

# Introduction

## Oil and Neoliberalism in Argentina

THE FALL AFTERNOON was unseasonably warm as I stood on the grassy median of the wide Avenida 9 de Julio in downtown Buenos Aires. Groups of poor Argentines filled the sidewalks and plaza surrounding the Obelisco, the modernist monument commemorating the 1536 founding of the city. They were gathering for a protest march and rally in support of the national boycott of two of the world's largest oil companies. The swelling crowd was composed of people of all ages. They wore nylon vests in the celestial blue and white of the national flag that were painted with big black letters indicating the social movements they represented. These people, with their bright vests but threadbare shirts, flimsy cloth shoes, and missing teeth, did not usually frequent the downtown where professionals and tourists move among government buildings, corporate offices, posh stores, and restaurants. They were clearly too poor to own cars, yet they gathered to protest recent gasoline price hikes. I was intrigued.

Although they looked out of place to many who passed by them, the people around me did not seem uncomfortable as they stood or sat in small groups, chatting and sharing soda or the traditional tealike drink *mate*. Children squealed as they ran amid the adults, playing games. As I leaned against a railing along the median, five people sat down in the grass at my feet and began to pass around a plastic bottle of cola. They included a heavy-set man with curly brown hair and three teenage girls I took to be his daughters. I asked them to tell me about what was going on. With the accent of someone from the north of Argentina with little formal education, the man told me why he joined the march using words I would hear many times in the coming months: they were protesting against the oil companies because if the people did not do some-

thing about the rise in fuel prices, the price of everything else would go up too. He was unemployed and relied on a welfare check of 150 pesos (approximately \$50) a month to provide for his family. Gesturing to his daughters squabbling over the one bottle of soda, he said that even a small rise in fuel costs would raise the price of beef and other staples to beyond what he could afford. The situation, the man asserted in a gruff but not angry tone, was dire. This did not stop him from offering me a sip from the bottle of warm brown soda.

At the appointed time, a group of young men and women filed into the street, lined up side by side in the crosswalks, and stopped traffic. Other youths distributed small paper flyers to bystanders and drivers, who looked annoyed but not surprised at the imminent delay in their activities. As the traffic lanes cleared, the protesters took their places behind large banners that flapped with the brisk wind in the deserted street. Drummers beat a steady rhythm as approximately seven thousand people began to walk slowly down the broad avenue toward the once elegant Congressional Palace (see Figure 1 and Map, Inset A). The group grew denser as it arrived in the Plaza del Congreso, where a stage was set up for a rally beside the congressional building. The slightly bit-



**Figure 1.** Protesters begin marching down the wide Avenida 9 de Julio toward the Plaza de Congreso, as a tourist takes a photo. The banner reads “No to Shell and Exxon’s Increase.”

ter smell of mate mixed with the smoky smell of chorizo, cigarettes, and sweat. Young children who had been running around in excited circles a few hours earlier now fell asleep in their parents' arms as the adults stood listening to the speeches by politicians and union and social movement leaders who spoke passionately about national energy independence and restoring the dignity of the working class.

The speakers asserted that the recent price increases at Shell and Exxon gas stations were signs that foreign dictators still ruled the national economy. For this reason, the event seemed a return to the famous "petroleum nationalism" (Solberg 1979) of twentieth-century Argentina. Yet it undoubtedly also represented the popular politics of the twenty-first-century. This protest march followed a form that had become common in Buenos Aires since 2001, when a major uprising ousted the elected president in a remarkable popular impeachment. The march and rally demonstrated the contemporary networks of "personalized political mediation" (Auyero 2000) in which poor people publicly showed their political support for the Peronist Party (Partido Justicialista) in exchange for material support for their daily survival from party brokers. The event, however, represented more than the merging of old and new politics. The Shell and Exxon boycott was framed as a protest against *neoliberalismo*, a shorthand for the state and economic "reforms" that have reconfigured Argentine society and everyday lives over the past two decades. Yet, despite the boycott's explicit rejection of neoliberalism, I argue that the boycott is better understood as a reconfiguration of key features of Argentine neoliberalismo, particularly because it framed the purchase of certain brands of gasoline as a political action that could effect social change. The boycott shows that neoliberalismo has continued to be a crucial force shaping Argentina.

