Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought

Malvinas: politics, territory and internationalism

Ronaldo Munck

a DCU, Dublin, Ireland
b University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
c University of Nova Scotia

Published online: 16 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: Ronaldo Munck (2013) Malvinas: politics, territory and internationalism, Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought, 3:1, 151-157, DOI: 10.1080/23269995.2013.821273

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2013.821273
The reverberations of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war in the South Atlantic are still being felt today. British Prime Minister David Cameron accuses Argentina of acting in a colonialist manner. Argentina has stepped up the diplomatic offensive around decolonization and has obtained considerable regional support. From an ‘Argentinian inter-nationalist’ perspective, this article carries out a brief historical analysis to then outline some of the main elements of the current situation. While recognising the critical importance of the geo-strategy in explaining the ongoing conflict in the South Atlantic, the emphasis here is more on the political dimension, especially in relation to emerging positions in Argentina seeking to transcend the dominant nationalist territorial position on the Malvinas.

**Keywords:** Malvinas; Falklands; geo-politics; nationalism; internationalism; imperialism

**Prologue**

The ‘political is personal’ for me in relation to the Malvinas question. At an English/Spanish bilingual school in Buenos Aires in 1962, on entering secondary school, the Argentinean geography teacher was at pains to tell us that the recently arrived English atlases contained an error in labelling some small specs on the map of South America as ‘Falkland islands’. Much later, in 1982, safely ensconced in my first lecturing job in the North of Ireland, I was rudely reminded of the situation when I received my call-up papers to report for duty at the Argentine Navy HQ in Buenos Aires. Having left Argentina in 1969 I thought I had left the seemingly incomprehensible conflict over some small islands in the South Atlantic behind me. In the event, I was able to explain to the embassy that I was exempted from military service having married and had a child while a student. Nevertheless, when I would see pro-Argentina and anti-Thatcher slogans painted along the walls of the Falls Road, I did feel that the Malvinas/Falklands conflict was one I could not ignore or escape now.

**The background**

The first settlers in the South Atlantic islands were French and coming predominately from St Malo, the islands became known as the Malouines (hence Malvinas). Various English expeditions with varying degrees of conviction also landed there. Spain, as the colonial power, saw these incursions as an infraction of the Treaties of Utrecht in 1713 between Spain, France and England. The treaty had formalized Spain’s exclusive navigation, trade and sovereignty rights over its holdings in the Americas, including its islands.
A later English presence was removed by the Spanish fleet but then allowed to return although on what grounds is disputed. When Argentina gained its independence from Spain in 1810, it moved to assert its rights over the Malouines in 1828 determined to stop much illegal fishing and sealing (by US ships, in particular). Superior British forces, however, arrived in 1883 to reclaim its islands for the British crown and, by doing so, laid the foundations for the start of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict which erupted in 1982.

In Argentina, the nationalist reaction to this event was not the only one. President Sarmiento (1811–1888) who coined the phrase Civilization or Barbarism to frame Argentina’s development dilemma declared that ‘England has established itself in the Malvinas to later air whatever right is has to do so. Let us be, frank, though, its invasion is useful to civilization and progress’ (Sarmiento 1950, 25). For Sarmiento, civilization entailed European immigration to counter indigenous savagery. Given that today, the ‘islanders’ wishes’ and the end to the ‘right to self -determination’ are key issues, it is worth detailing of what that population consists. Basically one-third of the 3000 strong population today is descended from the original British settlers. The rest were brought there from other British colonies and there are considerable numbers of migrant workers from Peru and Chile. People from Argentina are explicitly not allowed to settle in the islands. Many of its inhabitants retire to Britain’s south-east coast. This does not appear to be a classic case of national self-determination.

