in Barrington Moore’s (1966) modernization theory, which argues for the necessity of the mobilization of an elite bourgeoisie class to the success of the process of democratization. However, Welzel, Inglehart and Klingemann argue that socioeconomic development and rising emancipative values work together to build effective democracy, stating that “socioeconomic development diminishes the most existential constraints on human choice by increasing individual resources. These resources give people the objective means of choice” (Welzel et al. 2003). Once an individual has more resources, their desire for free choice and control over their lives will increase, defined as rising emancipative values. Following this, democracy is the final component of their theory of human development, as it “institutionalizes legal rights that guarantee choices in people’s private and public activity” (Welzel et al. 2003). Welzel, Inglehart and Klingemann argue that growing emancipative values will result in a population recognizing the illegitimacy of an authoritarian power, and will thus withdraw support, and channel their mobilization toward democracy.

Welzel (2008) argues, “Mass responsive democratization is the joint result of objective social conditions, motivational mass tendencies, and intentional collective actions, triggered by critical events, in the context of enduring grievances. The role of objective social conditions in this causal interplay is that they determine a society’s capabilities for collective action. The role of motivational mass tendencies is that they shape the intentions that inspire collective actions. The role of grievances is that they provide a reason to become active for the sake of given goals. The role of critical events is that they provide a trigger for collective actions. And the role of collective actions is that they constitute a challenge, that, when becoming strong enough, leads to a political change.”
For Welzel (2006), mass motivations and mass attitudes are the most important factor in democratization, and he argues that popular democratization theory, including structural theories such as modernization theory and conflict theories, downplay the integral role of the people. Welzel outlines the most popular prevailing theories of democratization, but argues that none provide for the importance of pro-democratic mass attitudes. Larry Diamond’s (1993) modernization theory argues that economic wealth is the most important for democratization; structural theories place a country’s level of economic development and fundamental structural properties as the root of the emergence of democracy, class-power theory emphasizes the importance of the working class, and conflict theories argue for the importance of international divisions within a country’s society as the major factor in democratization (Welzel 2006). However, argues Welzel, none of these theories are sufficient as they ignore the importance of mass attitudes as the defining variable of democratization, as he argues “if not completely ignored, mass attitudes are either considered mere reflections of a society’s structural properties or they are declared irrelevant for the elites’ institutional choices” (Welzel 2006). Welzel argues that the recent democratization processes of the “third” or “fourth-wave” originated from grassroots campaigns for freedom, where mass demonstrations were key. Welzel, drawing upon the social-movement theories of Klandermans (1984) and McAdams (1986), argues, “favorable mass attitudes are an essential factor in mobilizing public support for pro-democratic actors and their actions” (Welzel 2006).

The human empowerment process, outlined by Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart (2008), is based on the “liberal democracy” definition, where “the emergence and survival of democracy therefore depends on social preconditions such as the wide distribution of participatory resources and a trusting, tolerant public that prizes free choice” (Welzel and
Inglehart 2008). Welzel and Inglehart use the term “effective democracy” to measure not only what political and civil rights exist legally, but how those who are elected by the populace enforce said rights. The human-empowerment triad includes the previously outlined three components of Welzel and Inglehart’s theory: action resources empowering the economy, self-expression values empowering culture, and democratic institutions empowering the regime (Welzel and Inglehart 2008). They argue that “societies that emphasize self-expression values give high priority to self-expression; have participatory orientations toward society and politics; support gender equality; are relatively tolerant of foreigners, homosexuals and other out-groups; and rank high on interpersonal trust” (Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Growth in a society’s self-expression values, therefore, “increases the demand for civil and political liberties, gender equality, and responsive government, thereby helping to establish and sustain democratic institutions” (Welzel and Inglehart 2008). They argue that self-expression values are more important to the development of democratic institutions than explicit mass-level endorsement of democracy, because “self-expression values are much more conducive to prodemocratic mass actions…explicit endorsement of democracy, on the other hand, may reflect a variety of other motivations” (Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Welzel and Inglehart argue that these self-expression values emerge as a result of modernization and economic development, as people become more economically secure they look for ways to have more freedom in how they can spend their time and money. Once people have these new “action resources”, and realize the illegitimacy of the authoritarian regime, the development of self-expression values is vital. In a repressive authoritarian regime, mass mobilization can be facilitated by graffiti and street art, where self-expression can flourish and generate mass attitudes.
III. Graffiti

The origins of graffiti can be traced back more than 40,000 years to prehistoric rock art known as petroglyphs, and graffiti has since spread around the world and taken many styles, forms and purposes (McDonald 2013). Today, there are widespread debates over the etymology surrounding graffiti, while many scholars argue that graffiti refers to strictly illicit spray paint “tags” or quickly performed images, and others refer to pre-determined murals as “street art.” For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on political graffiti and political street art, with an emphasis on the spray paint stencil images, murals, and slogans most often associated with political movements. Lyman Chaffee (1993), in his work on political protest and street art in Hispanic countries, defines political street art as the “forms of street art most commonly and systematically employed by collectives and state interests as a communication device for informing and persuading. Included in this concept of street art are what I consider the most common forms utilized for political communication—posters, wallpaintings, graffiti, and murals” (Chaffee 1993). Political street art and graffiti have played a role in the cultural and political spheres for years, and writing statements about those in power has been around since graffiti in Pompeii and Athens (McDonald 2013). Political graffiti gives a voice to the voiceless, makes rhetoric and opinion visual and public, can be a measure of discontent, and can build a sense of community. Political graffiti is a central and extremely important facet of political participation and a method of generating self-expression values, and is a popular tool for democratization.