The protest against the oil companies in 2005 hints at how much oil matters to millions of people, even to those without the financial resources to use many hydrocarbon-based products. Oil is at the center of many of the most crucial economic, political, and social processes defining the contemporary world. Although a small rise in the price of gasoline at Shell and Exxon stations seems inconsequential in light of the march participants' struggles for daily provisioning, the protesters reminded me that oil and its politics affect everyone's lives. Oil is the motor of global capitalism, a driving force undergirding transnational alliances and international conflicts, and a powerful symbol of social achievement the world over. I first became interested in the oil industry because of the juxtaposition of its importance in underwriting contemporary capitalism and its invisibility as a productive force in everyday life. Since

I began investigating these issues in the late 1990s, some of that invisibility has disappeared. The importance of oil is now far more widely recognized but still not well understood.

Debates over oil politics now have spread far beyond boardrooms and courtrooms to public plazas, residential neighborhoods, and even shanty settlements. Yet much of the commentary on the oil industry is quite simplistic, frequently falling back on “big man” theories of power. *Resources for Reform* closely examines how oil intersects with the lives of people who are both near to and far from the inner workings of the petroleum industry by exploring the lives of oil producers and oil consumers in Argentina. Argentina is a fascinating case not because it is a major producer of petroleum, for it is not, but because it has a long history of struggling with questions about the roles of state, citizenry and business in the development of the economy and the nation, and about the place of oil in society. These questions came to a head during the recent state and economic restructuring—carried out in the name of neoliberalism—which placed great emphasis on reorganizing the oil industry as a means of fixing myriad social, economic, and political problems.

Argentina is a particularly intriguing place to look at oil production and consumption because of its remarkable history. It was among the first countries in the world to, first, establish a state-owned oil company when the petroleum industry arose around the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, and then to fully privatize it as a wave of neoliberal “state reforms” and “structural adjustments” swept across the globe at the end of the century. Throughout these changes, the role of oil in society has remained a critical matter of debate. In “oil nations” such as Venezuela, it goes without saying that oil is central to the government, the economy, and the popular imagination of the nation (Coronil 1997). In Argentina, however, this is not a settled case but a series of hotly debated questions. Who should control the petroleum reserves buried beneath the national territory? Who owns the oil extracted from them? What should it be used for? How should the material and financial resources generated by oil extraction be distributed? Who should benefit? Is oil consumption a right that is necessary for full participation in contemporary society, or a privilege that must be restricted? Argentina offers insights into the significance of oil not only for nationalism, but also for globalization, and even more broadly, for state governing, social life, and the subjectivity of ordinary people.

*Resources for Reform* is the result of the research I conducted in Argentina between 2002 and 2006 on the conversion of Argentina’s venerable state oil company, called YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales, pronounced *ee-pe-efe*),

into a transnational corporation, now named YPF-Repsol, and on the emergence of private corporations as major actors in the national oil market.<sup>1</sup> The book analyzes how the reorganization of the oil industry fits into both large-scale transformation of Argentine society and its global engagements, and the microscale transformation of people's relationships and subjectivities. In particular, the privatization of the Argentine oil industry provides a window into the translocal process known as neoliberalism, which has been of great consequence in recent decades and will continue to reverberate for a long time to come. The twists and turns in the story of oil in Argentina that this book recounts confound any linear or unidirectional understanding of this social transformation.

Most broadly, *Resources for Reform* examines the intersection of oil and neoliberalism. How do these two seemingly incommensurable things mix? Oil is a natural resource, a physical substance created by geological processes we cannot control but upon which we depend. It is hidden beneath the surface of the earth in the crevices of porous rocks until it is pumped out by rigs in far-off places; transported in pipes, barrels, and tanks; and then transformed in our workplaces, in our homes, and even in our bodies. How many of us who use oil almost every minute of the day are aware of all that is involved in bringing it into these spaces? The vast majority of consumers only experience oil once this natural resource has been altered into thousands of derivatives. Although we do not see oil as we go about our daily lives, we know it to be a powerful substance, capable of creating both unprecedented luxury and unfathomable destruction.