At one level, the islands and their settlers would be an anomaly akin to Gibraltar, Hong Kong and in a different way to Guantanamo. They did, however, have a strategic value in terms of the passage around Cape Horn and in opening a path to the Antarctic. In terms of popular consciousness in Argentina, the islands ‘belonged’ to Argentina but these were given varying degrees of importance. In the right wing nationalist imaginary ‘they mattered to everyone, regardless of political leanings or socio-economic status’ (Williams 2005, 56) and ‘their loss symbolized the loss of Argentina itself, and their recovery symbolized Argentina’s rediscovery of itself’ (Williams 2005, 57). The myth that recovery of the Malvinas would restore Argentine identity (ser nacional) was not shared by all, certainly outside crisis points. The Malvinas question has had no impact whatsoever on socio-economic development in Argentina nor been a threat to national sovereignty as, for example, Guantanamo clearly is for Cuba.

Argentina’s military saw it differently and presented recovery of the Malvinas as a holy war to redeem the nation and restore the national order. These geo-strategic ambitions, tinged with messianic undertones, were also evident in the ongoing conflict with Chile over the disputed Beagle Channel and its islands at the top of the continent. In the 1960s, Argentina repudiated the 1881 Beagle Channel Treaty (assisted by Britain’s King Edward VII in 1902) and claimed the Picton, Lennox and Nueva islands as their own. In 1978, under the Videla military dictatorship, Argentina moved towards military action and this was only halted through direct intervention by Pope John Paul II. In 1982, as preparations for the ‘recovery’ of the Malvinas were accelerated, Argentina made clear that following that seemingly easy operation they would return to takeover the disputed islands in the Beagle. Not surprisingly, Chile (under Pinochet) gave ‘limited but significant’ assistance to Britain when the latter set out to dislodge the Argentina’s military occupation.

No wars are inevitable but the conflict in the South Atlantic was steadily building up steam. Various attempts by Argentina to test Britain’s mettle had created the impression that the islands were not key for the declining imperial power. In 1964, the UN Committee on Decolonization placed the Falklands/Malvinas on a list of territories in need of
decolonization. Various resolutions ensued urging a peaceful solution to the territorial dispute while taking account the ‘interests’ of the islanders. Talks dragged on and in 1968 Britain declared that the ‘wishes of the islanders’ should be paramount. The Falklands lobby – empowered by better economic prospects – were now a third party in the negotiations which slowly grounded to a halt. In the early 1980s, having waged a successful ‘dirty war’ on its internal opponents, the military decided on a ‘clean war’ against the offensive colonial presence in the South Atlantic.

The war

The unfolding of the war is still quite vivid, certainly in Argentina where its effects are still felt. Argentina’s military landed and took over the islands on 2 April 1982. It would appear that this was seen as practising ‘politics by other means’ and that the cordial relations with the United States would persuade Britain to now negotiate seriously. Even when the British government dispatched its ‘Task Force’ to the South Atlantic, it was to provide extra leverage in negotiations and only ‘in the last instance’ to retake the islands by force. The UN inevitably demanded Argentina to withdraw its forces as a precondition for negotiations and the United States also inevitably supported Britain in the dispute. Armed conflict began on 1st May with some air battles and the sinking of the Belgrano followed by a British landing on the islands on 21st May. After a one-sided battle, General Menéndez (an infamous agent of the ‘dirty war’) surrendered to the British forces on 14th June.

It is clear now that from the British side a military conflict in the South Atlantic was not inevitable. Margaret Thatcher’s recently released private papers (The Guardian 2013) show that the jingoistic spirit of the times was not shared by those at the heart of state power. Both Thatcher’s senior economic adviser Sir Alan Walters and her chief of staff David Wolfson proposed ‘buying-out’ the islanders rather than deploying a costly and risky military operation. Sir John Hoskyns, head of the Downing Street policy unit, believed this essentially minor issue might bring down the Thatcher government and anyway ‘This is not a battle for our homeland and civilisation’. The notion that the islanders’ wishes were paramount was seen as unwise to put it mildly. Offering the islanders $100,000 per family to settle in Britain, Australia or New Zealand with full citizenship rights seemed preferable to a military adventure whose outcome was deemed uncertain. Sir Ian Gilmour declared that ‘We are making a big mistake. It will make Suez look like common sense’ (The Guardian 2013).

