


Conservative restorations in Argentina and Brazil: the intimate and the public under attack

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Based on the reflection that greets us in the mirror, we in Argentina watch the recent political processes in Brazil – our brother country – with intellectual and political concern. We feel reflected in certain aspects, but not in others. Here, I propose a few reflections inspired by the article that supports this debate.

Back in the era of 1990s neoliberalism, there was a minimal consensus in Argentina's political class and in society at large regarding the universality of citizens' rights to education and healthcare. The structural adjustment, which at the time was of a single solution to deal with the state's fiscal crisis, promoted the privatization of public companies, mass layoffs, salary reductions, limited workers' rights, and the abandonment of universal social policies. But education – and above all, healthcare – were still seen as almost unassailable.

The neoliberal winds of the last few years are more virulent: now, the attack is against all public welfare programs, including democratic politics itself. As one example: on January 25, 2019, *Clarín*, Argentina's newspaper of note, which acts as a mouthpiece for the government, presented this unambiguous headline: "The IMF (International Monetary Fund) advises

that electoral uncertainty may affect investments.” Electoral uncertainty is what makes democracy a democracy. And for the IMF and *Clarín*, such uncertainty is a problem.

Today, it is not a question of a return to a liberalism that aims to blind us to difference, but rather a reappearance of traces of elitism and supremacy of conservative restoration, including such dimensions as:

The advance of domestic and global capitalists, many of whom benefit from frequently corrupt business deals made with the state itself. These deals are regulated by the same state, and capitalists find any protection of salary rights and the social rights of workers to present insurmountable obstacles to capitalist accumulation; specifically, to their capitalist accumulation;

The advance of hierarchical-authoritarian actors, including religious actors, who fight – sometimes violently – to reestablish individual places in the historical order of inequality;

The uncertainty of the middle and working classes when faced with the breakdown of the certainty conferred by the order of “welfare” capitalism – even à la Latin America – and the more-or-less deeply installed hope of rising social mobility and of shifting identities through labor, which leads to ontological uncertainties, especially among male breadwinners;

Last, but not least, the uncertainty generated by the successful forces of more-or-less organized social movements in questioning the sex-gender order of reproductive heterosexuality and institutionalized gender binarism in hierarchical laws and privileges.

Miskolci and Pereira’s¹ article describes and analyzes how, in the case of Brazil, the educational and healthcare sectors have been converted into two privileged camps in which disputes occur, both within the relation between neoliberal restoration, the role of the state, and models of capitalist accumulation, and in relation to sex-gender and generational hierarchies. Education and healthcare are fields in which conservative restoration aims to put individuals in their places: it is as if power, raising its voice and its fists, is asking: “Do you know who you’re talking to?” Thus, in processes that are ambivalent but that find support, and that tend to reduce class and gender inequalities, issues of the state are once again “attended to by the owners.” This does not occur without disputes and resistance, which leads to violence, furor, and rancor.

These attacks are anti-egalitarian, as Miskolci and Pereira call them, but they are also against public wellbeing. Inequality and re-privatization walk hand in hand: political privatization and privatization of public goods, in service of the market and the family. But market and family present themselves in their most ideological conception – that is, their most false conception – inasmuch as the market for the distribution of equanimity in opportunities and resources has once again revealed itself to be the unjust mechanism of concentration; whereas the family, presumed to be society’s central organ, is the site for the greatest violence and abuses of gender and generations. Despite years of popular struggles and critical analyses, conservative restoration has managed to appear to many as bringing with desired values: the return to a mythical market, a mythical family, and even a mythical nation, a mythical race, and a mythical religious and colonial project.

Miskolci and Pereira’s article refers to attacks on sexual and reproductive rights in the name of “gender ideology.” Of course, I agree with this, but it seems to me that

these attacks are even more deep-seated: according to this perspective, not all residents of our countries have the right to have rights. The rancorous elites, nostalgic for a past that may never have occurred, do not share in this normative nucleus of democratic society. Hierarchies of class, race, sex-gender, and generation rely on systematically and hierarchically unequal material and symbolic conditions to exercise this primary right.

The decision of Brazil's elected government to exclude the LGBTI+ population from its human rights agenda is an explicit demonstration of the lack of recognition of the right to have rights among people who do not recognize themselves and are not recognized by others as cis-heterosexuals. The attack goes further, against people living with HIV; people not living with HIV but at risk of becoming infected in the absence of complete prevention policies; children, adolescents, and young people at risk of unintentional pregnancy and abuse, etc. The sex-gender order shows itself to be essential to the sociopolitical order and to the reproduction of social structures of inequality. Thus, this restoration concentrates on sex-gender as the key to its project for restoring classist and ethnic-racial hierarchies.

This investment passes through rights and policies: debates on equal marriage and abortion are not mainly about eradicating practices, but rather about the legitimate right to them^(b). Unlike Brazil, there are not legal projects for "gay cures" in Argentina; for our conservatives, the problem of homosexuality is not so much its practice, but rather its social and legal recognition as an erotic and family bond, recognized in 2010.

Historically, there have been attacks against recognizing the diversity of subjects as subjects with rights, as well as in relation to their own lives and their capacity for autonomy: girls and women; adolescents; gays and lesbians; trans* people; racialized subjects; indigenous populations; poor people; and migrants. The frightening novelty of the Brazilian election, of the appearance of socio-political neo-fascist movements on the political scene – not only in Brazil – and the complicity or omission of liberal democrats (who themselves do not seem particularly convinced of liberal democracy) is the extension of violence invested in their practices. This takes the form of physical and lethal violence against trans*, lesbian, and gay people, against poor, racialized young people, and against migrants; violent actions against girls and women who are victims of rape and abuse, and who seek legal means to end their pregnancies; explicit political misogyny, such as in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (in Argentina, such misogynistic modes of expression would not be acceptable in a parliamentary setting). These examples of violence come about through other forms of complicity.

In Argentina, as in Brazil, attacks on public well-being affect individuals and scientific institutions, as well as institutions of higher education, especially – but not exclusively – in the humanities and social sciences. In a world of irrationality and post-truth – an elegant name for organized lies – proving correct data and rational arguments is dangerous. Social networks paradoxically democratize access to lies and fallacies that – not spontaneously – circulate at great speed and scale. Attacks, which do not arise from a romantically plebian, anti-intellectual, anti-classist instinct (even if they are based on historical tendencies of critical reactions to university elitism), go beyond the intellectual or theoretical planes, beyond communication styles. They are directed at persecuted individuals who find themselves threatened – including physically threatened – and who lose access to their resources and suffer attacks carried out through orchestrated techniques of public carnage. What our Brazilian colleagues

^(b) It is worth clarifying that, in Argentina, it was the current right-wing government that introduced social and parliamentary debates on abortion, which remains criminalized even in 2019. For lack of space, we will not explain here why and how this is the case.



tell us is similar to what is happening in Argentina. For example, María Eugenia Vidal, governor of Buenos Aires, challenges university projects for poor people on the peripheries, while President Mauricio Macri says that certain people “fall into” public school. So-called trolls position themselves against investigators so as to impugn the danger, the irrelevance, and the snobbery of their investigations, and to demonstrate that such people are part of a body of parasites living off the taxes of those who are truly doing something productive. Neoliberalism and anti-intellectualism thereby form an effective alliance from which the populist character of this new neoliberalism emerges.

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