Oil is powerful because it is "a perfect specimen" of the commodity form (Retort 2005: 38) and a basic building block of modern capitalism. In classical Marxist terms, we can say that oil has both exceptionally high use-value and exchange-value. First, it is valuable because it packs a huge amount of energy into a small mass and burns quickly, making it especially convenient as a power source. Oil's high energy density also facilitates its transportation in large quantities, enabling its consumption geographically far from where it is extracted. Oil is thus an extraordinarily useful substance in our fast-paced world. In fact, one could argue that it makes this pace possible. Oil is valuable, second, because it can function like money, as a (nearly) universal medium of exchange.<sup>2</sup> In the capitalist exchange of oil for other things, the circumstances under which oil is produced become hidden from its consumers, most of whom do not even realize they are consuming petroleum at all while they, say, eat their dinner and then brush their teeth. Oil's exchange-value thus enables the current global capitalist arrangement, with all its inequities among regions and peoples. Yet

all this goes unnoticed when people use hydrocarbon-powered machines and petroleum-based goods to undertake the tasks and pleasures that are seen as the stuff of modern life.

If oil is a largely invisible substance, neoliberalism is an elusive concept. It has been variously defined as a set of specific policies, a hegemonic ideology, a new form of government, and a series of specific political-economic projects. Neoliberalism is widely seen as having spread globally with remarkable speed and penetrated new sites with apparent ease. But what precisely is it that is traveling the world over? For many, neoliberalism is the newest form of capitalist globalization. Bauman (1998) wryly criticized the use of the term globalization as “a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a passkey meant to unlock the gates of all present and future mysteries” (1). The same may now be said of neoliberalism. As other scholars who surveyed the field have noted, there is so much “overreach and underspecification” in the use of the term neoliberalism that it has become “something of a *rascal concept*—promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise, and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010b: 184). For too long anthropologists took neoliberalism as the ground undergirding the problems they were analyzing but not as an object of analysis itself. Although this has begun to change, the term is still in need of greater analytical precision.

I discuss later in this introduction how I understand neoliberalism and respond to the warranted criticism of its imprecise use in scholarship. But here, I take a second look at both oil and neoliberalism to point out that these objects of analysis are more alike than they first appear to be. Oil is not only a powerful substance, but also a powerful idea. A necessary amendment to the classical Marxist understanding of value is the recognition that oil also derives its value from its role as a depository of meaning. In Argentina, as elsewhere, oil can stand for movement, innovation, modernity, development, improvement, and progress. It can also stand for greed, corruption, violence, and environmental catastrophe. Neoliberalism, likewise, is not only a set of ideas, it is also a cluster of concrete events and their material effects. These include the privatization of the state oil company, the increase in foreign investment, and the informalization of labor in Argentina. *Resources for Reform* thus presents oil and neoliberalism as inseparably semiotic *and* material forces, that is, as symbols *and* substances, and as representations *and* entities.

The chapters that follow scrutinize the conversion of Argentina’s state-owned and state-managed oil industry into a privately owned and privately managed one as a way to grasp a mutually political, economic, and social pro-

cess that is transforming things, spaces, people, meanings, and values. How have oil production and consumption been reconfigured by the process of neoliberal structural adjustment undertaken in Argentina? And how did the deeply sedimented structures of the Argentine oil industry lay the path taken by neoliberal “reform”? Examination of this dual process reveals that oil and neoliberalism are not quite what they seem. But before we return to these questions, it is important to place recent events in their historical context.

### A Brief History of Oil in Argentina

Argentina is a fascinating place to examine oil and neoliberalism because the reconfiguration of the ownership and management of the oil industry has been a central part of the larger experiment in remaking the state, the economy, and society. Argentines have debated questions such as: What is the role of oil in pursuing national security, progress, and sovereignty? Do foreign, private national, or state-owned oil companies offer the surest path to economic development for the country and its citizens? Who owns the oil and how should its rewards be distributed? Through policy shifts from encouraging foreign companies to exploit the Argentine subsurface, to restricting their roles to contractors for the state entity, to welcoming them as key players once again, oil has been understood as an inalienable national treasure *and* as a natural resource in short supply. In the course of developing a national oil industry, state agents have promoted oil both as an important resource *for* social and economic development and as the reward *of* it.

Argentina is unique in the prominent role that the national government has played in the oil industry since its initiation. State institutions were largely responsible for exploration and extraction beginning with the discovery of deposits in Patagonia in 1907.<sup>3</sup> The state oil company, YPF Estatal, was founded in 1922, long before similar companies were established elsewhere in the world.<sup>4</sup> YPF quickly became involved in refining and commercializing oil as well as locating and extracting it. In fact, the company was the first vertically integrated state oil company in the world outside of the Soviet Union (Solberg 1979: vii). It managed the national oil industry, from exploration to consumer sales, for seven decades. Other state institutions also have had major effects on oil consumption. Policies such as price controls, taxes, and subsidies and programs like advertising campaigns, consumer education, and boycotts have encouraged citizens of all classes to use petroleum in their daily lives.