The Politics of Art

According to Murray Edelman, a scholar on the politics of art, art is integral to the formation of political attitudes in society. A population’s exposure to and interpretation of art,
including street art and graffiti, shapes their political behavior. As Edelman argues, “contrary to the usual assumption—which sees art as ancillary to the social scene, divorced from it, or, at best, reflective of it—art should be recognized as a major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior. The conduct, virtues, and vices associated with politics come directly from art, then, and only indirectly from immediate experiences. Works of art generate the ideas about leadership, bravery, cowardice, altruism, dangers, authority, and fantasies about the future that people typically assume to be reflections of their own observations and reasoning” (Edelman 1995). According to Edelman, the use of images in political rhetoric is extremely effective, and street art and graffiti can cultivate political perceptions that stray from the norm because of their medium. Edelman argues, “Exposure and reaction to particular art forms is certainly selective, reflecting their degree of availability to various people as well as the intentions and biases of individuals and groups. But even when art reinforces preexisting prejudices, its contribution of images and other symbols is vital. Without that contribution, alternative perceptions become more potent and displace the prejudiced ones” (Edelman 1995). Graffiti is arguably the most exposed, accessible, and available art form, contributing images and symbols that can be associated with specific movements and political groups. Art can be a way for a population under authoritarian rule to imagine a different way of life, with a different political system. Edelman states, “Rather, art creates realities and worlds. People perceive and conceive in the light of narratives, pictures and images…because they create something different from conventional perceptions, works of art are the medium through which new meanings emerge” (Edelman 1995). A population that has been living under authoritarian rule may find it hard to imagine life any other way, but a mural on the side of a building depicting democratic ideals or rhetoric allows them to create new meanings and ideas of how their society should
function. Art inspires creativity and imagination and can be a source of inspiration for a dissident group. For Edelman, “because it can be ahead of general opinion, art becomes controversial at such times, and in some measure becomes symbolic of rebellion and dissent. It may be especially effective at disseminating skepticism when that message is enshrined in a conventional display” (Edelman 1995). Street art and graffiti do exactly that; they take dissident political ideas and create a work of art that is visually appealing, easy accessible, and open to interpretation.

**Visual Aspects of Political Graffiti**

Graffiti and street art can take many different forms, and each artist has their own particular style and signature. In terms of political graffiti, simplicity and clarity are essential. According to Chaffee, “for the most part, political murals are designed to be ephemeral, not permanent, unless produced under state sponsorship…political graffiti tend to be furtively placed in quick fashion with little artistic consideration” (Chaffee 1999). Political graffiti require the highest degree of visibility to be effective and essential to the creation of political graffiti is clarity in design, warm colors, and positioning for maximum visibility. One of the most popular mediums of political graffiti is the stencil, which allows for the mass replication of a significant image. Art scholar Emily Truman (2010) argues that the stencil graffiti style “is modeled on utilitarian signage and packaging; it is clear, instructive and consistent. Stencil graffiti has what Tristan Manco calls ‘enduring aesthetic appeal,’ stemming from the juxtaposition of its aesthetic roots in the utilitarian style of official signage and its political roots in countercultural practices of graffiti writing” (Truman 2010). Stencil graffiti allows an image to be reproduced countless times, with only a stencil and a can of spray paint. When creating political or subversive graffiti, the ability to quickly spray a message to avoid legal repercussions is essential, especially under a repressive authoritarian regime. In addition to the convenience of stencil graffiti, it also creates a
Anne Buckley

specific aesthetic that works to pull from the popular rhetoric and mock it in order to solidify a symbol of protest. According to Truman, “stencil graffiti exercises its transformative power through the act of mimicking ‘the official,’ but at the same time mocking it by subverting its meaning through the artful juxtaposition of image and text or the remaking and remixing of recognizable icons, symbols, and phrases. In this way, the graffiti artist should remain unseen both in the design and in the execution of the stenciling” (Truman 2010). Other forms of political graffiti styles include murals, posters, and tags, but stencil graffiti and murals are among the most conducive to political participation and expression.

Graffiti as a Measure of Mass Attitude

According to Chaffee (1993), street art is often disregarded as an important form of mass communication, but “as one of numerous information sources, it should be viewed as one dimension of the multimedia, multiformat communication system. It gives expression to groups that otherwise could not comment upon or support current or perceived social problems. In the process it provides a popular record” (Chaffee 1993). Street art has a unique ability as a constantly-changing art form to reflect the mass attitudes of the public, and to influence and

Figure 1: Stencil Graffiti of Dictators Emilio Massera, Videla (center) and Orlando Agosti. (BA Street Art).
shape those attitudes as well. As Chafee explains, “street art can shape and move human emotions and gauge political sentiments. Language and visual symbols help shape perception. Clichés, slogans, and symbols—the substance of political rhetoric—help mobilize people…like the press, one role of street art is to form social consciousness. In authoritarian systems where outlets for free expression are limited, it is one of the few gauges of political sentiment” (Chaffee 1993). According to Chaffee, street art is essentially democratic, as it is accessible by all and creates debate over who controls the public spaces, the people or those in power. Chafee argues, “street art, in essence, connotes a decentralized, democratic form in which there is universal access, and the real control over messages comes from the social producers. It is a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking, especially during democratic openings” (Chaffee 1993). Political street art is conceived through a collective motivation and is created on a collective medium, and generally uses simple rhetoric and images. Street art is adaptable, constantly changing to reflect the state of the country and the attitudes of the public.

Anthropologist Julie Peteet (1996) also emphasizes the importance of street art as a measure of a society’s discontent in her work in the West Bank, writing “the walls of shops, homes, and offices were littered with a jumbled profusion of graffiti; the quantity was a barometer of discontent and resistance” (Peteet 1996). Peteet argues that the use of public space is an inherently democratic component of graffiti and street art and is integral to mass mobilization, and that “as an accompaniment to standard mobilization strategies of visiting and persuasion, and of confrontations, graffiti suggested and beckoned people to resist, to take action. Private property in the form of walls—which demarcated residences or businesses—was mobilized. Aside from declaring the popular communal nature of the uprising, taking over privately owned walls for inscription was also an act of internal politicization and mobilization
Anne Buckley

(Peteet 1996). Peteet argues that graffiti itself can stir political debate, that simply the appearance of words on walls can spark dissent or political action. According to Peteet, graffiti was a vital part of the uprising during the first Palestinian Intifada, bringing concepts of resistance and change into the public arena. Graffiti is most accessible by pedestrian audiences and provides a source of news and information during a time of political unrest, and according to Peteet “the sheer ubiquitousness of graffiti was a constant reminder both of the abnormality of everyday life under occupation and of the mass uprising…graffiti were the silent narrative accompanying acts of resistance yet were themselves an act of resistance. They encouraged resistance, cajoled, demanded, critiqued, and provided running political commentary on the progression of the uprising” (Peteet 1996). Graffiti aids in resistance and embodies resistance itself, while giving a voice to the voiceless. For Peteet, “written under a highly elaborated apparatus of censorship, graffiti were a form of expression that recorded domination and simultaneously intervened in it” (Peteet 1996).

According to Peteet, graffiti was a way for the everyday citizen to get involved in the uprising, where they would no longer feel like a bystander but were able to intervene in a system where they lacked freedoms. Even the act of reading graffiti on the street could feel like a subversive act for some of the population, a way in which they could participate in the mass uprising indirectly. In this way, graffiti worked as a force to foster community within a mass mobilization, as Peteet argues, “the anonymity of graffiti, their signature by political groups rather than individual writers, suggested the sense of community and assertiveness of a readership bound by common political experience and language…To the occupying forces, the hurried images were more crucial than their actual contents. Soldiers responded to the social practice of writing—and to the possibilities it suggested for the emergence of a readership
exploring and affirming its collective identity. Erasure and its accompanying violence indexed fear both of a community producing and circulating knowledge and of an experience and sentiment being inscribed and shared among people not in actual face-to-face contact.

