

# The conversion of a citizen in a violent and insecure Buenos Aires. Towards horrifying anarchy along the inexorable path of crime run amok

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February 1995, at midday on a hot Friday, a car pulls up in front of a block of flats. Another vehicle rams into it from behind and a young man gets out. He has a well-groomed appearance, with short cropped hair, and is carrying a 9 mm pistol in his hand. He points the pistol at the other driver who is now getting out of his vehicle and tells him to hand over the money he has just taken out of the bank. He refuses and a furious struggle ensues. The attacker puts the gun against the victim's temple and pulls the trigger. It fails to go off. The scene finishes with the young man hitting the victim over the head repeatedly with the butt of the pistol, leaving him unconscious.

The police go round to the victim's house to take a statement. He describes his assailant as a member of the security forces, evidently well trained in the use of firearms, extremely calm and adept at street fighting techniques. A question hangs in the air: **does he think his attacker was a policeman?**

Forty days later the victim is summoned to appear at the District Attorney's office to confirm the details of what happened. He is attended by a junior intern – a law student - who notes down the facts in a haphazard fashion and with glaring spelling errors. At the end she tells the victim in a low voice, as if it were confidential, that the case would be classified as "Assailant Unknown" and that no investigation would be carried out.

**So why bother to take the victim's statement at all?**

Despite the fact that the victim changes his usual routines, keeps an eye on his surroundings and looks out for suspicious signs or dangerous situations, he is attacked again in July as he is leaving a bank. This time his assailants are three men on a motorcycle and the robbery takes place barely 70 metres from a police station.

Again the victim goes to the police station to report the crime. This time he is required to present witnesses who can vouch for his identity and his trustworthiness as: "a man of good character". All the witnesses he presents are threatened with legal proceeding and penalties for perjury. This time they don't even ask for a description of the assailants, **at least they were more honest this time - they weren't interested.**

One of the witnesses observes that **"being a witness is more dangerous than being a thief..."** .

Yet the unfortunate protagonist of our story had one more frightening experience to undergo: being robbed near a shantytown known locally as "Fort Apache" (in the 'Ejército de los Andes' district) while with his family. Their two assailants went about their work **in full view of about 50 bystanders who watched what was going on with evident amusement, and did nothing to stop it.**

**What goes through the minds of the people of this neighbourhood that they tacitly approved and encouraged what these young criminals were doing?**

The protagonist of these stories is a 50 year old doctor with 4 children, who is worried about the safety of his family. Not least because violent crime in his neighbourhood still goes on. In 1996 this reign of terror reached a new low when a pharmacist was shot dead during a robbery committed by three teenagers, one of whom –a girl - was barely out of puberty.

The neighbourhood reacted with demonstrations in the street and appearances in the media calling for better security, increased police presence and tougher sentencing.

Another group of residents “Vecinos Solidarios, Plan Alerta” (Neighbours United, Vigilance Project) decided to draw up a local prevention plan based on neighbourhood networks, on the assumption that:

- No public institution was capable of providing an effective security service,
- They could only trust their counterparts: other residents who were exposed to the same risks and lived in fear every day.

The neighbourhood organization was based on the British ‘neighbourhood watch’ system.

Their ideas and proposals were disseminated through a webpage and by e-mail, which in turn led to the formation of numerous other groups in the Capital district, Greater Buenos Aires and in other parts of the country.

The social, economic and cultural characteristics of each region were taken into account, thereby achieving a greater efficiency in each zone.

By banding together, Vecinos Solidarios acquired negotiating power and were able to bring pressure to bear on those in charge of public service provision in order to obtain specific demands. In this way they were able to secure better street lighting for key sectors in the neighbourhood using additional lighting, by alleging “state of necessity”, a legal provision which allows flexibility with regard to the strict application of the law in extreme circumstances. They were also able to negotiate police protection for certain risk areas, as well as establishing the technical means for emergency communication. Talks were organized and discussions were held with police officers of all ranks, resulting in a greater appreciation of public anxieties about violent crime in the locality.