The early creation of a national company prevented foreign corporations from dominating the development of the oil industry in Argentina as they did

in most other countries in the Global South. This is not to say that private oil companies have not been active in Argentina. Standard Oil (including its heirs and subsidiaries) was one of the most important corporations in Argentina for a long time. While foreign and national private companies were central to the development of the Argentine industry, their roles were defined and managed by state institutions for most of the twentieth century. Yet the power dynamic and the distribution of responsibilities among YPF Estatal, foreign oil corporations, and national companies changed multiple times. At some points, drilling and refining by foreign companies was seen as the surest way to provide for Argentina's development. At others, YPF was envisioned as the only company that could ensure the security, progress, and sovereignty of the country. Throughout these changes, petroleum was both the input necessary for economic activity and the prized end product of economic development. Moreover, oil paradoxically represented both an inalienable treasure belonging to the nation and a scarce resource whose use by citizens needed to be rationed. It was the national state that both produced this treasure and restricted access to it.

One cannot understand events in Argentina since the 1940s without understanding Peronism, and this is true of oil politics as much as anything else. Peronism is a social movement, a political party, a cultural force, and a popular social identity that is organized around the figure of Juan Domingo Perón but far transcends him. Perón, the man, rose from within the military to become president from 1946 to 1955 and again from 1973 until he died in 1974. He emerged as a national figure in the context of Argentina's rapid industrialization during the period between the global recession of the 1930s and World War II. By the end of the war, Argentina's industrial production had more than doubled and national wealth had significantly increased, yet the masses of industrial workers had seen their economic standing decline (James 1988: 8). When Perón served as secretary of labor under the military government in the early 1940s, he began to put in place policies that assisted these disenfranchised workers in gaining economic benefits and political power. He built an effective labor movement around him, while undermining communist and other groups that were organizing workers through other channels. By 1948, Perón had established a highly centralized union structure through which employers were legally bound to negotiate with their workers. Perón asserted that workers, as the citizens creating Argentina's economic growth, not only had a right to "labor with dignity," but also had a right to shape the development of the country (James 1988). Yet, at the same time that



workers acquired substantive representation within the state through their unions, they became dependent on welfare from paternal state institutions. The Peronist state's commitment to ensuring workers' representation, rights, and welfare frequently conflicted with its aim to increase industrial production and domestic consumption.

The conflicts within Peronism among the goals of increasing workers' political power, citizens' welfare, and national economic growth played out particularly dramatically in the oil industry. Under the military government, Perón encouraged unionization in the oilfields for the first time. The state oil workers' union, the *Sindicato Unidos Petroleros del Estado* (Syndicated Unions of State Oilmen, hereafter SUPE), incorporated recent immigrants and longtime residents into a highly centralized governing structure and national movement. Oil workers gained wage increases, improved labor and living conditions, and an extensive array of social benefits, such as medical services, retirement payments, and vacation leave. Yet they did so in exchange for ending their adversarial stance against YPF and becoming state agents. Once president, Perón supported greater nationalization of strategic industries and utilities, including oil. He gave the national government jurisdiction over oil concessions but stopped short of expropriating foreign oil companies' operations. Despite the intense pressure on the state to take over foreign oil companies, as it did the French-owned railroads and the U.S.-owned telephone company, the Perón administration instead encouraged YPF to increase its production. It was not possible for YPF alone to keep up with the demand for oil created by the continued industrialization of the country and the increased disposable income of its citizens. The country thus became dependent on foreign imports of both the equipment needed to increase fuel production and fuel itself. In the face of severe shortages, Perón changed course and, in 1955, made a deal with a subsidiary of Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) to extract petroleum in Patagonia. However, a military coup overthrew Perón before his contract with SOCAL could be implemented. General Eduardo Lonardi, the first provisional military president, cited Perón's agreement with the despised North American oil company as a justification for the military coup (Solberg 1979: 163–66). This ended Perón's nine years of formal rule but not his influence on Argentina.

