



[Dossier: Contemporary Reconfigurations of Latin American Political Modernity: Conflicts, Institutions, and Imaginaries]

Hegemony, Crisis and Political Vicissitudes in Contemporary Argentina

Hegemonia, crise e vicissitudes políticas na Argentina contemporânea

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Article received on 31/03/2026 and accepted on 13/04/2026.



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Abstract

This article proposes an analysis of contemporary Argentine politics through the concept of hegemony, which plays a key role in Critical Theory. It first presents the development of this concept and its different interpretations, with particular attention to its reception in Argentina. It then analyzes the Argentine conjuncture at three levels: the international level, by examining Argentina's position within global power blocs; the regional level, by situating the Argentine case within the South American context, from the so-called "Pink Tide" to the current rise of the far right; and the national level, by analyzing how processes such as deindustrialization, financialization, and platformization have created fertile ground for the weakening of traditional social organizations and the strengthening of a radical individualist ideology, represented by Milei.

Keywords: Hegemony; Far-Right; Gramsci; Argentina.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma análise da política argentina contemporânea a partir do conceito de hegemonia, de fulcral importância para a teoria crítica. Inicialmente, será apresentado o desenvolvimento do referido conceito e suas diferentes interpretações, com especial atenção à sua recepção na Argentina. Em seguida, propomos analisar a conjuntura argentina em três escalas: internacional, examinando a inserção da Argentina nos blocos de poder globais; regional, articulando o caso argentino ao contexto dos países sul-americanos, da chamada "onda rosa" à atual ascensão da extrema-direita; nacional, analisando como processos como desindustrialização, financeirização e plataformação criaram um terreno fértil para o enfraquecimento das organizações sociais tradicionais e para o fortalecimento de uma ideologia individualista radical, representada por Milei.

Palavras-chave: Hegemonia; Extrema-Direita; Gramsci; Argentina.



1. Introduction¹

Milei's election was an outlier in Argentina's political history. First, because he was a genuine outsider and his coalition was entering national elections for the first time. Second, because Milei's political discourse and, above all, that of his vice president Victoria Villarruel, confronted issues once treated as uncontroversial by the vast majority of the population, such as Human Rights and public education. Finally, because Milei is characterized by an eccentric personality, marked by episodes ranging from his alleged habit of seeking political counsel from a dead dog to the public insults directed at political and religious leaders, such as Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis.

How was it possible for a figure like this, alien to Argentine political traditions and frequently deviant in his behavior, to be elected with 14.5 million votes, the largest tally in the country's history? How can one explain that social groups historically identified with Peronism voted en masse for a far-right candidate whose political platform is opposed to the positions these same groups traditionally defended? Many analysts rushed in and, directly or indirectly, embraced the cliché popularized during Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign in 1992: "It's the economy, stupid!".

We do not deny that the deep and prolonged economic crisis afflicting Argentine families played an important role in Milei's rise to the presidency. However, reducing a phenomenon as complex as it is singular to a mere reflection of an economy in crisis obscures the political dimension of the phenomenon. In view of this, this article proposes to use the concept of hegemony to analyze some facets of contemporary Argentine politics. Our objective is to demonstrate not only its contemporaneity, but also its importance in treating politics, economics and culture as articulated systems.

We understand that an analysis of contemporary Argentina, focused on the political dimension of the current crisis and grounded in the set of hegemony theories, is capable of illuminating some crucial aspects of the reconfiguration of political modernity in Latin America. Over the last decade, in that southern country, there has been an accelerated development of contemporary tendencies such as the electoral success of the far-right, radical individualism and the growth of informal and platform-based labor.

¹ This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 88887.228673/2025-00.



Against this backdrop, it is worth asking whether the critical theory (henceforth understood ecumenically and not as an exclusive reference to the Frankfurt School) can offer useful tools for analyzing the phenomena related to the set of transformations through which modernity is passing. The question may sound puerile, however, historically, with some exceptions, critical theory has not devoted sufficient attention to political questions, at least not directly (DOMINGUES, 2021b). We believe and will seek to demonstrate that the answer is affirmative. For the purposes pursued here, we emphasize the thought of Gramsci and of some of those who followed him and developed his work in different directions.

2. The Concept of Hegemony

The germ of the concept of hegemony, like so many others commonly employed in certain subdivisions of the social sciences, traces back to ancient Greece. In that work regarded as the cornerstone of International Relations studies, the History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides states that:

after the Persian war, by which time we had built our navy, we broke free from the Spartan empire and Spartan hegemony. They had no more right to give us orders than we had to give orders to them, except that at the time they were stronger. We ourselves were appointed to exercise hegemony over those peoples previously subject to the King of Persia, and we continue to manage their affairs. Our view is that in this way we are least likely to fall under the domination of the Peloponnesians, since we have the power to defend ourselves (THUCYDIDES, 2001, Book 6, § 82, p. 403, our translation)

As the cited passage makes clear, for the ancient Greeks hegemony corresponded to the imposition of leadership and to the exercise of material power. It was, therefore, a vertical relation grounded in force, even if the use of force was not always necessary.