In 1999 their neighbourhood (Saavedra) became the subject of a pilot project aimed at decentralizing the system of District Attorney’s. The scheme was headed by Dr. Quantin and his team (including Drs. Campagnoli, Rodríguez Varela, Irigaray, Cura, Gallo, among others). The new District Attorney’s offices adopted a policy of touring the neighbourhood, arranging talks for the residents, attending the public in extended opening hours, acting as intermediaries between the police and the residents in order to develop prevention plans for specific points, and eradicating some of the administrative inefficiencies in police stations, etc.

They published crime maps for the area so that residents could take preventative action based on the crime patterns shown in real time. This helped identify the types of criminal activity perpetrated in the area and also gave residents the chance to voice their anxieties to senior police officers.

Despite the fact that the achievements of the scheme were sufficient to justify its application elsewhere, they came up against stiff resistance.

As an example:

For party political reasons another District Attorney’s office had to be set up in the neighbourhood of La Boca. The Argentinean Congress decided that the District Attorney’s office of La Boca should be the permanent one, and that the District Attorney’s office of Saavedra would be closed when the pilot scheme came to an end.

The residents of Saavedra lobbied Congress in order to defend their newly won District Attorney’s office, pointing out that:

- The process of decentralization was based on the experience of Saavedra, and that it would be absurd not to establish the permanent District Attorney’s office there.

- The statute which intended to authorize the establishment of new District Attorney’s offices on a case-by-case basis was a crass error given that it merely responded to ad hoc needs instead of establishing a judicial policy.

- A legislative act can only be regarded as a true act of government policy if it establishes broad lines of action, leaving the administrative details to be resolved at a later stage. The reply given was that “we didn’t give this power to the members of Congress because it was more responsibility than it was desirable to give them”.

- Decentralisation generated strong opposition from the Justice Department, who did not wish to see any change in the “status quo”. They did not consider it a cause for concern that district attorneys worked in offices which are 40 Km away from the district for which they are responsible, that they

were only open to the public from 11.00 AM to 3.00 PM, that they did not conduct adequate examinations of crime scenes, etc. Moreover, the system of rotation within the District Attorney's offices prevented investigating officers from getting to know the characteristics of the neighbourhoods which limited their understanding of the contexts of the crimes under investigation.

For their part, the residents continued to insist on the development of new preventive techniques, obtaining new successes with the introduction of "Safe Corridors"<sup>3</sup>, a scheme which was researched and implemented in Greater Buenos Aires (Burzaco, Mármol, Banfield) and later copied by the municipal authorities of the City of Buenos Aires.

In 2003, Dr. Béliz was appointed Minister of Justice and gave Dr. Quantin and his team key posts.

This was the beginning of the development of a genuine government policy, based on:

- Decentralization of the Justice Department.
- A single, unified system of criminal records, which would permit the identification of criminals in any part of the country (Proyecto SURC).
- The creation of crime maps in real time, permitting the continuous monitoring of the performance of law enforcement institutions (Police, Justice Department).
- Setting up a neighbourhood monitoring structure by means of neighbourhood crime prevention networks (Proyecto Renaseco).
- Publishing the curricula vitae of the senior officers of each police station, as well as making crime statistics available on a monthly basis so that the public is aware of the current state in the security in the area, and developing new preventative techniques with the agreement of the residents.
- Restoring the tarnished image of the law enforcement agencies and Justice Department by improving the service they provide to the public and rewarding efficiency.
- Developing preventive schemes for rural areas, preventing cattle theft.
- Combating crime by targeting the commercial channels through which stolen goods are sold.
- Firearms schemes, improved security for tourists, etc.
- Trial by jury.
- An elite police agency with a nationwide jurisdiction, along the lines of the American FBI.

These proposals were not approved immediately. Not until another shocking kidnap and murder had been committed in which the police and other institutions played a deplorable role: the Axel Blumberg case.

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<sup>3</sup> The "safe corridors" scheme grew out of the concerns of the head teachers of schools in Burzaco (Partido de Almirante Brown, Greater Buenos Aires, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina) about the growing number of violent incidents suffered by pupils. The final impetus was provided by the rape of two teenagers on their way home from school.

The Safe Corridors were constructed using the streets most often used by pupils on their way to each school, taking into account shared routes common to all the schools involved. On each route there are designated shops or houses where pupils can take refuge in the event of any threatening incident.