Perón quickly became a powerful symbol that has been used to mobilize and justify a wide range of political-economic projects from Import Substitution Industrialization to neoliberal reform. Peronism does not represent a consistent set of policies regarding the oil industry but a broad commitment to petroleum nationalism that has taken several different forms. Perón's early

support of a state oil monopoly and his subsequent turn toward foreign investment in the oil industry were both made in the name of strengthening the nation. As historian Carl Solberg (1979) carefully showed, petroleum nationalism denotes the conviction that state control of oil is essential for the well-being of the country and its citizenry. The strong support for petroleum nationalism in Argentina, however, has sat uneasily with the continual importance of foreign capital, equipment, and oil to meet the demand for fuel in the country.

In the years following Perón's death in 1974, Argentines lived through a series of brutal military dictatorships that encouraged foreign investment in the oil industry, once again in the name of national independence and self-sufficiency. In order to finance the arms purchases that supported their reign of terror, the military rulers started the process of converting YPF from an autonomous state enterprise into a joint-stock corporation. Beginning in the 1970s, the dictatorship introduced the first steps in what became signature neoliberal policies—including privatization, deregulation, and deunionization—while still maintaining tight government control over the company (Solberg 1979: 174). These moves only fueled the inflation, unemployment, and misery that contributed to the military's downfall in 1983.

Economic collapse both helped to end the dictatorship and continued to plague Argentina in the post-dictatorship period. As Chapter 2 discusses in greater depth, the increasingly dire economic situation following the end of military rule enabled the Peronist Carlos Menem to carry out one of the most exhaustive state and economic restructuring programs in the world. The fact that Menem was a long-time Peronist leader further indicates that the relationship between the state and the oil industry has continued to be as complex in recent years as it had been in the past. The story of the privatization of the petroleum industry told in the chapters that follow shows how the neoliberal restructuring represented a departure from much of the history outlined here but could not erase the legacies of petroleum nationalism, company paternalism, Peronism, or state involvement in the oil industry. The privatization reworked different parts of this history in surprising ways.

### **Argentine Neoliberalismo**

Neither oil nor neoliberalism is a simple object of analysis, and defining neoliberalism is particularly difficult. The term has been used so widely that it has lost precise meaning. While some scholars have advocated abandoning the word because of this, I retain it with some hesitation and several caveats. I do so, first, because I believe that the popularity of the term within and beyond

academic circles indicates that its meaning matters. I do not want to see anthropologists shy away from engaging in debates that extend beyond our discipline; instead, we should aspire to play a role in shaping the terms of debate on the most important issues of our time. Oil and neoliberalism are certainly among them. Moreover, avoiding the word *neoliberalism* has not, in my opinion, eliminated the need to name a crucial phenomenon that exists in the world, even if that phenomenon is not internally consistent but instead is complex, contingent, and dependent upon its context. Replacing a commonly used word with jargon-filled phrases is no solution to the problem that neoliberalism never has, or ever will, exist in a single ideal form.

The second and more important reason I use the word is because it is an emic term in my research. When living in Argentina, I heard the word *neoliberalismo* said in businesses, community centers, and homes, on the television and on the street. I heard it said with a spit of anger, a sigh of regret, or sometimes with a self-deprecating laugh. Whereas in the United States neoliberalism has become a catchall for myriad phenomena in the contemporary moment, in Argentina it has a more precise meaning. I use the Spanish form of the word, *neoliberalismo*, as an unobtrusive way to remind the reader of this precision of meaning.

The privatization of state entities and services, the opening of national markets to transnational corporations, and the weakening of organized labor are three crucial aspects of a profound state and economic restructuring Argentines know as neoliberalismo. Though it is important to recognize the roots of neoliberalismo in earlier administrations, it was during Menem's presidency from 1989 to 1999 that the Argentine government, economy, and society were most profoundly transformed along neoliberal lines. In fact, many Argentines use the term *menemismo* interchangeably with neoliberalismo to refer to the policies, programs, and discourse about "reform" that were rapidly implemented during these years. These changes were enacted under the premise that the state should no longer regulate the national economy directly by running companies, providing services, or regulating markets but indirectly by enabling corporations to govern the economy with little to no restraint. For instance, although General Jorge Rafael Videla, the de facto president under the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1980, changed YPF's legal status from an autonomous state enterprise into a joint-stock corporation, he did so in order to increase government control over the company (Solberg 1979: 174). The Menem administration, in contrast, was the one that transferred management of the company to private hands. The state remained YPF's only shareholder until 1993,

when officials began selling YPF shares on stock markets around the world. In 1999, the Menem administration definitively relinquished state control over the company when it sold its remaining stake to the Spanish firm Repsol. As Chapter 1 discusses, these changes came as great shocks to state oil workers and their families and led to profound transformations of their lives.