Circulations of sentiment and experience could lead to incitement” (Peteet 1996). Graffiti was also a rite of passage into the resistance movement, according to Peteet, where those who wished to become involved could simply take a can of paint and join the uprising. Graffiti, creating unity among the dissident population, also created a community readership. The act of reading the graffiti, as Peteet compares to “reading the newspaper,” resulted in multiple interpretations and meanings. According to Peteet, “as a social practice, reading graffiti is grounded in position and experience—in the situatedness of a readership in a power structure and the graffiti writer’s place in it, and the implication of his product for that structure. In short, multiple optics are involved” (Peteet 1996). Graffiti were also a way for the Palestinian population to reclaim their lost territory, to put their stamp on the walls. According to Peteet, “graffiti were a means of circumventing denial of voice. They were what Foster refers to as ‘a response of people denied response’ (1985:48). They were a way of breaking rules that limited speech and

Figure 2: Mural by graffiti artist "Blu" in Buenos Aires, Argentina depicting the Argentine flag blinding the population.
thus can be cast as the crossing of boundaries erected to fragment and isolate…graffiti were evidence of an attempt to recover voice and to fashion a ‘public sphere,’ that is, to quote Habermas, an arena in which ‘such a thing as public opinion can be formed,’ (1991:398)” (Peteet 1996). For those who were denied a voice and denied their homeland, graffiti was a way in which they could speak out and reclaim a public area. Graffiti and street art can also be used as a means of keeping a record of collective memory, whether in painting murals of martyrs, or paintings of those disappeared during the Argentine “Dirty War,” Graffiti and murals can serve as memorials to heroes of mass mobilizations, as Peteet argues, “the promise of memory was central in graffiti; they were imbued with an assertive desire to be remembered and recorded in the collective archives of memory. Graffiti encoded a wish to be recognized where existence had been denied. In graffiti, not only was the martyr promised memory, his or her actions stood as an exemplar to others” (Peteet 1996). Graffiti, a form of resistance in itself, is a way for those denied voice to speak out and for the community to become involved in the resistance movement through readership and production itself. Graffiti and street art, as Peteet experienced in the West Bank, also serves as a medium for collective memory, where martyrs can be glorified on the walls of the cities.

Motivations for the Production of Graffiti

Chaffee (1993) outlines several motivating factors for the production of political street art, all of which focus on the inherently democratic nature of graffiti. The first motivational factor he terms the “catharsis/protest explanation,” where following a period of harsh authoritarian rule, populations need an emotional release to deal with the end of their repression. Chaffee argues, “the emotional rage and frustrations from repressive control and the inability to freely express oneself or to air one’s grievances often produce an outpouring of slogans and
sentiments from a broad spectrum of society…It serves not only as a symbolic act of protest and defiance against fallen regimes but also to symbolize the regenerated values of democracy…graffiti is generally the preferred form of expression due to the ease with which it can be produced” (Chaffee 1993). Graffiti can satisfy a population’s need for personal expression, especially during a democratic opening. Another relevant motivating factor in the production of political graffiti according to Chaffee is the “marginalized group/alternative media explanation,” where “lacking access to the conventional media or the financial means to engage in high-technology propaganda, marginalized collectives are motivated to seek alternative means for achieving sociopolitical recognition and expression…Argentine human rights groups in the early 1990s lobbied against a national pardon for human rights violators, relying on street graphics when denied access to the dominant media that refused to run issue ads for their campaign” (Chaffee 1993). Those groups who are denied access to mainstream media as a venue for the dissemination of their ideas are forced to use grassroots methods, such as graffiti, to get their message heard. Another explanation Chaffee offers, building upon the “marginalized

Figure 3: Anti-Dictatorship graffiti in Argentina: "30 years of Impunity and Repression, of Looting, of Hunger, 30,000 reasons to continue fighting." (2007)
group” explanation is the “impacting the dominant media explanation,” where groups use graffiti in order to garner attention from mainstream media to allow for greater spread of their message to a wider audience. The “announcements, special-events explanation,” where graffiti, wall paintings or posters are used to announce political events, protests, or strikes, is another important motivating factor for political graffiti. Another explanation is the “collective, grassroots explanation,” where because graffiti and street art are inherently a collective and grassroots production, Chaffee argues “its use is appealing especially to those who stress a collective consciousness and claim to speak for and represent the people” (Chaffee 1993). The “underground media explanation,” which can be applied to mass mobilizations under authoritarian regimes, argues that “street art in authoritarian regimes is one way to break the complicity of silence; to mobilize against demobilization attempts; to inspire and motivate; and to manifest through pamphlets, leaflets, street art, and other means that there is an organized opposition to the government,” according to Chaffee (1993). Chaffee also offers the “psychopolitical explanation,” where painting the streets or graffiti in relation to protests and demonstrations “are perceived as creating a feeling of who controls the tenor or tone of the street” (Chaffee 1993). He goes on to use the example of the human rights group Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, arguing “in a similar fashion, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in the recent postmilitary period made silhouetted profile posters of the disappeared and pasted them the first day of the democratic opening. This set a new tone by emotionally calling for justice for those who committed human rights abuses” (Chaffee 1993). Another motivation for producing political graffiti, as reiterated by Peteet and Truman, is the importance of graffiti for establishing control over public spaces. This motivating factor Chaffee terms “the territorial demarcation explanation,” where graffiti is used “to symbolically demarcate a particular area as controlled or
Anne Buckley

liberated, or as rightly belonging to a specific group, ethnic population, or nation,” such as Julie Peteet witnessed during the Intifada (Chaffee 1993). Lastly, among the motivating factors Chaffee provides, he also contends that the authoritarian power can also employ street art as a political tool. Chaffee offers the “street art as political inspiration explanation,” where “Street art can be a means to inspire people, to energize them, to raise spirits and generate morale. This is most pronounced at times of crisis, war, or revolution…the Argentina military regime from 1976 to 1983, which had sought to repress street art, turned to its use. They encouraged citizens to participate in the Malvinas War effort by producing street art to inspire people” (Chaffee 1993).

While political graffiti and street art can be produced as a result of a wide variety of motivating factors, its efficacy in inspiring change and mobilization toward more democratic ideals is clear.