A map showing these "Safe Corridors" has been pinned up in the classrooms of all the ten schools participating in the scheme. All the schools taking part in the scheme are private – some religious, others not - and all are based in Burzaco. The state schools have not joined the scheme. "We wanted to include them, but the hierarchical administrative structure and the bureaucracy one has to get through made it impossible," explains one of the scheme's proponents.

**The schools concerned also tackle the subject of insecurity in the classroom** with the following methodology:

- a) Pupils draw maps in class showing where all of them live.
- b) They identify the most conflictive areas and the safest routes.
- c) Parents and teachers have succeeded in including shops and homes in the scheme to which pupils can go for help or refuge in dangerous situations.

The school heads sent out 10,000 letters to parents with very detailed instructions: that pupils should always use the designated routes; that they should not do the journey alone but in groups of at least three; and that parents should always accompany their children to the start of the corridor. The Safe Corridors are now also used by adults and old people.

Axel Blumberg, a teenage boy from a middle class family, was killed while trying to escape from his kidnappers shortly after the untimely appearance of patrol cars belonging to the Greater Buenos Aires police force and a mobile unit of the SIDE (State Intelligence Service) wrecked an attempt to pay the ransom.

His father, Juan Carlos Blumberg, called a demonstration outside the Argentinean Congress building attended by some 200,000 people. Demonstrators held burning candles and showed photographs of the victims of the insecurity ranging from kidnappings, reckless use of firearms, to police officers killed in the line of duty. There was little chanting, but what there was, was mostly directed at political leaders, members of Congress, judges, district attorneys and police officers.

Accompanied by shouts of "down with corruption" and "give us justice", a series of demands were presented including calls for tougher sentencing and new legislation on gun control.

The members of Congress had no choice but to accept that the legislative system had failed and so approved the proposals almost without debate. This is yet another cruel demonstration, of the fact that Argentinean legislators are incapable of formulating national policy and merely bow to public pressure with the following excuse: "we are the reprehensive of the people. If they demand these changes we have the moral duty to comply with the demands of the people"...

In this way, if the measures adopted prove to be ineffective, the responsibility for their failure will fall on the shoulders of Juan Carlos Blumberg and the citizens who proposed them, thereby covering and justifying the incapacity, negligence and arrogance of Argentina's legislators.

Argentinean society tries to create idols in order to canalize its dreams, its frustrations, and its lack of leadership. This is at the root of the strange relationship which a large proportion of Argentinean society has with a man who showed absolutely no commitment to social questions when his own son was killed. Yet many politicians would sell their souls to get their hands on that kind of charisma.

The executive was also unable to resist the force of popular demand and so presented the Integrated Security Plan with much pomp and circumstance on the 19 of April.

Vecinos Solidarios, who had been quietly, but steadily, campaigning since 1997, believed that they were finally on the point of obtaining their objective: a coherent and feasible plan.

However, in Argentina, where public servants wield power in the manner of feudal overlords and the majority of the population is socially and economically disenfranchised and has the mentality of colonial serfs - policies aimed at bringing about the kinds of social changes required to create a modern democracy do not last long. Differences of opinion with regard to the handling of the "pickets" issue led to the dismissal of Dr. B eliz and his team (the immoral political exploitation of the poorest sections of society vs. the enforcement of the law and the constitution).

The Integrated Security Plan is floundering and, in the worst-case scenario may well soon be written off the statute books.

The new authorities which have been appointed are doing nothing in the face of the new wave of kidnappings, while society at large celebrates the liberation of the victims –once the ransom has been paid– and resigns itself to the growing impunity of the criminals.

We now hear with monotonous frequency that "the kidnappings are a result of the displacement of criminals previously engaged in the stripping and resale of parts taken from stolen cars to a much more profitable activity".

This leads us to pose the following questions:

- Are the new public servants going to permit criminal activity in the automotive sector in order to control kidnappings?.

- The organizational structure of the chop-shops and the sale of stolen automobile parts are based on links and shared interests among public servants from a wide variety of government agencies (police officers, politicians, members of the judiciary, municipal government, etc). This in turn raises the question as to whether the gangs which specialize in kidnappings share the same contacts?