Repsol was hardly the only private oil company to benefit from the privatization movement. During the same period, private companies, both domestic and transnational, acquired unprecedented access to markets, natural resources, and consumers in Argentina. Moreover, the restructuring of the oil industry was not unique; privatization was the centerpiece of Menem's program. During his decade-long presidency, the state transferred ownership and control of 90 percent of the national companies and public services to conglomerates of business firms and banks (IMF 1998: 5). These privatizations embraced a wide range of public enterprises in addition to oil and gas—from domestic utilities (for example, telecommunications, water supply, and electric power plants) to transportation (airlines, railways, and urban subways) to industries (steel manufacturing and defense equipment) (Alexander, Corti, and World Bank 1993). YPF's privatization shows that the process of neoliberal restructuring did not eliminate market regulation, as some have suggested, but rather replaced state management with corporate management.

Although neoliberalismo is closely identified with Menem, the former has outlived the reign of the latter. The Menem era formally came to a close with Fernando de la Rúa's narrow defeat of the president's chosen successor, Eduardo Duhalde, in the 1999 presidential election, when the aftershocks of Menem's rule were being felt strongly across the country. Since then, neoliberalismo has been identified with the ongoing consequences of this intense period of change. For millions of Argentines, neoliberalismo represents the polarized inequalities that have translated into poverty, hunger, and disease in a country that once prided itself on having the largest middle class in Latin America. De la Rúa did not break with Menem's economic policies, yet he promised to address their social costs. However, he became president in the midst of a prolonged recession and could not even begin to fulfill his pledge to relieve the growing levels of destitution. When it became clear that the state was insolvent, the national economy fell apart as foreign investors fled and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suspended assistance. De la Rúa's economic team froze bank accounts in a desperate attempt to halt the run on the banks. In this moment, middle-class Argentines joined their working-class compatriots in banging pots and pans outside banks, rallying at supermarkets, and

setting up emergency soup kitchens in the streets. In December 2001, millions of people gathered outside the presidential palace in the Plaza de Mayo and in other plazas across the country, chanting, “*Que se vayan todos!*” (“All of them [the politicians] must go!”). The crowd included many of the impoverished people living on the outskirts of the city who would return four years later for the smaller march and rally in support of the Shell and Exxon boycott.

President de la Rúa resigned, but, unlike in the past, a military government did not take over. Instead, after a succession of five nominal civilian heads of state in ten days, Congress appointed Duhalde to finish out the last two years of the term of his 1999 rival, de la Rúa. While this was happening, the state defaulted on more than \$130 billion in debt, the largest sovereign default to that point in history. More than half the population had fallen below the official poverty line by that time, and at least 20 percent of Argentines could not afford daily food (INDEC 2001; Rock 2002: 2).

In the next presidential election, a little-known governor from Patagonia named Néstor Kirchner defeated Menem, who sought to recapture the presidency for a third term, in an election that turned into an internal struggle within the Peronist Party.<sup>5</sup> While Menem stood for neoliberalismo, Kirchner stood for its antithesis. He campaigned on a platform of ridding the country of the vestiges of his rival’s earlier “reforms.” He censured foreign corporations for monopolizing national markets and criticized foreign companies for making enormous profits by extracting resources from the national territory and labor from the people. After winning the presidency, Kirchner again asserted his anti-neoliberalism when he refused to accept the foreign bankers’ terms for loan repayment and renegotiated the country’s defaulted debt. Bolstered by the popular support this gained him, Kirchner announced an anti-inflation campaign that aimed to ensure that the prices of staple commodities would not rise further. This campaign, he claimed, would restore the “purchasing power” that Argentine citizens had lost during the Menem years.