**Efficacy of Graffiti and Street Art**

Graffiti and street art, according to Chaffee (1993), is a key part of the process toward democratization, and can be viewed as “an indicator of political discourse and group conflict in a society.” Graffiti and street art can be used to draw attention to an issue, and is effective, or successful in producing the intended reaction, when the government or public acknowledge the message. Graffiti and street art can be most effective in providing a forum for political participation for marginalized groups, and fostering the self-expression values that Welzel (2008) emphasizes. As Chaffee argues, “certain groups may be in decline, fighting to survive, while others may be in a formative stage, attempting to establish an identity and carve out a political space. Whatever the case, without a means of popular communication, organizations are deprived of their social identification” (Chaffee 1993). Political graffiti and street art can provide this means of popular communication, and can be a medium used to voice dissent against the regime and spread information. A main sign of effectiveness that Chaffee cites is the graffiti’s
capacity to provoke a response from the regime, as he argues, “underground street art can break the censorship imposed on information by authoritarian states and pierce the complicity of silence with the regime. If regimes did not believe ideas have an effect, then they would not worry about suppressing them; but they do believe” (Chaffee 1993). The process of democratization, following Welzel’s (2008) theory, calls for self-expression values in the dissident population. Political graffiti and street art can be used as a medium and vehicle for the expression of these emancipative values, and can inspire those democratic values in those who view and interpret the political images.

IV. Case Study: Argentina (1976-1983 Dirty War/1983 Democratic Opening)

Argentina has had a long history of democratic openings and subsequent reversions back to authoritarian regimes, and throughout has developed a strong culture of political protest. Popular expression is greatly valued in Argentina, and street art and political graffiti can be found on almost every street corner. According to Chaffee, “the prevalence of street art was stimulated by the hyper politicized and polarized conflict among the social forces—military rule, social tensions, and a powerful populist movement—and by the unstable political system characterized by cyclical swings between authoritarian and democratic regimes” (Chaffee 1993). Starting from the country’s first democratic election in 1896, pamphlets and posters were popular tools for informing the public, as they “published 20,000 copies of their programs and pasted up 8,000 posters on the walls, fences, and buildings in Buenos Aires, trying to inform the working class. Lectures, pamphlets, and posters became standard campaign tactics. A tradition was born” (Chaffee 1993). Street art and political graffiti became even more popular following the country’s 1955 overthrow of the populist Peronist government, while under the military
dictatorship the media was censored and controlled. To challenge this hold over the flow of information, many groups used street art as an underground medium.

The most notable period in Argentine history during which the opposition’s efforts were shaped and defined by their use of political graffiti and popular images is during the military dictatorship under General Jorge Rafael Videla from 1976-1983. In March of 1976 the military staged a coup d’état against the democratically elected President Isabel Peron. Upon taking power, the military began the campaign known as the “Proceso de Reorganizacion Nacional” (Process of National Reorganization) during which the junta launched an ideological war against the left-wing population. The military junta regime was characterized by a brutal repression of political participation and grave human rights abuses, as they targeted what they labeled “leftist subversion.” Their campaign of torture, random arrests, murder, and “disappearances,” resulted in this period of military rule to be coined the “Dirty War.” The military dictatorship employed a unique form of state terrorism and repression and targeted any perceived political dissidents, left-wing activists, intellectuals and journalists. Their repression was characterized by brutal torture, illegal arrests, and most notably: the forced disappearances of an estimated 30,000 people. The military junta “disappeared” almost an entire generation of left-wing political activists and intellectuals, who were tortured, held in detention centers and most often eventually killed and hidden in mass graves. When the military came to power March 16, 1976, they immediately put all labor unions and universities under the government’s control and dissolved political parties, doing so allegedly to “restore order and peace to the country” (Agosin and Franzen 1987). While at the beginning of the military rule the victims of the terror, repression and torture were vocal dissidents and opponents of the regime, as time passed the victims seemed randomly chosen, and the “disappearing” of citizens became “routine and bureaucratic” (Agosin and Franzen 1987).
In the beginning years of the dictatorship the majority of the Argentine population were too afraid to voice their dissent. According to Chaffee “during this period, street art went underground. From the first six months to a year after the coup, there was a vigorous outpouring of antimilitary resistance graffiti…Graffiti such as ‘The moral and order of the military is hunger and repression of the people,’ was typical” (Chaffee 1993). However, the authoritarian regime’s repression intensified, and street art and graffiti became less popular until the beginning of the 1980s. One of the motivating factors Chaffee (1993) outlines for political street art that pertains specifically to the Argentina case is the “street culture/receiver explanation,” where Chaffee contends that because Latin America and Argentina in particular have a history of “vibrant street culture,” street art and graffiti seem to be a logical form of political communication. The exercise of self-expression values by the Argentine population, through the use of political graffiti, marked the beginning of the country’s democratic opening. Welzel and Inglehart (2009) argue that high levels of support for democracy can emerge in authoritarian societies even before they begin the transition to democracy, and that “rising education, information levels, opportunities to connect with people and other resources, broadens people’s action repertoires, further increasing the utility of freedom. In this view, self-expression values emerge and diffuse as a function of modernization, rather than as a function of long-term experience under democratic institutions.” According to Welzel and Inglehart’s theory (2009), mass emancipative values and self-expression values are the mediating variable between modernization and democratization, and “democracy is based on empowering human conditions in a society. It includes cultural conditions that motivate people to demand democracy, and economic conditions that make people capable of exerting effective demands.” In Argentina, graffiti and street art were an integral component of the cultural conditions that motivated the population to demand the transition to democracy.
Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

One group in particular which was able to speak out against the repressive authoritarian regime of General Videla was the human rights group “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), who first gathered on a Thursday afternoon in April 1977 in the main plaza in Buenos Aires. They wore white handkerchiefs tied symbolically around their necks, and they solemnly began to march in a counterclockwise circle outside of the Presidential Palace, the Casa Rosada. The mothers had met while waiting outside of the Ministry of the Interior, searching for their “disappeared” children, and had decided to form a collective to demand justice. The Madres were targeted by the military regime, and in 1978 the military junta captured eleven women along with the leader of the group, Azuzena Villaflor Vicenti, whose whereabouts are still unknown (Agosin and Franzen 1987). The Madres garnered international attention in 1978 when Argentina hosted the World Cup and international journalists documented their demonstrations in the city, when “the Mothers realized then that visibility and publicity were powerful weapons of protest…they became more and more effective, in spite of censorship, in spite of silence, in spite of ostracism,” (Agosin and Franzen 1987). The Madres used art and images to garner support and mobilize the masses in Argentina, constructing life-size silhouettes of the disappeared and parading through the plaza in a circle wearing masks. As Chaffee explains, “hand posters personalized the experience. Each woman held a photo affixed to paper or cardboard with the name and date of her disappeared. To heighten the visual impact, women wore white kerchiefs tied over their heads; embroidered in colored thread on the kerchief was the name and date of the disappeared kin” (Chaffee 1993). The Madres continued to inspire the Argentine population with their demonstrations and imagery, and by the early 1980s graffiti began to reappear on the city streets and buildings (Chaffee 1993).
The role of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in the transition to democracy in Argentina has been analyzed by many scholars, as they represent the successes of the human rights movement in subverting the “culture of fear” the authoritarian regime had cultivated.