The concept would be taken up again in the nineteenth century, in the context of debates on German unification under Prussian leadership (ANDERSON, 2017). In the final decades of that same century, in the Russian Empire, social democrats began using the notion of hegemony no longer only to refer to relations among States or political entities but also to relations among social classes. The question guiding the debates at that time was: which class would bear the task of leading the social revolution that would overthrow the tsarist regime? Broadly speaking, opinions were divided between those



who pointed to the peasants and those who pointed to the proletarians, since the bourgeoisie displayed a stark incapacity to assume such a historical task.

Plekhanov, who defended a democratic revolution in which the proletarians would lead the other classes, was the one who began, albeit timidly, to open the concept of hegemony beyond the idea of leadership pure and simple. Let us see:

During one period of history hegemony belongs to religion, during another to politics, and so forth. This circumstance inevitably reflects itself in the character of the corresponding critical epochs, each of which, according to circumstances, either continues formally to recognize the old hegemony, introducing a new, opposite content into the dominant conceptions (as, for example, the first English Revolution), or else completely rejects them, and hegemony passes to new provinces of thought (as, for example, the French literature of the Enlightenment). (PLEKHANOV, 1977, p. 639)

The idea of hegemony adapted to the interpretation of the role played by the ideological systems was still far from trivial. Lenin, for example, uses the word hegemony 167 times in his works (D'AMICO, 2023). In his most important writings, the concept always appears as an explanatory tool for the process by which one class objectively leads a movement. In an article written in 1911, Lenin criticizes the liquidationism of certain social democrats who were disseminating liberal-bourgeois ideas contrary to “time-honored slogans of revolutionary Marxism as the recognition of the hegemony of the working class in the struggle for socialism and for the democratic revolution” (LENIN, 1974, p. 2016).

The most relevant innovation in the use of the concept was introduced by the Italian communist party leader and theorist Antonio Gramsci. His propositions deeply influenced the subsequent development of Western Marxism and of critical theory as a whole, especially with regard to interpretations of the nexus between superstructure and infrastructure. It may be said that Gramsci was the main figure responsible for progressively weakening the mechanistic readings present in some Marxist circles regarding the determination of social relations by the economic ones.

As is widely known, between 1926 and 1934 Gramsci was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. In prison, while his increasingly frail health still allowed it, he wrote 33 notebooks addressing varied themes, with emphasis on culture, history and politics.² In these notebooks we find some of the central concerns of the organic intellectual, a category formulated by Gramsci himself.

² Palmiro Togliatti and Felice “Gamba” Platone, then leaders of the Italian Communist Party, originally chose to publish 29 of the 33 notebooks. The complete publication of the notebooks would occur only decades later.



Defining an objective and then devising a strategy, Gramsci asked himself: how is the communist revolution to be organized in Italy? To answer this, it was necessary to carry out a historical analysis of the country, identifying a set of singularities that, when articulated, formed what he called the “southern question” (GRAMSCI, 1987). This was the association of social, economic and demographic features specific to an Italy then marked by late capitalist development, where modernizing and traditional forces coexisted, and which, although unified under a single State, remained divided between an agrarian and profoundly poor south and an economically powerful industrial north. It is important to stress that, besides constituting the guiding thread of Gramsci’s reflections, the southern question also helps explain the favorable reception of his work in Latin America, itself a subcontinent characterized by deep regional inequalities and by the coexistence of the traditional and the modern.

In the mid-1920s, Gramsci expressed deep discomfort with the accusation, made by some socialists, that northern communists defended a magical solution to the southern question³. Such a magical solution would consist of the simple imposition of the socialization of the latifundia, which would supposedly seal an alliance between northern proletarians and southern peasants in a revolutionary scenario led by the former. In defense of the Turin communists, Gramsci states that he maintains his position in favor of distributing land to the peasants, explaining, however, that this measure must be subordinated to a proletarian-peasant alliance built not only on the basis of the objective interests of a class, but verily through the attainment of the consent of the broad peasant masses, in a relationship of solidarity with the industrial workers. At this point, what Ortiz (2006) underscores and what is central to the Gramscian interpretation of hegemony becomes visible: unlike many Marxists of his time, Gramsci does not operate with essentialist categories. On the contrary: he inserts them into a multifaceted historical context, in which multiple social relations unfold.

It was in reflecting on the revolutionary tasks of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI)⁴ in this context that Gramsci developed his concept of hegemony. First, as we have seen, the Sardinian broke with the traditional use of the concept as employed in the texts of the Second International, that is, as objective political direction, replacing it with a

³ The accusation was set out in an article by the socialist Tommaso Fiore, published under the pseudonym Ulenspiegel in the journal *Quarto Stato* in September 1926.

⁴ Only from 1943 onward did the organization come to be called the Italian Communist Party.



notion of intellectual and moral direction. Thus, Gramsci cast new light on themes that had until then been secondary in Marxist debate: culture, ideology, public opinion and the production of consent. Let us see:

Public opinion as we think of it today was born on the eve of the collapse of the absolutist state, that is, during the period when the new bourgeois class was engaged in the struggle for political hegemony and the conquest of power. Public opinion is the political content of the public's political will that can be dissentient; therefore, there is a struggle for the monopoly of the organs of public opinion – newspapers, political parties, parliament – so that only one force will mold public opinion and hence the political will of the nation, while reducing the dissenters to individual and disconnected specks of dust. (GRAMSCI, 2000, v. 3, § 85, p. 265, our translation)

The choice of the decline of absolutism as a symbolic landmark was not accidental. Also revealing himself as a sociologist of modernization, Gramsci identified that moment as the beginning of the gradual separation between political society and civil society, that is, between the State in the strict sense and the private apparatuses of hegemony, instruments through which a class disseminates its ideas and produces consent, such as the newspapers and political parties mentioned above.