As events unfolded in the South Atlantic, several facts became clear. In the first instance, the military capacity of an industrialized and militarized semi-peripheral country is no match for the modern equipment and military training of even a second-order core country. Clearly, the Argentine military prowess in chasing small groups of armed civilians and then ‘disappearing’ them did not prepare that military formation for the reality of war. There was total disorder and confusion on the logistical front, military strategy bordered on the absurd and the officer class wallowed in corruption and cowardice and displayed all their well-ingrained repressive habits. This was a tragicomedy reminiscent of the trenches of the First World War. As Adolfo Gilly puts it ‘All the moral corruption, professional ineptitude and spiritual rottenness of a military dictatorship specialized for six years in uncountable kidnappings, rapes, disappearances, torture and murder came to the surface as a bloody froth when faced, for the first time, with an organized and merciless military enemy’ (Gilly 1983).
As news of the dictatorship’s surrender to Britain reached Buenos Aires popular resentment exploded. The unfortunate General Fortunato Galtieri was forced to resign as Junta president to be replaced by General Bignone whose sole task was to negotiate a return to democracy. The defeated military class now needed the political class they had defeated and displaced to help them carry out a negotiated retreat from political power. This had not been a people’s war against imperialism and the bubble of military power had been burst. The labour movement and civil society as a whole began to articulate its demands and state terror no longer had any purchase. Raúl Alfonsín, from the minority Radical party, took office, committed to thorough democratization and holding the military to account.

In retrospect, the events in the South Atlantic were over-determined by nationalism in both Argentina and Britain. There was, of course, the historical reality of Britain’s informal empire in Argentina during the 1860–1930 heyday of the agro-export economy. Further back, the ‘Invasiones Inglesas’ of 1806 and 1807 were repulsed not by the Spanish but by the population of Buenos Aires. This was also overlaid by Cold War Christian mysticism which saw Argentina as the last bastion against the corruption, decadence and sexual licentiousness of the West. In Britain, the colonialist outlook soon came to the fore with the Johnny Gaucho discourse, the Sun’s Gotcha (celebration the Belgrano sinking) and the calls to ‘Nuke Rio’. Thatcher’s claim that ‘British sovereign territory has been invaded by a foreign power’ meant that we could then ‘rejoice’ when the military job was accomplished, enabling her to parade through Port Stanley in the image of Winston Churchill.

The left

The Malvinas war exposed serious fault-lines in Argentina’s left political parties (see Bonnet 1997 and Tarcus 2007). The context was set by a brutal military dictatorship persecuting the left and the working class since 1976. However, the spectre of the ‘English pirate’ from the days when Jack Hawkins visited the South Atlantic through economic dependency in the 1930s to Thatcher’s Task Force loomed large. Maybe it was unpalatable to have the military doing the job but there was a general conviction that this was a ‘just cause’. Jingoism in Britain with its colonialist, racist and sexist undertones had its counterpart in Argentina’s ‘patrioterismo’ (extreme or corrupt form of patriotism). Many believed the military briefings that Britain’s army was composed of ‘alcoholic homosexuals’ who would melt away at the sight of the Argentine macho in arms. The left was far from immune to this discourse.

The Catholic Church in Argentina, not surprisingly, presented Operación Rosario (the invasion of the Malvinas) as a holy war or moral crusade. The trade union leadership also subordinated its increasingly contestatory activity to the national interest. With only slightly less patriotic fervour, the Communist Party of Argentina (PCA) joined the chorus behind Operación Rosario which it dubbed an anti-imperialist struggle and called for international solidarity from the non-aligned countries in its support. The Soviet Union was a key trading partner for Argentina so that explained in part its position of the Communist Party. But as anti-war or peace demonstrations multiplied, especially on the occasion of the Pope’s visit to Argentina, the anti-colonial interpretation of the Malvinas invasion prevailed. Fidel Castro, not to be left behind, welcomed the dictatorship’s Foreign Affairs Minister Costa Mendez to Havana and expressed his support for this war of national liberation. Rarely has solidarity been so misplaced.
A case apart was the Montoneros, the left Peronist armed mass movement which had probably been the most effective guerrilla movement in Latin America in the early 1970s. While at odds – to put it mildly – with conservative Peronists such as Isabel Perón (Peron’s widow) and persecuted mercilessly by the military regime after 1978, it found common ground with the nationalist clerical regime. Already in 1978, during the international campaign against the football World Cup in Argentina, the Montoneros had strenuously opposed the human rights discourse as anti-national. They had supported the dictatorship against Chile during the Beagle dispute and, of course, rowed in behind the national campaign to recover the stolen Malvinas islands. They went as far as to organize the return of guerrilla volunteers to fight for the cause and sought to mount an operation against the Royal Navy in Gibraltar. Since, French and German socialists chose the national flag over the workers cause on the eve of the First World War had not such craved behaviour been seen.