Alison Brysk (1994) argues “one of the few studies of social psychology done during the Argentine dictatorship shows the effects of the ‘culture of fear’ as depoliticization and withdrawal, denial, privatization, ‘de-enlightenment’ about authority figures, and the acceptance of ‘micro-despotism.’” Brysk (1994) argues that in order to contest this “culture of fear,” groups such as the Madres used symbolic protest such as graffiti, as “symbolic protest as a necessity in Argentina because other channels were blocked. This necessity became a virtue because those spaces available for resistance were collective and normative.” Symbolic protest, including the use of graffiti and street art to create spaces of democratic participation, defined the success of the human rights movement during the transition to democracy. According to Brysk (1994), “using expressive modes of collective action, they created a counterhegemonic ‘culture of resistance’ to the privatization of state terror and linked both institutional and regime legitimacy to movement demands. Ultimately, both the

Figure 4: Life-size wheat paste of one of the Madres in Buenos Aires, Argentina. (BA Street Art)
particular nature of the human rights agenda and the movement’s use of symbolic politics led to a kind of collective learning that has shaped the transition to democracy.”

At times, the regime also encouraged street art in support of their policies. In 1982 when the ten-day Falklands war was declared between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) in the South Atlantic, the state encouraged street art in favor of the war effort (Chaffee 1993). This once again reignited the Argentine tradition of political participation through street art, which the population used to express their democratic ideals, and aided in the fall of the military regime. According to Chaffee, “when casualties began to mount, street art commemorated them; right-wing nationalists made the dead their martyrs to nationalism. When the war proved a disaster, the military regime collapsed. The walls castigated them in a stream of anti-armed forces sentiments that did not cease during the succeeding Alfonsín era” (Chaffee 1993). The end of the Falklands war and the fall of the military dictatorship resulted in a flood of graffiti and street art, ushering in the democratic opening of 1983.

**Graffiti and the Return to Democracy: An Integral Tool**

With the end of the war, the Argentine population’s self-expression values (Welzel 1996) were able to grow, as they used graffiti as a political tool to express their opinions and to provide social commentary. They initially used graffiti as a form of emotional release, as “a catharsis of posters, graffiti, and wallpaintings demanded accountability for human rights violations. The human rights movement rallying cry, *que aparexca* (reappearance), was proclaimed continually in the street art. Las Madres and other human rights groups used martyrdom in their street art to pressure the government for a full investigation…Throughout Buenos Aires posters and graffiti kept the issue in the forefront with a *Nunca Mas* (never again) slogan” (Chaffee 1993). Street art
following the war and during the democratic opening was essential as a form of therapy for the Argentine population, as they painted murals of martyrs and called for justice for the perpetrators of human rights abuses. The Madres once again played a large role in the proliferation of street art as a means of political protest, and on the first day of the restoration of democracy in December of 1983, “overnight thousands of human-size posters with the silhouetted figures of the disappeared outlined in black on white appeared, posters produced by las Madres. The silhouetted figures indicated the range of human forms of the disappeared—children, teenagers, women and men, pregnant women, and couples” (Chaffee 1993). This form of street art personalized the heartbreak the population felt during Videla’s dictatorship, and mobilized the masses in an effort to “never again” (“Nunca Mas!”) suffer under authoritarian rule. Street art and graffiti surrounding the legacy of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and the “disappeared” characterized the use of graffiti as a tool for collective memory. The end of the Falklands war and the fall of General Videla resulted in an explosion of street art, as Silvio Waisbord (1996) explains, “the exuberant popular fervor petitioning the holding of elections was best expressed in streets frequently swamped with jubilant masses, political affiches and graffiti. Whether

Figure 5: Stencil of Las Madres’ iconic headscarf in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
in profusely painted walls, private and municipal billboards saturated with political posters, numerous pasacalles [signs hanging from trees and lampposts], and buses and trains displaying political signs, cityscapes revealed both rising anti-government sentiments and a highly-spirited electioneering atmosphere.” The fall of the authoritarian regime was a result of the population’s increased emancipative values and desire for democracy, and they took to the streets to write on the walls their expectations for their future democratic system.

During the transition to democracy, street art became even more widely popular and encompassing, as “the walls became a historical repository of the issues with which the democratic system had to grapple…an unsponsored poster on inauguration day summed it up, ‘Democracy—now you have it—guard it’” (Chaffee 1993). According to Chaffee, in the years following 1983 until 1990, street art continually expanded, as those who were denied a voice during the military junta seized their opportunity for democratic political participation. Chaffee states, “further augmenting the process was that in a politicized society like Argentina, new groups, new alliances, and splinters from old collectives form, break apart, and reform, in a continual struggle for survival, recognition and greater leverage. Each group used street art to advertise its metamorphosis, its identity, and its realignment” (Chaffee 1993). The main issues the Argentine people became involved in included the prosecution of those who violated human rights during the “Dirty War,” Argentina’s international debt, economic policies, restoring union democracy, and the politics of divorce. Graffiti and street art campaigns were utilized for each issue, and campaigns began to focus on street art for name recognition and spreading messages (Chaffee 1993).

Street art memorializing the past human rights abuses is still prevalent in the streets in Argentina, and since the return to democracy street art has remained a popular tool for political
participation in Argentina. Today, anti-United States imperialism street art is popular, as well as graffiti pertaining to student politics. According to Chaffee (1993), the educational facilities have been important targets for street art and graffiti, and “every inch of outdoor wall space was constantly covered. The institution’s walls became rich historical depositories.” Street art and graffiti have helped foster a culture of democracy in Argentina, and ensured that the memory of those “disappeared” would be constantly present on the city walls.