On 26 of August 2004 Juan Carlos Blumberg succeeded in organizing another demonstration which drew tens of thousands of citizens (police and press sources put the exact figure at around 75,000) calling for better security, and political and legislative change. In the midst of this maelstrom of demands, proposals, cries, wolf-whistles and tears of the friends and family of kidnap victims the demonstrators gave explicit voice to a grievance which has been welling up silently over the last few years:

"The problem is that, here in Argentina, civil rights are for criminals, not for honest, law-abiding citizens"

This is symptomatic of the structural decay of Argentinean society which is now on a path of no-return towards anarchy and violence.

### **Conclusion**

*Vecinos Solidarios, Plan Alerta, is an informal organization, which is non-hierarchical and open. Its brief is the analysis, planning and development of techniques relating to Urban Security. All the members of the organization have equal rights. The duties of each participant depend on the dictates of his or her conscience. No one obeys orders: decisions are consensual within a framework of freedom of conscience. Its objectives are:*

- Disseminating the basic concepts of individual and community crime prevention.
- Promoting the debate on security.
- Working together so that Public Security (a duty which is incumbent upon the State and which cannot be evaded ) is offered equally to all inhabitants. (Art. 34 of the Constitution of the City of Buenos Aires).
- Demonstrating to public servants and political leaders that the community is prepared to collaborate in solving its own problems in the full exercise of its civil rights (1) . The political time frames of our elected representatives do not generally reflect the urgency of public demands.

Its members work "ad honorem" and without party politics with the aim of:

- *Promoting independent negotiations.*
- *Sustaining philosophical integrity.*
- *Maintaining a critical spirit.*

Vecinos Solidarios are conscious of the fact that the increase in criminal activity and in levels of violence is intimately connected with social problems such as unemployment, poverty, marginalization and exclusion. The incapacity of the state to provide the wherewithal to foster incorporation and system of production which is increasingly more demanding and restrictive, the decline of the public health system and the exit of unemployed persons from the contribution-based Social Security system, are other contributing factors.

Vecinos Solidarios are also very conscious of the fact that illegal practices which occur within public institutions sap the legitimacy of these institutions in terms of maintaining law and order. If the efficiency of law enforcement institutions rests on the dissuasive power of the law being applied and being seen to be applied, the widespread incidence of illegal practices in public institutions annuls this function and acts as an incentive to other sectors of the population to break the law themselves. Nor do they ignore the erosion of social ties related to the loss of legitimacy of the organizations which bind citizens together such as political parties and trade unions.

All these factors have caused profound changes in the traditional identities of large segments of the population, affected by the breakdown of the structure of social life outside the work sphere, by the growing incapacity of the state to fulfil its traditional and crucial role as the force which holds society together, as these social groups find themselves voiceless, impotent witnesses to the continual illegal practices (internal and external) of the public institutions, without their being reliable channels (such as political parties or trade unions) for the expression of their demands.

The erosion of these identities affects social ties, leads to social fragmentation and favours the emergence of violence as an expression of the incapacity to establish alliances and agreements and as a product of the collapse of social consensus.

Violence can also play a constructive role. It can form part of new forms of protest, it can establish identities and build ties, although, obviously it operates within the framework of the reality imposed by the modern society, conditioned by globalization and neo-liberal ideas. With the passage of time it comes to have its own social manifestations such “cumbia villera”<sup>4</sup>, the musical voice of the shantytowns of Buenos Aires (see note below).

Despite the erosion of certain social groups there are various forms of leadership or emerging movements voicing the demands of specific localities vis-à-vis municipal organizations, public servants, politicians, churches, schools, aimed at improving the exchange of good and services which they provide to these small and highly specific groups in the social and public ambit. By means of negotiation, they seek changes and shared benefits outside factional or client-patron relationships. The negotiations occur within very narrow margins and with shifting loyalties, especially if those in charge fail to keep their promises.

Vecinos Solidarios fall into the latter category. They reflect the change of mentality from that of “colonial serfs” into that of the citizens and re-builders of social bonds. They are also critics and proponents of the reform of governmental institutions calling for the purging of corrupt officials, and the creation of greater transparency and control in public administration.