Perhaps more surprisingly (or not), most of the Trotskyist parties in Argentina also took up the war fervour. Their claimed authority came from Leon Trotsky himself who (from his Mexican exile) concluded an interview in 1938, an anti-imperialism where he declared that ‘In Brazil here now reigns a semi-fascist regime that every revolutionary can only view with hatred. Let us assume, however, that on the morrow England enters into a military conflict with Brazil. I ask you “on whose side will the working class be?” I will be on the side of “fascist” Brazil against “democratic” Great Britain’ (Trotsky 1938). That was because what was at stake was not democracy versus fascism but imperialism versus the emerging nationalist consciousness in Brazil. With variations, the not insignificant Trotskyist groupings in Argentina saw the war as part of an anti-imperialist war regardless of Argentina’s neo-liberalism and militarism.

There were, of course, some dissenting voices on the left. León Rozitchner took on the infamous statement of critical support for the war by the Mexico-based Pasado y Presente group including Emilio de Ipola, Juan Carlos Portantiero, Nestor García Canclini and basically the whole of the Gramscian left (see Rozitchner 1985). Their position was that ‘Las Malvinas con argentinas pero también los desaparecido’ – the Malvinas are Argentinan but so are also the disappeared. They called for an end to the dictatorship (how could they not?) but they did not call for them to withdraw from Malvinas (just cause) and, indeed, called on international solidarity to the British invasion. There was also the consistent voice of Adolfo Gilly (cited above) and many independent leftists who may have kept a low profile while patrioterismo ruled supreme, but who never succumbed to the abysmal collusion with the dictators around an absurd military adventure.

Democratic Argentina
Contrary to what David Cameron proclaims, democratic Argentina is a very different place from the dictatorship. The economic nationalism of Cristina Fernandez is simply not the same as Galtieri’s delusional dreams of military grandeur. The rise of a democratic, demonstrably left-leaning Latin America, led by Brazil is a part of a new world order. Regional support for Argentina’s claims of sovereignty over the Malvinas is a key datum (Romero 2012). So also is the US recognition that UK de facto control over the islands does alter the need for a durable resolution of the territorial conflict with Argentina. Britain’s seeming reliance on the ‘done deal’ represented by a military victory in 1982 changes none of those facts. Even the European Union is ambivalent in its position and is likely to become even more so as Britain seeks to extricate itself from the EU. Under Raúl Alfonsin, Argentina managed, as Foreign Affairs Minister Dante Caputo put it, ‘to reverse
the image of an irrational country as cause of the war and moved from aggressor country to one which sought dialogue’ (Escude 2000, 50).

Following the democratic spring under Alfonsin, Argentina was governed by Carlos Menem, a Peronist convert to neo-liberalism. His particular brand of ‘peripheral realism’ under his Foreign Affairs Minister Guido di Tella led to a charm offensive around Malvinas in the 1990s, which fully accepted the international status quo and an abandonment of any pretence of non-alignment (Escudé 2000). Menem turned his back on the United Nations and set about direct dialogue with Britain. The US State Department and the governments of Brazil and Uruguay mediated this rapprochement and by 1989 talks were taking place in New York and later, more officially, in Madrid. Joint exploitation of the fisheries was agreed while sovereignty was put on hold. In 1995, a joint declaration established co-operative arrangements for the exploitation of oil and gas reserves. In 1996, Argentina proposed joint sovereignty for the islands. By 1999, Argentine citizens could travel to the islands, flights were resumed and war memorials for both sides were set up.