**Dirty War Criminals on Trial: The Power of Collective Memory**

Upon taking office in 1983, President Raul Alfonsin, of the Radical Party, initiated the process of investigating the thousands of Argentine “disappeared” by creating the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) and including members of prominent human rights organizations such as Las Madres (Crenzel 2011). President Alfonsin also initiated one of the world’s first processes of transitional justice, and ordered the prosecution and investigation of those involved in the military junta and guerilla leaders, and “established a convention that while those who issued the illegal orders to repress, and those who committed excesses in the fulfillment of the orders would be prosecuted, while those who had simply carried out the orders would not be held accountable” (Crenzel 2011). In November of 1984, CONADEP published a report on the political violence during the coup, entitled “Nunca Más” (“Never Again”), which stated the names of many of the disappeared and included testimonies from the perpetrators. The report provided descriptions of the institutionalized system of disappearances, and the processes of torture. Because the military dictatorship had vehemently denied any knowledge of the “disappearances,” the publication of “Nunca Más” was vital to validate the collective memory of the Argentine public. According to Argentine scholar Emilio Crenzel’s (2011) analysis of CONADEP’s role, “through the articulation of the voices of the
State and the human rights movement, “Nunca Más” offers a new ‘emblematic memory’ of the past marked by political violence. The notion of ‘emblematic memory’ refers to configurations which provide interpretative meaning to reflect on and evoke the past, integrating personal memories and concrete experiences, and which, backed by legitimate spokespersons, resonate in the public sphere.” “Nunca Más” was later used as a key source of evidence in the 1985 trials against the military juntas, and became incorporated into school curricula, “in this way, ‘Nunca Más” became a vehicle for establishing an ethical and intergenerational commitment regarding Argentina’s past political violence and dictatorship’ (Crenzel 2011).

Reflected in the CONADEP’s publication “Nunca Más,” and the efforts of human rights organizations during the transition to democracy, is the importance of publicizing the atrocities committed during the dictatorship to prevent future horrors. In order for the democratization process to be seen as legitimate by the public, the widespread human rights abuses under the military regime needed to be addressed. Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin argues that the pervasive idea following the fall of the dictatorship was “that only through remembering can avoidance of such violations be ensured—as if ‘never again’ could only be guaranteed by the constant remembrance of the terror experienced during the dictatorship” (Jelin 1994). The concept of “collective memory,” first coined by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, can be understood as the collective understanding of a commonly experienced memory in a specific population. Jelin argues that during the transition to democracy in Argentina, the human rights movement’s biggest fear was “collective forgetting” (Jelin 1994). Jelin emphasizes the importance of “truth” and “justice” to the Argentine community during democratization, and argues that the “Nunca Más” report succeeded in disseminating the truth, but justice was much more difficult to attain. Jelin argues, “in political terms, fragile new democracies face difficulties
in implementing truth and justice: there is fear of the reaction of the guilty (mostly military men and their supporters, who retain considerable power and some social base), including the threat of a new coup d’état and other manifestations of force and resistance; there is the factual impossibility of bringing to trial all those responsible for violations and compensating all the victims” (Jelin 1994). Although justice for all perpetrators seemed almost impossible in the initial stages of democratization, reports such as “Nunca Más” were essential in keeping the importance of truth and justice in the national discourse. The new turn to democracy would have been ineffective without addressing the atrocities committed during the authoritarian rule, and graffiti was integral in fostering communication regarding memory.

Many scholars have since argued that truth and reconciliation of past abuses, such as those that occurred during Argentina’s “Dirty War,” must be resolved in a population’s collective memory for democratization to succeed. Since the “Nunca Más” report was published, there has not been an in-depth investigation by the government expanding on the initial findings, but the need for “truth” for the Argentine society has not dissipated. Vincent Druliolle (2013), in his analysis of the Argentine society.
human rights group H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio/Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silencing), argues that “democracy and participation are not reduced to (representative) institutions and voting: They are about direct, active involvement in politics, and the politics of memory is a unique opportunity to overcome a legacy of terror and to shape the values and institutions of postconflict society.” There is an extensive debate over the importance of remembering or forgetting to the success of democracy, and many scholars argue the necessity of the politics of memory and transitional justice to make a successful shift from an authoritarian regime to democracy (Druliolle 2013). H.I.J.O.S. is a human rights organization initiated by the children of the “disappeared,” which primarily stages “escraches,” which are loud, “carnivalesque” demonstrations and marches, where they demonstrate outside the houses of accused human rights violators. The “escraches” are spectacular visual demonstrations, much like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo marches, which reject the impunity of the perpetrators of the human rights abuses. Druliolle (2013) argues “Argentina raises the question of how a society can remember when, despite criminal prosecution of the perpetrators, the number of disappeared will remain only an estimate, some aspects of the repression will never be fully known, and most perpetrators keep showing no remorse for their crimes—in short, when both memory and justice remain partial and incomplete.” Even without clear results from efforts to establish truth and justice, the process is integral to democratization and graffiti plays a key role in the fostering of a collective memory and continuing the democratic rhetoric of “never again.”

Expanding upon the importance of memory to democratization, Ana Forcintio (2008) argues that individual and marginalized memories must be valued in constructing the significance of a “collective memory.” The beginning of the process of bringing the perpetrators
of the dictatorship’s abuses to justice defined the first years of the transition to democracy, and voicing the testimonies of the witnesses and survivors of the atrocities was integral to fostering a culture of democracy. Forcintio (2008) states “the continuing role of the survivors is not to be circumscribed solely to juridical instances but also concerns a broad range of cultural practices, that not only serve to position witnesses as citizens in the official interpellation that was supposed to lead to justice, but also to affirm their role as cultural and political agents.” Forcintio (2008) argues that during the decade following the return to democracy, the figure of the disappeared “served to resignify democratic practice in accordance with the respect of human rights,” and graffiti representations of the disappeared, such as those employed by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo worked to visually promote a culture of democracy.