Regarding that distinction, two points must be clarified. First, the Gramscian notion of civil society should not be confused with the one developed by Marx in opposition to Hegel. For the philosopher of Trier, bourgeois society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), used in the sense of civil society, was “the form of intercourse determined by the existing productive forces at all previous historical stages, and in its turn determining these” (MARX, 2007, p. 39)⁵. It was, therefore, the “economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” (MARX, 2008, p. 47). Civil society, as conceived by Gramsci, however, is something distinct, being less susceptible to forms of conditioning and more open to productions and reproductions, antagonisms and articulations, as an imbrication of the political, economic and cultural spheres⁶. It is

⁵ In the same cited passage, Marx continues: “this [civil society], as follows from what has been said above, has as its presupposition and foundation the simple family and the compound family, the so-called tribe, whose more precise determinations were set out earlier. Here it is already shown that this civil society is the true focus and stage of all history, and how absurd the previous conception of history was, neglecting real relations and limiting itself to the pompous actions of princes and states” (MARX, 2007, p. 39).

⁶ In the first version of this article, presented at the annual internal seminar of the Núcleo de Teoria Social e América Latina (NETSAL), I used the old division between structure, linked to the relations of production, and superstructure, linked to law, culture, and the State, to differentiate the concept of civil society in Marx and Gramsci. However, after debating with colleagues and reflecting on the topic, I concluded that the use of that analytical resource was not only misplaced, but also worthy of note. Doing justice to Marxian thought, the division between infrastructure and superstructure is in fact a resource that causes more confusion than it



the terrain where public opinion is not only disputed, but also where ideologies are produced through what he called private apparatuses of hegemony.

The second point concerns the division between civil society and political society. This distinction must be understood as methodological rather than organic. Gramsci himself takes care to emphasize that, in practice, there is an Integral State, a complex formed by the articulation between civil society and political society, in which the former is the primary arena to produce consent and the latter the privileged space for the exercise of coercion.

For Gramsci, then, hegemony is linked to a class's capacity for intellectual and moral leadership, and not only to its objective material capacities. However, the Sardinian does not disregard the role of force: the exercise of hegemony requires a delicate balance between the construction of public opinion as the political content of collective will and the use or threat of use of violence (GRAMSCI, 2000).

There is a figure Gramsci identified as central to the construction of intellectual and moral leadership within society: the organic intellectual. This category, formulated by the author himself, clarifies the role of certain individuals whose philosophical and educational activities are connected to the political actions of a social class. It is incumbent upon the organic intellectual to forge an intellectual-moral bloc that makes possible the intellectual progress of the masses, and not merely of small groups.

The understanding that the decline of absolutism opened processes of separation between political society and civil society in various national formations was the basis on which Gramsci developed his theoretical constructions. What he had in mind was the question: why did the Russians manage to make the revolution that the Germans and we Italians did not?

Committed to an evolutionary view of history common in his time, Gramsci saw Russia as a backward country, where civil society was too fragile and, consequently, the State could be conquered in a single move, through the use of force. In Western societies, however, where civil society is more developed, a gradual strategy would be necessary. This should not be confused with a defense of stagism, that is, of the construction of a revolution by stages (liberal-bourgeois, socialist and communist). On the contrary: the

helps in shaping an adequate analysis. Thus, we come closer to Bonefeld (2014) when he states that, for Marx, the State is not an objective creation of the capitalist mode of production, but the political form that capitalist society has taken. In other words, and not so differently from Gramsci, society duplicates itself as State and society.



communist revolution should be on the agenda, but its viability depended on persuading the masses. For this reason, for Gramsci, hegemony in modern societies had to be grounded in an intellectual and moral leadership capable of conducting that process of persuasion.

To categorize the two tactics, the Sardinian borrowed concepts from military circles: war of maneuver, characterized by a frontal attack on the enemy with the aim of defeating it in a single offensive; and war of position, marked by the slow advance and retreat of the forces in conflict, which progressively occupy (or lose) positions, as occurred in the First World War, a trench war that ended a little more than a decade before the Prison Notebooks were written.

The understanding that, in the West, there was an ongoing process of development of civil society in relative autonomy from the State *stricto sensu*, and that therefore the struggle for political direction should articulate economic and cultural questions, was perhaps the most influential contribution of Gramscian thought to Western Marxism in the twentieth century. Themes such as mass communication and ideology definitively entered the agenda.

In the United Kingdom, its influence was profound on the heterogeneous and heterodox group of Marxists associated with the New Left. Thompson (1978), for example, offered an innovative interpretation of the making of the English working class, which, according to him, was forged much more by struggles, traditions and shared experiences than by a mechanical determination derived from individuals' position in the capitalist division of labor. Williams (1979), in turn, emphasized the role of traditions and culture incorporated into hegemony, conceived as a dynamic process that gives meaning to lived experiences. In both cases, these were important innovations for critical theory at the time.