After 2000, the seeming improving relationship between Argentina and Britain began to deteriorate. Already in the mid-1990s, Britain had begun to take unilateral action, for example, in extending the Falklands Outer Conservation Zone 200 miles towards the coast of Argentina. In Argentina, the new Radical president Fernando de la Rúa in 1999 made clear that Argentina was dealing with Britain but not the Kelpers. By the time Nestor Kirchner took office in 2003, a combination of UK unilateral acts and Argentina’s less than accommodating attitude towards the ‘wishes’ as against ‘interests’ of the islanders led to a suspension of the high-level bilateral political negotiations between Argentina and Britain. In the years since, Britain has sent its high-tech vessels and crown princes to the islands and Argentina has stepped up its campaign to make the British presence there costly in both economic and diplomatic terms.

Recently in Argentina, a post-Malvinas mood can be detected. In 2012, a group of prominent academics and public intellectual figures such as Beatriz Sarlo, Hilda Sábato, Luis Alberto Romero and Emilio de Ipola (one of the signatories of the pro-war Mexico group in 1982) issued a statement (see de Ipola et al. 2012). They propose a critical revision of the Malvinas war, the disproportionate as well as illegitimate nature and the real blindness in Argentina towards the Kelpers’ wishes. The obsessive repetition of Las Malvinas son argentinas is seen to stand in the way of rational cooperation over natural resources between Argentina and the islanders. Rather than obsess over spilt Argentine blood and the evils of the British Empire, we should be forging alternative visions that will overcome the conflict and provide solutions. The withdrawal of British forces and the demobilization of the South Atlantic are deemed full and peaceful demands. But it is time in Argentina to move beyond the Malvinas fixation. Not surprisingly this statement caused considerable controversy but it also received much support.

Clearly, the territorial conflict in the South Atlantic is not going to resolve itself. The fisheries’ economic value and the potential oil and gas reserves, not to mention the geopolitical aspects, mean that Argentina and Britain need to reach an accommodation at some point. There are certainly all sorts of formulas that can be applied within a realist frame. That Argentina’s position is couched in nationalist terms is not surprising in a world with globalizers and globalized, rule setters and rule takers. I believe, however, that the irredentist outlook and the mystique of the lost islands that need to be recovered to complete the ser nacional is now a thing of the past. In Britain, and elsewhere, an internationalist position would need to accept the inevitability of decolonization and the need for a meaningful conflict resolution process mediated by the UN.
Epilogue

Thirty years on from the war in the South Atlantic, we can see a clear geo-strategic fault-line involving a declining imperial power and emerging new power, namely Brazil, which is literally and metaphorically behind Argentina. Oil resources, rich fishing grounds and the yet under-exploited Antarctic are at stake around the Malvinas/Falklands question. It is thus not bizarre or war-mongering to see a democratic Argentina pursuing its territorial claims in the South Atlantic. And, for Britain, it is business as usual in terms of pursuing the interest with the islanders’ ‘self-determination’ a quite transparent fig leaf. From a democratic left perspective, we do see now in Argentina the beginning of what is called the ‘desmalvinización’ of politics with irredentist claims being not so integral to popular common-sense, as they were in 1982. The islands do matter economically and strategically but they do not define national identity and they do not (or should not) stand in the way of an internationalist perspective on development and peace.

Notes on contributor

Ronaldo Munck is Head of Civic Engagement at Dublin City University and Visiting Professor of development and Latin American studies at the University of Liverpool and the University of Nova Scotia. He has written over 20 books on labour and development issues. His most recent work is Rethinking Latin America: Development, Hegemony and Social Transformation (Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

References

Bonnet, A. 1997. “La Izquierda Argentina y la Guerra de Malvinas.” Razón o Revolución (Buenos Aires), No. 3.