Brysk (1994) also emphasizes the importance of interpretations of the past to democratization, and argues, “the establishment of a democratic national identity following authoritarianism must be based on a reinterpretation of the past to avoid its repetition. Authoritarian repression often seeks to rewrite and conceal the history of its victims; as it transforms citizens into subjects, state terror seeks to eliminate even the memory that there were victims. The Argentine human rights movement helped to recover the past by reclaiming the identity of the disappeared as citizens. On the eve of the 1983 transition elections, the movement printed a stunning eight-page newspaper supplement resembling pages from voter rolls, listing thousands of disappeared persons, their dates of disappearance, and their national identity document numbers, with the caption WHERE WILL THE DISAPPEARED VOTE?” While increasing their self-expression values and cultivating a collective memory, Argentine graffiti artists and human rights groups created images and slogans to ensure that those who were disappeared were not forgotten.
Eric Langenbacher and Kyle Dandelet (2005) also argue that collective memory and those actions that foster a collective memory, such as graffiti are key to the process of democratization. Langenbacher and Dandelet (2005) state that “open and public discussions of memory and efforts to work through the past indeed positively effect democracy in a variety of ways: by invigorating civil society and re-building societal trust, by promoting vigilance against anti-democratic groups and weakening ‘authoritarian enclaves,’” and most importantly, by increasing the legitimacy of the democratic regime through an emphasis on human rights and transparency.” Langenbacher and Dandelet (2005) outline the transition from Argentina’s Dirty War to democracy under President Raul Alfonsín, and criticize the decades of immunity following the amnesty laws implemented by Alfonsín and his successor President Carlos Menem. However, they attribute the success of the cultivation of collective memory to both the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S., and their use of spectacle, imagery and street art. By 1985 the Buenos Aires Federal Appeals Court sentenced five junta members to prison for human rights violations, but this did not satisfy the public’s demand for justice. When President

Figure 7: Stencil reads "Videla does not have entity—he is neither alive nor dead." Videla died May 2013 in prison. (Photo Source: BBC News).
Carlos Menem came into office in 1989, he issued two sets of presidential pardons to free those who had been convicted and those who were on trial, and in doing so “offered an alternative, even more radical institutionalist approach: forgiving and forgetting” (Langenbacker and Dandelet 2005). Menem introduced massive neoliberal economic reforms, which led to a monumental crisis in 2001, and “as soon as Argentines began hearing the approaching footsteps of what would become one of history’s most severe crises, the collective amnesia of the Menem years faded away and 30,000 ghosts suddenly reappeared,” (Langenbacker and Dandelet 2005).

In 1996, following years of human rights group’s work in cultivating a collective memory; the city of Buenos Aires initiated the construction of the Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory). When President Nestor Kirchner took office in 2003, he began his presidency by changing the human rights discourse and, “in doing so, sparked important developments in Argentina’s struggle to make amends with its past. During his inauguration, Kirchner, a political outsider and a member of a much younger generation, announced that he came to the government as ‘a son of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” (Langenbacker and Dandelet 2005).

Decades since the end of the authoritarian regime, the importance of keeping those atrocities committed in the Argentine collective memory and discourse has not diminished. Graffiti around the city of Buenos Aires continues to keep the military junta a central theme, as visual representations of the disappeared, stencils of the military generals, and slogans reading variations of “Nunca Más!” (Never Again!) continue to cover the walls of the city.

As more time passes since the fall of the military junta, and the democracy of Argentina becomes more established and consolidated, the importance of the collective and shared memory of the atrocities committed has increased in Argentina. Graffiti, a form of political participation as well as the manifestation and inspiration of self-expression values, increased the effectiveness
of the collective memory in fostering the democratic and antimilitary culture of Argentina.

According to Chaffee (1993), “the antimilitary campaign sought to arouse public consciousness, destroy the military’s credibility, and settle old scores by seeking political retribution, an attitude that emerged from fifty years of direct and indirect military rule. One of the most astute displays of graffiti was carried by the major media the next day; it occurred the night before the trials on April 22. An unidentified group painstakingly wrote on the famous obelisk in downtown Buenos Aires the names of each of the twelve hundred individuals named in the commission report [“Nunca Mas”]…a graffito message accompanied the names; ‘all should be tired and none granted amnesty.’” Graffiti, while working to increase the population’s emancipative values (Welzel 1996), also created a public consciousness and collective memory, which discredited the authoritarian regime and gave validation to the new democracy.

Stephanie Kane (2009) argues that graffiti in Argentina should be understood as cultural products that are both “archive and repertoire.” Kane states that Argentine graffiti stencils are representative of “a particularly successful moment of peaceful resistance to violent repression,” and that “they sustain a form of heightened politicality independent of that achieved through more everyday transgression of the fraught lines between legal and illegal spatial marking activities in most marginal sites. After all, the faceless human silhouette (like the white kerchiefs of the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo which have also entered the stencil corpus) was deployed as a weapon of truth in an all-out war.” Kane characterizes the role of the stencil graffiti in Argentina as a “defender of the public against crimes of state,” and as a crucial performance of cultural and collective memory.
“Redemocratization”, Argentine Culture and Graffiti

Many scholars have stated that Argentina simply has an authoritarian culture, and as Steven Chaffee, Roxana Morduchowicz and Hernan Galperin (1997) argue, “Argentina, one of the world’s richer nations at the turn of the century, experienced from 1930 to 1983 a late and unbalanced industrialization process, under alternating populist governments, weak democracies, and oppressive military regimes. The result was a political culture of intolerance marked by a distrust of pluralism and of democratic debate as a legitimate means of conflict resolution.” However, with the increase in political graffiti and the humiliation of the authoritarian regime at the end of the Falklands war, the Argentine public showed a strong interest in a democratic government and increased political participation and self-expression values. On April 28, 1986 the National Program of Cultural Democratization was implemented in Argentina (Foster et. al 1989), in an effort to aid the country in its process of “redemocratization” with an emphasis on the importance of fostering a “culture” of democracy within the country. As Inglehart and Welzel (2008) argue, the self-expression values cultivated by graffiti are integral in establishing a culture of democracy and in turn leading to a successful process of democratization. After a long history of democracy littered with authoritarian periods, the new democratic government

Figure 8: Street art of child holding a photo of one of the "disappeared" with the slogan of H.I.J.O.S. "Justice and Punishment" on shirt. (Photo Source: BBC News)
under President Alfonsín recognized the importance of establishing norms and ideals of
democracy, as, according to Argentine novelist and director of the National Program of Cultural
Democratization Marcos Aguinis, “Authoritarianism is not a sporadic visit, but a permanent
resident. It has existed in our land for a long time. And it has made its mark in education,
political conduct, and everyday life, including hospitality, sports, the sciences, and public
administration. Its influence is so profound that it has blended with ‘the permanent features of
the national identity,’” (Foster et. al 1989). The importance of instilling democratic ideals and
fostering self-expression values (Welzel 1996) was crucial to the process of “redemocratization,”
and according to Aguinis, “the policy for a democratic evolution, therefore, needs to turn
passivity into activity, to stimulate protagonism, to facilitate participation, to encourage free
thought, and to educate not for obedience, but for liberty,” (Foster et. al 1989). Argentine
scholars who attended the symposium (Foster et. al 1989) to discuss the National Program of
Cultural Democratization emphasized the necessity of analyzing the role of culture throughout a
political transformation, as Javier Toree and Adriana Zaffaroni wrote, “if we understand culture
to be the total processes through which the symbolic goods of any society and all individuals are
created, disseminated, appropriated, and reproduced; if we realize that those symbolic goods—
ideas, codes, works of art, discourses, lifestyles, educational models social myths—articulate the
concrete life of human beings and the communities they form, perhaps we might agree to
consider culture a prime factor in the conservation of in the transformation of the political and
social order,” (Foster et. al 1989). Argentina became defined by its authoritarian history, and in
turn developed a culture that rationalized dictatorial regimes. However, after the loss of the
Falklands War and the initiation of the democratic opening in 1983, the culture of Argentina
began to shift, inspired by the renewed emergence and proliferation of political graffiti and street art.