3. Gramsci and hegemony in Argentina

In the second half of the twentieth century, Gramsci's thought, whose core, as we have seen, is the concept of hegemony, spread throughout the world. This dissemination was mainly due to two factors: the increasing complexity of modern societies, which made the adoption of a class-against-class politics more difficult for certain communist and socialist parties; and the gradual insertion of those same parties into the liberal-democratic



system. In Latin America, however, in addition to the two factors mentioned above, the favorable reception of the Italian thinker's work was also related to other aspects.

[...] the adoption of Gramsci by Latin American social thought is linked to the fact that the national peculiarities of the countries of our region find in his theoretical propositions, in his fundamental concepts and in his method of inquiry the possibility of being universalized into a more general criterion of interpretation that includes Latin American singularity in a typology more consistent with the reality of state formations. (ARICÓ, 2005, p. 139, our translation)

Two non-conflicting explanations help us understand the favorable reception of Gramsci's thought in Latin America. The first concerns the social reality he analyzed: Italy was a country with deep regional inequalities, where the modern and the archaic coexisted and where Christianity played a central role in popular culture, characteristics shared, to a greater or lesser degree, by Latin American countries.

Second, Gramsci's work offered an innovative alternative to local left-wing movements, especially after 1968, when Che Guevara's execution in the Bolivian mountains frustrated the expectations of many intellectuals and militants who, enthused by the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, had placed their hopes in *foquismo* as a tactic. The Gramscian alternative consisted in the possibility of building socialism without dispensing with democracy, that is, without assuming the dictatorship of the proletariat as a historical imperative. The path would be pursued through the deepening and reform of the democratic system itself, with a view to establishing a socialist democracy. The democratic road, as envisioned in Chile in the 1970s under Allende's presidency, was conceived as a processual revolution: a war of position, in Gramscian terms.

Although Gramsci's writings were translated into Spanish and published in Latin America as early as the 1950s – receiving special attention in Argentina due, among other factors, to the presence of a large population of Italians and their descendants –, it was only from the 1960s onward that studies on hegemony actually began to become popular. This process, however, faced advances and setbacks because of the wave of military dictatorships installed in the subcontinent with support from the United States (MELO; MAROCHI, 2020).

It is relevant to mention the role played by the journal *Pasado y Presente*, edited in Córdoba between 1963 and 1965 by Héctor Agosti, Héctor Schmucler, José Aricó and



Juan Carlos Portantiero, under the sponsorship of the Argentine Communist Party⁷. During that period, a new intellectual left took shape in Argentina, one that needed conceptual tools to deal with a relatively new and broadly singular phenomenon: Peronism (TERÁN, 2013). In this sense, Gramsci's thought emerged as a beacon that illuminated the path toward a more or less critical articulation, depending on the interpreter, between Marxism and national-popular movements.

The term “national-popular” assumed a central role among Gramsci's readers in South America, functioning as a true “meeting point in which many of his fundamental concepts converge, such as that of hegemony” (PORTANTIERO, 1991, our translation). The concept articulates two dimensions: cultural traditions and the construction of a collective will, both essential to the formation of hegemony, as Portantiero explains well:

What Gramsci proposes as the process of constructing a “national-popular collective will” is the necessity of this nexus between a modern, secular and scientific culture and the nuclei of “common sense” found in contradictory popular culture. This association between a mass that, in order to organize and distinguish itself, requires the mediation of intellectuals, is specific to his concept of hegemony as a process of constitution of social subjects. His reflections on hegemony merely crown his discourse on the national-popular as a foundational category for the possibility of historical change. (Idem, p. 134, our translation).

Relating Sorel and Machiavelli critically, Gramsci presented his notion of the Prince as a myth capable of producing collective will as a dialectical synthesis. This Prince could be none other than the Communist Party, which would act, therefore, as a “concrete fantasy which works on a dispersed and pulverized people in order to arouse and organize their collective will” (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 14).

The idea of the Prince as concrete fantasy, as the operator of an articulation necessary to the construction of hegemony, directly influenced another important Latin American theorist, the one who perhaps developed the most eclectic and heterodox approach to the subject: Ernesto Laclau. Although he built most of his career in England and produced some of his most important works in partnership with Chantal Mouffe, a Belgian political scientist, Laclau was born and raised in Argentina and was politically formed within the broad Peronist field. His main analytical categories stem both from the political experiences he lived through in his native country and from the tradition of Argentine social thought.

⁷ The publication was interrupted due to the 1966 military coup that brought General Juan Carlos Onganía to power.



In the 1980s, Laclau faced two crucial questions for political and social thought. The first was the crisis of the socialist experience in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, whose emancipatory dreams had faded amid the consolidation of regimes sustained by rigid apparatuses of domination. This crisis called into question not only those regimes themselves, which would implode a few years later, but also Marxism-Leninism, which since 1917 had been the main theoretical and organizational reference for anticapitalist struggles.

