〈Summary〉

The Formation of New "Public Spaces"

in the Process of "Democratic Deepening" :

An Argentine Experience in the 1990s

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The main purpose of this paper is to examine the emergence of new forms of politicization in contemporary Argentina. What is the role of social movements or collective actions in the deepening democracy? This is the key question of my paper. Even with basic institutional mechanism in action, Argentine democracy has limits when civil society does not find ways to further its direct participation in the democratic process. Our central argument is that civil society organization challenges old practices, such as clientelism and patronages, while at the same time offering concrete alternatives for new practice, identities, public spaces.

Most Latin American countries have restored formal democratic institutions. In the last two decades, the risk of authoritarian reversals has diminished with a few exceptions. But although formal democratic institutions endure, the quality of the democracies in the region seems obscured.

Latin America faces the persistence of some aspects of authoritarian rule or non-democratic legacies during a phase when it needs to cultivate democratic culture through collective actions at the public level. In order to make a democratic regime deepen, the regime does not take the place of authoritarian regime, but also get rid of the non-democratic social practices.

In Argentina, responses to these issues must include citizen efforts to construct new networks of social movement and collective action to assure democratic culture and develop the necessary institutions. Therefore, social movements are important because in the conflictive terrain of social life, they constitute public spaces, in which conflicts gain visibility and collective actors become valid spokespersons. In addition, social movements generate new sociability, change the associational structures of civil society, and create a plurality of new public spaces while expanding and revitalizing spaces that are already institutionalized.

Theoretically, we review both the argument of societal accountability and of participatory publics, that is, institutional public forum. Our point here is that the establishment of formal democratic rights in post-authoritarian regimes has allowed an expansion of the public spaces beyond the boundaries of existing political institutions wherefore social movements are developing new identities and playing role of quasi-ombudman as watch-dog or monitor.

When we focus on the character of several citizens' collective actions such as social movement in the case of María Soledad, we realize that they form alternative public spaces in which people present problems, discuss common agenda, and take joint actions. Above all, within these public spaces, we insist that the influences of social movements and civil society organizations on political society depend on interaction between the webs of voluntary associations and the function of quasi-ombudsman like religious people, politician, and ordinary people. With regard to the case of María Soledad, those who protested against injustice and impunity, constructed plural spaces of representation of collective actors. The movements proposed their demands onto the public stage and left their imprint in important victories in the court.

While civic associations continue to demand justice and equality under law, the empowerment of human right movements represent a cultural innovation, which means strengthening of identities of new collective actors, setting new issues, doing the new way of politics in Argentine democratic deepening.

Therefore, we try to develop the concept of public spaces as an expan-

sion of conventional politics outside formal decision-making. The idea we deploy will improve existing understanding of Argentine politics. An Argentine experience in the 1990s suggest a need to examine the linkages between the characteristics of political institutions and the concerns of citizens in their everyday lives.