**Measuring Democratic Values and Culture in Argentina During the Transition**

In an analysis of “Cultural Trends in Argentina: 1983-2000,” Marita Carballo uses empirical data from World Value Surveys from 1984 (one year after the democratic opening), 1991, 1995 and 1999 to analyze the significant changes in Argentine attitudes and values concerning democracy in the decades following the end of authoritarian rule. Since the democratic opening, it has been increasingly apparent that Argentines have increased the value they place on citizen participation. As Carballo argues, “as time passed, Argentines attached more importance to increased citizen participation. In fact, from 1984 to 1999, the percentage of Argentines who considered increased involvement as a priority rose from 21% to 30%, while the percentage of those who prioritized order maintenance dropped from 42% to 33%. Priority given to the protection of freedom of speech rose from 9% to 19%, while priority given to combating inflation declined from 27% to 18%” (Carballo 2008).

Carballo also argues that there has been a shift from the left to the right in the decades following...
the return to democracy, stating “during the first years that the World Values Survey was conducted, when democracy was restored after seven years of non-democratic regime that ended in deep disgrace (economic crisis, the Malvinas War, human rights questionings), public opinion was closer to the left wing. As it became increasingly apparent that the democratic government was failing to overcome the economic woes, and was beginning to lose its popular support, Argentines began to move to the center, especially when inflation spiraled out of control” (Carballo 2008). It is evident in Argentina that support for democracy since the transition has varied depending on the country’s economic success, or “action resources” (Welzel 2008).

Immediately after the end of authoritarianism in 1983, the Argentine public had high expectations for the country’s democratic future, especially economically, and many Argentines were dissatisfied with the economic outcome of the first ten years of democracy. However, political participation and self-expression in Argentina has remained a key value in spite of periods of poor economic performance, as graffiti and human rights group’s demonstrations have continued the dissemination of democratic values.

In his analysis of surveys conducted from 1982-3 Edgardo Catterberg (1990) argues that during this period of transition attitudes supporting participatory democracy were increasing. Catterberg (1990) states, “the extensive consensus to participative values is clearly reflected in the fact that three fourths of the population support the universal vote and periodical elections as bases for the political system. These attitudes—which according to our data existed prior to the transition—became stronger in 1983, when an ‘opening’ in political life took place during the final stages of the military regime.” Catterberg, analyzing surveys asking Argentines to respond to questions such as “Democracy is dangerous because it may bring about disorder and disorganization,” found that “in short, the population support for participatory aspects of
democracy is not only greater than support for liberties or freedom, but also proves to be more stable over time” (Catterberg 1990). 69% of those interviewed disagreed with Catterberg’s (1990) statement “Democracy is dangerous because it can bring disorder and disorganization.”

During the transition to democracy, the Argentine public, inspired by graffiti and street art, expressed clear support for democratic values and aversion to authoritarian rule.

There was a distinct and empirically verified shift in culture and values during the transition to democracy following 1983 in Argentina. This increase in self-expression values and subsequent turn to democracy was facilitated by an increase in political graffiti and street art throughout the country.

**Conclusions**

Areas for further research are extensive, as the perceived legitimacy of the democracy of Argentina suffered huge blows during the economic crisis of 2001. Examining the influx of graffiti that occurred after the crisis, much of which demanded “que se vayan todos!” (that all of the government officials leave), could lead to interesting findings. Further research venues implementing modernization theory could include investigating the public opinion of political graffiti while controlling for socioeconomic status or studying those who create the political graffiti and their backgrounds. Another area of research could compare the level of democratic values between the population of the city of Buenos Aires and those who live in the provinces, where there is less graffiti. Graffiti and its role in the process of democratization offers many more complex variables and venues for study, and much more research can be done on their relationship.

Edelman (1995) and Truman (2010) argue that art, including political graffiti and street art, can have a critical influence on a population’s behavior and culture. In a country with a
turbulent political history, characterized by swings between authoritarian and democratic regimes, graffiti has proven to have a strong impact on the political participation and behavior of the Argentine people. Living under a repressive regime founded on the desire for censorship and control forced the Argentine people to turn to other forms of political communication to foster the self-expression values that Welzel and Inglehart (2008) argue are integral to the process of democratization. According to Welzel and Inglehart (2009), “emancipative values give priority to tolerance over conformity, autonomy over authority, gender equality over patriarchy, and participation over security. If these beliefs arise in an authoritarian regime, the very legitimacy of authoritarian rule is undermined and mass regime opposition that topples these regimes becomes more likely.” Graffiti, along with street art and public spectacles employed by prominent human rights organizations, increased the population’s capacity for self-expression, and offered an alternative political tool for democratization. Graffiti has been a part of Argentine culture for decades, and holds a symbolic power in Argentine society to unite people and shape public consciousness. During the first stages of the transition to democracy in 1983 graffiti was the most widely used and effective tool for political participation, whether Argentines were involved in its production or reacted to its presence in the streets. Graffiti and street art played an integral role in fostering these emancipative and self-expression values in order to delegitimize the authoritarian regime and create a culture of democracy in Argentina. Graffiti, in creating visibly attractive images and clever slogans, was a key way in which the population was able to keep the rallying cry of “Nunca Mas!” (Never Again!) in the public consciousness and increase support for the democratic values that would prohibit such horrific human rights abuses to be repeated. Graffiti and street art was also a vital tool for keeping the atrocities experienced under the authoritarian regime in the country’s collective memory, increasing the people’s democratic
values and rejection of authoritarian culture. Graffiti provided visuals for a shift in the “ideological frame” that Welzel (2008) describes, fostering a culture of democratic freedom of expression in the Argentine population. Art, and graffiti, inspires creativity and expression in a population, and in Argentina this increased self-expression and emancipative values led to the fostering of democratic values and culture to initiate and sustain the democratization process.
References


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