The second question was the pluralization of identities (HALL, 2011), which Laclau and Mouffe addressed as the proliferation of subject positions (2010). Empirically, this concerns the deepening of the process of social differentiation, which made individual and collective identities the result of increasingly complex equations, with variables in constant transformation and impossible to reduce to a single dimension, such as the economic one. One of the central consequences of this phenomenon was the emergence, from the 1960s and 1970s onward, of the so-called “new social movements”, which culminated in the contemporary scenario where movements are increasingly characterized by the pluralization of forms of engagement, multiple activism, multi-layered identities and transversal agendas that articulate different scales of action (BRINGEL; PONTES SPOSITO, 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, assuming that there is a multiplication of subject positions implies rejecting the essentialist notion of the subject as prior to social relations and determined, for example, by class. Declaring himself “post-Marxist” without apology, as he emphasized in the title of a celebrated article written with Mouffe (2015), Laclau (1985, p. 42) went so far as to state that the concept of class struggle “is neither correct nor incorrect – it is, simply, totally insufficient as a way of accounting for contemporary social conflicts”.

Faced with the diagnosis that society had become more complex, producing growing democratic demands directed at the political system; and that traditional Marxism, excessively tied to the primacy of economic relations, no longer provided, by itself, adequate tools for social analysis and the formulation of emancipatory strategies, Laclau formulated the central question of his most important work: what should the socialist strategy be in this new scenario? To answer it, he returned to Gramsci, more precisely to the concept of hegemony, which for him is nothing less than the very logic of the political.



If, for Laclau, politics consists in the incessant and always incomplete struggle for hegemony, its mechanisms must be understood. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2010), Laclau and Mouffe argue that the key to hegemonic construction lies in the capacity to produce discursive articulation. The proliferation of subject positions, each of which may give rise to distinct democratic demands, constitutes a field of differences. The task of those seeking to build a hegemonic bloc is to articulate these differences by constructing a chain of equivalence. For this to occur, the production of an empty signifier and the constitution of an antagonistic frontier are necessary.

The empty signifier is a signifier structurally prevented from signifying fully; it expresses a lack (LACLAU, 2011). It is precisely this imprecise and at times ambiguous character that gives it the capacity to unify heterogeneous demands. Yet every chain of equivalence presupposes the constitution of an antagonistic frontier, since hegemonic articulation, in universalizing particularities, necessarily produces an “outside”. This is not the place to deepen the problem of the relation between universal and particular in Laclau. It is enough to bear in mind that, in line with the Lacanian hypothesis of constitutive lack, Laclau understands that “every identity, as a differential dimension, is penetrated by a constitutive lack and is canceled when included in a non-differential medium; therefore, particularity is constituted only in reference to universality as lack” (REZENDE, 2021, p. 352, our translation).

It is precisely the question of identity in contemporaneity that makes Laclau’s ideas on hegemony so useful for current sociological analyses. Let us consider an example: Peronism, understood as a sociopolitical movement, was not born from the pure and simple will of its leader but from a discursive construction capable of articulating a social group under a collective identity. When Perón came to power, he found a legion of people excluded from the political system, a mass available to be organized. This available mass, first observed by Germani (1965), was composed of workers recently incorporated into urban and industrial life who nevertheless remained excluded from the country’s main institutions. Perón perceived, insightfully – as later recognized by Germani himself, a notorious anti-Peronist – that this mass could and should constitute the social base of his political movement.

Despite Domingues’s (2018) criticisms of Laclau, whom he accuses of reintroducing into sociological debate the old binarism between culture and structure, as well as replacing economic determination with political determination, the Brazilian



sociologist recognizes that Peronism is a discursive construction and turns to Cornelius Castoriadis's concept of imaginary to represent the partial crystallization of this discourse. Domingues also identifies the opposition between people and oligarchy as one of the central elements of this imaginary, which converges with Laclau's theory of populism.

The opposition between the *descamisados*, as Eva Perón called the Peronist working-class masses, and the oligarchy that had historically ruled the country constituted the antagonistic frontier that made possible the construction of a chain of equivalence, capable of dividing Argentina between "the people", that is, the Peronists, and the rest: oligarchs, traitors to the homeland and so forth. Not by coincidence, it was by observing Juan Domingo Perón's speeches during exile – speeches that required a certain degree of ambiguity in order to appeal to both right-wing and left-wing Peronists – that Laclau formulated his theory of populism, one of whose central elements, as already mentioned, is the construction of chains of equivalence capable of overcoming differences. In a famous interview granted in Madrid in 1972, Perón was asked about the political spectrum in Argentina. The general then replied:

Look, in Argentina there are 30 percent Radicals [referring to the Radical Civic Union, an Argentine party founded in 1891 and, at that time, strongly identified with the urban middle classes], what you would understand as liberals; 30 percent conservatives and just as many socialists." "So where are the Peronists?", asked the journalist. "Ah, no, we are all Peronists!" (PERÓN, 2019, our translation)

Thus began a period in which all Argentines were Peronists, except those who were not. For at least sixty years, Peronism became the center of Argentine politics or, more precisely, its hegemonic nucleus. It is true that this hegemony did not always translate into electoral victories. However, the concept of hegemony should not be confused with the simple formation of numerical majorities. Peronist hegemony in Argentina can be observed in its capacity to crystallize certain imaginaries and institutions, such as, for example, the strong trade union movement, public education and, after the end of the last dictatorship, the centrality of the defense of human rights. As we will point out below, this hegemony began to be effectively challenged only with the rise of Javier Milei, who seeks, at all costs, to build a new chain of equivalence from which it would be possible to erect an alternative hegemony.



