

## Ana María Ospina Pedraza || Thesis Abstract

My dissertation, “Grammars of Identity: Languages of Activism in Argentina and the United States,” is motivated by two questions: what is the impact of local political culture in the implementation of global ideas about internal democracy in collective action? Do local conventions of activism produce unique political subjects despite shared transnational principles of protest? I answer these questions in a study of two cases of broad social mobilization where popular assemblies reached international significance: the neighborhood assemblies of Buenos Aires in 2002 and the New York General Assembly of Occupy Wall Street in 2011. Popular assemblies are self-organized, non-hierarchical bodies where people gather to discuss pressing political issues, organize political action and address the needs of the community. *Transnational networks of activism connected these movements, and despite their shared commitment to internal democracy, its operationalization was tied to cultures of activism specific to each political space.* My research is a study of language and political practice at popular assemblies through a qualitative study of original material produced by each movement.

*Asambleistas* and occupiers represent imperfect, if not paradoxical subjects of liberation. Dominant scholarship narrates the unequivocal adoption of ‘horizontality,’ a form of internal democracy in Argentine assemblies. However, my analysis demonstrates that through regular debates about means and ends, participants implemented and transformed global ideas about internal organization from global and regional actors. Internal democracy became radical equality in the absence of hierarchies, and autonomy from the political class. The enactment of equality at the assemblies awoke democratic virtues and defied, albeit temporally, neoliberal subjectivities cultivated during the military dictatorship and a decade of structural adjustment. Although their resistance was short-lived, unable to break class barriers, and ultimately defeated by electoral politics, *asambleismo* and direct democracy became staples in Argentine political culture. Alternatively, in Occupy Wall Street established ideas about internal democracy in social movements overlapped with the popularization of intersectionality and its rhetorical strategies, to produce a vernacular epistemology of identity. Individual experiences of discrimination were understood and taught as the main obstacle to equality and participation. At the General Assembly, reflections about privilege and subject positions were central to secure inclusion and became the avenue to perform internal democracy. However, their performance of equality was consistent with neoliberal notions of personal responsibility to the detriment of a political economy of racial and gender oppression. Below is a brief description of the substantive chapters.

**Chapter 1.** “Political antagonisms and the production of *asambleista* identity during the 2001-2002 Argentine crisis.” Analysis of the political context—historical and immediate—to trace the development of the political identity of assembly participants in relation to the concept of horizontality. *Asambleistas* understood their politics in terms of radical equality and autonomy. Radical equality meant the absence of a hierarchy but also equal empowerment. Autonomy meant political independence from state institutions, political parties, labor unions, and clientelist networks.

**Chapter 2.** “Horizontality as empathy: post-neoliberal subjectivity and democratic virtues at neighborhood assemblies in post-crisis Buenos Aires.” Discusses neighborhood assemblies as heirs of a tradition of Latin American collective action, where horizontality is a key component of movement identity. I explore the relationship between the practice of horizontality and the transformations in political subjectivity that assembly participants describe as disputing neoliberal influence on their everyday life and selfhood.

**Chapter 3:** “Direct Democracy at Occupy: performing equality.” Discusses the tradition of participatory democracy in the United States and how it the internal organization of Occupy. The meaning that equality and inclusion attained at the General Assembly was indebted the reciprocal relationship between activism and scholarship in U.S activist culture. As such, equal participation and inclusion meant careful attention to everyday power imbalances produced by identity and diversity.

**Chapter 4: “Privilege and Personal Responsibility”** The operationalization of intersectionality in contemporary progressive movements draws participants towards the hyper-politicization of everyday encounters with difference and the deployment of notions of personal responsibility and self-work akin to those promoted in contemporary neoliberal discourse.