We are heading towards terror and our own destruction as a civilized society, led by a state which is blind and hidebound along the path of uncontrolled violence and crime.

The Vecinos Solidarios show another route which can help rebuild the bonds and ties which cement the relationship between society and public institutions.

ReNaSeCo ( National Community Security Network), an institutional resource jointly administered by citizens, is their most impressive achievement to date. The aims of the network are:

- a) Promoting the development of citizen networks as part of a plan for local crime prevention
- b) Providing information so that the public is made aware of the crimes committed in their areas with the aim of developing preventative techniques and tactics (supported by the local law enforcement institutions) to modify and reduce the situation of insecurity.
- c) Publicising the true statistical evolution of crime patterns, zone by zone, as well as the effectiveness of security services such as the police, District Attorney’s offices, municipalities, etc.
- d) Personalizing the security function by informing the citizens of the name and *curricula vitae* of the public servants in each area.
- e) Monitoring the performance of those institutions involved in providing public security.
- f) At the request of those residents directly involved, arriving at solutions to particular problems involving public servants in any area relating to security, when normal channels have been exhausted.

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<sup>4</sup> Cumbia villera (literally: Shantytown Cumbia) is a dance music genre with rhythms which are reminiscent of Centro American folkloric music and whose lyrics describe life in the shantytowns of the Capital district and of Greater Buenos Aires.

The lyrics of cumbia villera mostly deal with the crude realities of life in these marginal neighbourhoods –such as crime; police harassment; the scarcity of resources; the role of women; and drug dealing, and use . The songs portray the dismembered profile of the slum neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires: young girls working the streets; the prevalence of marihuana use; hapless local boxers scraping a living in poorly paid fights; and corrupt politicians filling their pockets at the expense of the community. It is the music of class struggle: “boys N the hood” vs. spoil rich kids and sets out– at least in part –to justify the criminal activity which is rife in these shantytowns.

The citizens plan to construct Neighbourhood Networks for the purposes of crime prevention, which will become nodes, each run by a citizen functioning as activist coordinator and administrator, who will offer their services “ad honorem”, voluntarily and by rota, elected by his or her peers solely on grounds of their work and commitment, and who will be solely responsible for lodging specific legal complaints against the authorities when all the normal administrative channels have been exhausted.

All information and the progress of the complaints, will be openly accessible to the public ([www.renaseco.gov.ar](http://www.renaseco.gov.ar)) given that the resolution of conflicts depends on exposing the public servants responsible.

This Project, which has been suspended and deliberately ignored is symptomatic of the profound cultural changes which powerful local figures and interest groups are struggling so vehemently to arrest. It is based on the idea that an inefficient state which is incapable of controlling and re-channelling its own institutions, in itself, generates violence. Therefore the running of affairs should be delegated to the community in a clear and transparent way, reserving the right to apply the appropriate sanctions. Should it fail to do so, it could be accused of neglecting its duties.

This instrument will be the springboard for the generation of other important initiatives which are fundamental for the support of the work of the Networks, such as, for example:

- Negotiating with the state for the improvement of education, integrating state schools into the communities that they serve, permitting them to generate an identity of their own, transmissible through the generations. Social recognition is a reaffirmation of their own culture and will be a permanent stimulus, encouraging them to persevere in the slow, but worthwhile struggle towards social betterment.

- Encouraging the various religious institutions to integrate themselves into the community and to collaborate in providing support to young people at risk, and ensuring that each church set up canteens supported by the local community in order to meet primary needs of the poorest residents. We must not forget that these institutions can serve to transmit basic ethical points of references which are currently lacking due to the breakdown of the family.

- Reactivating neighbourhood clubs so as to offer a support network for young people, using sport as a medium.

- Promoting the creation of small business aimed at satisfying basic necessities (food, housing) in a way which is sustainable in the long term.

When a society finds itself plunged into a long, tortuous state of anarchy due to the absence or corruption of the state, the initiative for its reconstruction falls necessarily to its original sources of authority (the citizens).

This is the basic philosophy behind Vecinos Solidarios, Plan Alerta.

The Argentina of the future will be born out of the interaction of these two currents (vested interest groups versus the new community culture). No one can say who will prevail.

Pray for us, just in case....