4. The political dimension of Milei's rise

The relevance of Gramscian thought today is significant. The conceptual and analytical tools developed by the heterogeneous group of theorists of hegemony allow us to understand contemporary political phenomena by emphasizing three central points: the idea that, although politics does not constitute an autonomous system, neither is it a determined system; the understanding that social classes do not possess interests defined a priori; and the admission that ideas are capable of organizing worldviews and guiding individual and collective actions and interpretations.

With rare exceptions, such as Semán and Welschinger (2023), a considerable portion of sociologists and especially political scientists, when analyzing the Javier Milei phenomenon, tend to identify the economic crisis as the determining variable, whether in the first or in the last instance. In general terms, these interpretations constitute variations of the same scheme, which lowers politics to the condition of a determined system: the economic crisis leads to popular dissatisfaction, which leads to the election of an outsider.

This is what Murillo and Oliveros (2024) do, for example. In an interesting article on the “irruption of Javier Milei in Argentine politics”, the renowned political scientists point to various variables and, in the end, interpret Argentines' electoral choice as a combination of economic vote and protest vote. Considering, however, that, as Abal Medina (2025) aptly noted, Argentines had long grown accustomed to an anomalous situation in which economic crisis and political stability coexisted, the question remains: why now? Why Milei?

To understand the political dimension of Javier Milei's rise, it is necessary to observe the multiple imbrications among the national, regional and global scales. In other words, it is necessary to understand how different factors are articulated: the relative weakening of United States hegemony, the election of Donald Trump, the end of the Pink Tide in South America, the effective propagation of neoliberal rationality and structural transformations in the Argentine economy, which are related to the current crisis but go far beyond it, having their roots in the last military dictatorship, when they were introduced as a political project for dismantling the traditional Peronist social base.

According to Robert W. Cox (1981; 1983), a theorist of International Relations who adapted Gramsci's theory of hegemony to his field of study, hegemony in the



international system is an exercise of leadership sustained by three foundations: institutions, ideas and material capacity. From this premise, when we observe the world conjuncture, we may conclude that United States hegemony is being challenged by China, forming a scenario of “hegemonic stalemate”, that is, a situation in which two forces are capable of blocking each other’s project, although neither possesses sufficient resources to fully impose its own (PORTANTIERO, 1977).

The liberal Joseph Nye (2019), who certainly cannot be accused of anti-Americanism, argues that United States hegemony remains in force, although under threat, characterized by relative decline. This would occur because the international institutions that sustained the *pax americana* are gradually being abandoned by the United States itself and, in parallel, are losing legitimacy in the international system. In a consciously or unconsciously Gramscian outburst, Nye warns policy makers that leadership is distinct from domination.

In our view, the problem with his interpretation, in addition to the excessive weight assigned to institutions and multilateralism, is that Nye appears to treat Trump’s rise as a cause and not as a consequence of this decline. International institutions have been losing legitimacy at least since 2003, when the United States disregarded the UN Security Council and invaded Iraq without legal backing. Second, it must be taken into account that Trump’s election derives from long-term transformations in North American politics and economy, which include: decades of wage stagnation, rising inequality, diminished upward mobility, growing private indebtedness, decline of employment in the traditional manufacturing sector, intensification of racial conflicts and the diffusion of conservative ideologies (CAMPBELL, 2019). In other words, Trump’s two victories should be read not as a demonstration of the strength of a flourishing empire but as a desperate reflex of a hegemony in crisis.

Another possible sign of the relative decline of United States hegemony is the deepening of global financialization. Giovanni Arrighi (1996), strongly influenced by Gramsci and Braudel, analyzed the systemic cycles of capitalist accumulation and concluded that the migration of “productive” capital toward finance is one of the main indications of the exhaustion of a hegemonic cycle. The author also observed that the gradual transfer of productive sectors to East Asia, one of Trump’s favorite targets during his campaign, constitutes another indication of transformations in the world-system.



The contemporary economic and political crisis, associated with the possible decline of the United States hegemonic cycle, should not be read as an exception but as the rule. Crises are inherent to capitalism and should be understood not as terminal symptoms of the mode of production but as opportunities to overcome obstacles to its reproduction (KARATANI, 2016). Such overcoming, if necessary, may assume the form of authoritarian populist leaderships, as the world witnessed in the 1920s and 1930s and witnesses again today.

Far from constituting isolated phenomena, the contemporary explosions of political extremism are part of an articulated process. The Argentine researcher Ariel Goldstein (2024) states that far-right leaders, parties and movements today form a genuine reactionary international, whose national representatives, despite their differences, are connected by solid bonds of solidarity. Many of the business figures and foundations that previously financed the mainstream right have begun supporting the new radicalized right. Added to this reactionary international are the big tech elites, responsible for the modulation of algorithms that transform social networks into machines of extremist propaganda produced on demand, while at the same time controlling gigantic databases that feed the electoral campaigns of this new global right.