This brings us back to the protest scene that opens this book. The march I describe was part of a boycott of Shell and Exxon, undertaken across Argentina in 2005, that began after the two companies raised the price of fuel at their gas stations. The price increase seemed at first an unremarkable occurrence, quite common with the creeping inflation in Argentina and the upward trend in oil prices on global markets. As Chapter 3 explains more fully, car-owning Argentines did not appear to see the price hike as a major event until Kirchner called for a national boycott from the presidential palace. Shell, and then also Exxon, had defied the ongoing negotiations between his administration and

the oil industry that were aimed at curbing inflation, and Kirchner decided to make a point of it. The president's action was not out of character, given his anti-neoliberal rhetoric, nor was he exceptional within the region. Kirchner joined Luiz Ignacio da Silva (Lula) in Brazil and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in proclaiming the end to neoliberalismo across South America. Two years into his presidency, the boycott of two foreign oil giants captured the widespread anti-neoliberal sentiment of the moment. The incident seemed the perfect example of Argentines' response to the intersection of neoliberalismo and the oil industry, so I stopped the series of interviews with petroleum industry professionals I was doing at the time and threw myself into learning about the boycott firsthand. Whereas I had been focusing my attention on people working in the oil industry, I now saw those formally outside of it as equally crucial to understanding its transformation. This is how I found myself in the midst of the crowd of boycott supporters on Avenida 9 de Julio and in conversation with people I did not expect to be part of my study of the oil industry.

Argentines who owned cars participated in the boycott by "voting" with their gasoline purchases, while their impoverished compatriots took part by occupying gas stations and joining protests like the march and rally I attended in downtown Buenos Aires. As I listened to the speeches at the rally that day, I was struck by the incongruity of the political rhetoric celebrating the value of the working class being delivered to a crowd composed of people who did not fit the image of the Peronist worker being hailed from the stage. The people who participated in this demonstration were mostly unemployed or worked in informal and odd jobs without stable wages or benefits, not to mention union representation or the ability to afford a car. The majority of the protesters identified as *piqueteros*, members of popular social movements that organized the unemployed, underemployed, and marginally employed through informal networks in poor neighborhoods and shanty settlements across Argentina. Their vests and banners identified the neighborhood subgroups of the national associations to which they belonged. As they walked toward the Plaza del Congreso, they shouted chants that included both ones popular at protest marches of this sort and ones that specifically addressed the boycott, connecting Shell and Exxon with greed, illegitimate power, and even treason. Despite the angry words, the mood was not hostile and the crowd not violent. Yet apprehension was evident all around me. Like their wealthier counterparts, the *piqueteros* saw the boycott as a way to support President Kirchner's anti-neoliberal position and to express opposition to neoliberalismo. They also endorsed the president's message that participation in the boycott demonstrated their belonging

to the nation. Impoverished Argentines in particular envisioned the boycott as defending petroleum consumption as part of their economic right to support themselves and their families. What had brought them into alliance with middle-class gasoline consumers, oil workers' unions, and the president was not only their concern with oil prices, but also with neoliberalism and how it was reconfiguring daily life. By linking people's everyday activities to global political-economic processes, the boycott demonstrated the continued importance of oil and neoliberalismo in shaping Argentina.

How should we understand the anti-neoliberal stance of the boycott in light of Argentina's history? The boycott was both a resurgence of the petroleum nationalism that characterized twentieth-century Argentina and an expression of the contemporary configuration of society, with its polarization of wealth and privilege. It was not, however, a popular expression of resistance to neoliberalismo and the growth of corporate power in Argentina. Why? The boycott was not a "grassroots" action because it did not begin when consumers saw new prices at their local gas stations or markets, but only after the president urged them to stop buying Shell gasoline. As I describe later in the book, the boycott was carefully staged and orchestrated by the Kirchner administration and allied organizations. State representatives deployed affective ties of kinship to discourage certain purchases, and promote others. In doing so, they invoked a sense of filial obligation to domestic economy, in the double sense of the national market and household finance.

It is important to recognize that, although the boycott pushed Argentines to collectively use their "purchasing power" to shape the oil market, it was not a *gasoline* boycott, but a *brand* boycott. It did not urge Argentines to abstain from using oil or even to find less-hydrocarbon-intensive forms of transport but directed their consumption *toward* products that were presented as good for the family and nation. For middle-class citizens, these "goods" were certain brands of gasoline, ironically including the privatized state company. Buying YPF-Repsol fuel became an expression of national belonging, even though it moved through the same transnational networks as other brands. This incongruity leads me to argue that the boycott was not a protest *against* neoliberalismo but *a continuation of it*, albeit in a novel form. Despite the anti-neoliberal rhetoric, I assert that the boycott represents crucial features that have characterized Argentine neoliberalismo from its emergence in the late 1970s through its development in the mid-2000s. I want to highlight here two ways in which it reworked crucial features that have characterized Argentine neoliberalismo and the global family of phenomena to which it belongs.