Solidarity is not limited to discourse. Milei has been constantly supported by Trump. Shortly before the Argentine legislative election of 2025, the United States president granted Argentina a 20-billion-dollar currency swap, promising an additional loan of the same amount indirectly conditioned on his ally's electoral success. Weeks later, on the date when Argentina was due to pay an installment of US\$840 million to the IMF, there was an increase of US\$870 million in a specific type of Argentine asset, while the same asset in the United States declined by exactly US\$870 million compared to the previous month. Both governments refused to comment on the curious coincidence.

At the regional level, Milei's election is situated within the exhaustion of the Pink Tide, the name given to the sequence of electoral victories by South American left-wing forces. Although heterogeneous, with different levels of integration into the political system, varied forms of organization and reformist or refoundational strategies (PEREIRA DA SILVA, 2011), these forces were articulated around a project of regional integration and the defense of democracies against internal coups and foreign interference. The end of this cycle favored the construction of a hegemonic discourse that emphasizes the errors of national left-wing governments while obscuring their achievements.



The end of the Pink Tide did not mean a return, sanctioned by the ballot box, to a prior scenario, that is, to a conjuncture in which the right-wing forces, as they had existed until then, operated within the limits established by representative liberal democracy. On the contrary, it inaugurated a moment marked by the proliferation of cases of what Pereira da Silva (2018) called “neo-coups”, that is, democratic ruptures, not necessarily with military support or participation, in which new and old right-wing forces resort to distorted interpretations of institutions in order to foster processes of destabilization and activate the impeachment mechanism where constitutionally available.

When they were not victims of neo-coup processes that placed democratic regimes under siege in a single move or in just a few moves, South American political regimes were situated within a global context of gradual de-democratization. The twentieth century was an expansive moment for liberal democracy: universal suffrage became a reality in most of the world, the public agenda was broadened, and political and social rights were won. With the advance of liberal democracy, the State ceased to be merely a committee for managing affairs of the bourgeois class, as Marx observed in the nineteenth century, and developed a relative autonomy, becoming the material condensation of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions, as Poulantzas (1980) argues.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, a regressive process began, one that apparently has been gaining increasingly accelerated rhythms, producing a system far closer to what Domingues (2021) calls an advanced liberal oligarchy than to a liberal democracy properly so called. In this context, “we can all vote, the public agenda is supposedly open, but none of this seems to really matter” (DOMINGUES, 2021, p. 17, our translation).

The development of the de-democratization process may be related to the deepening crisis of democratic legitimacy. According to *AmericasBarometer*, a public opinion research project covering more than 30 countries in the Americas and carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, Argentina and Uruguay remain the two surveyed countries with the highest levels of support for democracy. Nevertheless, in Argentina, between 2008 and 2023, such support fell from 90% of respondents to 68%, a shift of 22 percentage points in fifteen years (EL OBSERVADOR, 2024).



It is not possible to determine, without a deeper study, whether de-democratization fuels distrust toward the regime or whether distrust toward the regime fuels de-democratization. Nor is it possible to determine, in the Argentine case, the degree of influence of the economic crisis on the population's perception of the regime. What is clear is that both phenomena are real and that there are indications that they may feed back into each other.

At the national level, two factors contributed to the formation of fertile ground for the emergence of a figure such as Milei: the structural transformations through which the country is passing and the crisis of Peronist leadership. The social base of Peronism was born with the integration of the working masses, especially migrant industrial workers or the children of migrants, into the political system (GERMANI, 1965). This integration occurred, in part, through the proliferation of civil society organizations, such as trade unions, assistance entities and centers of political activity, almost always linked to Peronism, here conceived as a movement and not only as a party. Thus, still in the 1950s, Peronism became the center of Argentine politics, which came to be structured between Peronists and anti-Peronists. The latter, in the effort to eliminate the movement, resorted to military coups in 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1976, besides preventing the electoral participation of the Justicialist Party between 1955 and 1973. None of this diminished the movement's strength; on the contrary, its adversities became a source of pride for the militancy, as expressed in a passage from a well-known chant repeated by militants: "despite the bombs, the firing squads, the dead comrades and the disappeared, they did not defeat us".

The most effective blow suffered by the Peronist movement, however, was the gradual dissolution of its social base as a collectivity. In 1974, Argentina was completing a decade of continuous economic growth, strongly supported by the manufacturing sector. In that year, Argentine manufacturing GDP corresponded to 61.7% of Brazilian GDP and 87.6% of Mexican GDP, percentages that, in 2001, had fallen to 35.3% and 34.5%, respectively (WAINER; SCHORR, 2022). During the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), the so-called long neoliberal cycle began, marked by the rupture with the import-substitution model, the abandonment of the industrializing strategy and the adoption of a financial model oriented toward structural adjustment. The observed results were:

the relative and absolute shrinking of industry; changes in the profile of specialization and international insertion, focused on reprimarization and on the disintegration of the productive fabric; drastic redefinition of the capital-



labor relation; growing structural centrality of large economic groups and decline of broad business segments (micro, small, medium-sized and even some large ones), and the pronounced financialization of the accumulation and reproduction cycle of the most concentrated fractions of capital. (WAINER; SCHORR, 2022, our translation.)

The process that began during the last dictatorship was deepened during redemocratization and remains ongoing today, despite brief interruptions during the Peronist governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. As a consequence, the mass of unionized workers that once sustained the Peronist movement no longer holds the same relevance in the political landscape that it once did. As the intellectual and social leader Juan Graboïs (2013) argues, neoliberalism promoted a type of structural exclusion. More precisely, this is not a matter of forming an industrial reserve army, called upon in periods of expansion and serving capital as an instrument for containing wage demands. Rather, these people are true leftovers of the system, while the only State policy commonly directed at them is repression or incarceration (WACQUANT, 2009).

Those excluded from the formal labor system, when they do not turn to begging, drug abuse or crime, frequently find means of survival in the popular economy (as waste pickers, market vendors, street vendors and so forth) or in the platform economy. The latter depends on the intensive use of social networks, which form what Marins (2025) called a “new infrastructure of informality”.

The gradual dissolution of Peronism’s classic social base and the reconfiguration of the world of labor, now oriented toward increasingly individual, flexible and precarious activities, are part of what Grimson (2024) called the “emotional landscapes of mass far rights”. The author further argues that, at the root of the growth of the far-right in Argentina, lies the resentment of those who became poorer while watching the advance of policies of gender equality and cultural recognition associated with the left. Added to this is the internalization of the platform-economy model and, more broadly, of neoliberal reason, which leads the individual to perceive himself as an “entrepreneurial subject” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). As we have argued in a previous work, Milei was successful in selling

a radical project, through an anti-system discourse, that presents all individuals as potential capitalist entrepreneurs whose failure would result solely from the action of the state and its parasitic agents. It is a true discursive opposition between citizenship and entrepreneurship: the former is associated with poverty and dependence; the latter, with wealth and autonomy. (REZENDE, 2025, our translation)



Milei constructed his political figure in line with the logic analyzed by Laclau and Mouffe. He mobilized an empty signifier, liberty, and established an antagonistic frontier by placing the State and all those who depend on it for the realization of their rights in opposition to individual liberty. The State and the political class thus came to represent the enemies of liberty and individual success and, therefore, the main actors responsible for the hardships experienced by the population. The struggle for this abstract liberty, open to multiple significations, was able to transform differences into equivalences. In this sense, Milei's victory occurred above all in the field of discourse.

If, on the one hand, Milei was efficient in the use of his resources and shrewd in taking advantage of the opportunity presented, on the other hand, the Peronists accumulated errors and today face a leadership crisis, understood here in a broader sense, from a Gramscian point of view. By this, we mean that it is not only a matter of Peronism not yet having a leadership capable of unifying and guiding the movement; it is a matter of the incapacity of the movement and of its leaders to exercise moral and intellectual leadership among the Argentine people. If it is true that the Peronists were placed in an intricate labyrinth, it is also true that they have been colliding with one another in its corridors, rather than uniting to seek a way out.

Reconstructing Peronism as a force capable of once again articulating a hegemonic project will not be simple. The crisis is also one of legitimacy. Although Peronism has demonstrated resilience in recent years, maintaining a national electoral floor of around 20%, many Argentines became deeply disappointed with the Peronist political camp after the disastrous governmental experience of the Alberto Fernández–Cristina Kirchner ticket.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we sought to reconstruct, within the constraints of the available space, the trajectory of the concept of hegemony, with particular attention to the turn promoted by Antonio Gramsci. We then presented some of the main receptions of the concept in Argentina. Finally, we analyzed the rise of Javier Milei, relating it to certain tendencies in the reconfiguration of contemporary modernity, such as de-democratization and the growth of radical individualism.



The analysis developed here assumed as its premise and sought to demonstrate that every political and social phenomenon is always multicausal, which makes reductionist explanations impossible when they attribute to politics or to economics the role of ultimate determining factor, in a kind of belief in the ontological precedence of one over the other.

In sum, we argue that, beyond the suffering imposed by the crisis on the Argentine population, factors such as Trump's election, the decomposition of Peronism's social base, the construction of neoliberal subjectivities and the errors of political conduct by Peronist leaders were fundamental to the legitimacy crisis of that movement and to the emergence of a challenging actor interested in articulating a new hegemonic bloc. This challenging actor, whose success was expressed in the streets and at the ballot box, discursively constructed himself by aligning with the most striking tendencies in the reconfiguration of contemporary modernity: the valorization of the entrepreneurial subject, the financialization of the economy and the weakening of the collectivities once identified with Peronism.

There is no way to predict the future of Milei or of Peronism, just as there are no magical formulas for overcoming the crisis, restoring political stability or maintaining the democratic regime. Regardless of the side from which one observes the dispute, victory or defeat will be the consequence of a long war of position.

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Authorship credits

The author is solely responsible for writing the article.

Conflict of interest statement

There are no possible conflicts of interest in carrying out and communicating the research.

Funding information

This research was funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES)

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analyzed in this study.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI tools were not used in the development of this work.

Editors Responsible for the Evaluation Process and Editing

Carolina Alves Vestena and Bruna Bataglia.

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