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Collective subjectivities, the “democratic pact,” and the rise of the far right in the Argentine government

Las subjetividades colectivas, el “pacto democrático” y el ascenso de la derecha extrema en el gobierno de la Nación Argentina

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Abstract

This article analyzes the rise of the far right in Argentina, asking whether it signifies the end of the “Never Again democratic pact.” It argues that this phenomenon stems from the erosion of the collective democratic subjectivity that underpinned it, in light of the state’s inability to fulfill its dual promise—both political and social. Drawing on Marina Franco’s proposal regarding the founding pact and José Maurício Domingues’s category of collective subjectivities, this work traces a history of the last 40 years, describing the conflicts surrounding these consensuses. The central thesis is that the emergence of subjectivities that question egalitarian democracy does not imply—at least for now—a consolidation of the far right, but rather a response to the unfulfilled expectations of the post-dictatorial cycle.

Keywords: Egalitarian democracy, Far right, Collective subjectivities, Human rights, Argentina.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el ascenso de la derecha extrema en Argentina interrogándose si supone una clausura del “pacto democrático del Nunca Más”. Se argumenta que este fenómeno resulta del resquebrajamiento de la subjetividad colectiva democrática que lo sostenía ante la incapacidad del estado de cumplir su promesa bifronte, tanto política como social. Recuperando la propuesta de Marina Franco sobre el pacto fundante y la categoría de subjetividades colectivas de José Maurício Domingues, el trabajo traza un recorrido de los últimos 40 años describiendo los conflictos en torno a estos consensos. La tesis central que se sostiene es que la emergencia de subjetividades que cuestionan la democracia igualitaria no implica —al menos por ahora— una consolidación de la derecha extrema, sino una respuesta a las expectativas incumplidas del ciclo posdictatorial.

Palabras-clave: Democracia igualitaria; Derecha extrema; Subjetividades colectivas; Derechos Humanos; Argentina.



1. Introduction

Does the current government end a cycle based on the Never Again “democratic pact”? This article offers a review of recent history and revisits academic discussions regarding the conditions of possibility for the rise of the far right in the Argentine Republic¹, proposing a thesis that repositions the debate concerning the characteristics of this historical cycle and expands it to the level of collective subjectivities.

The thesis that guides this article could be summarized as follows: the rise of the far right in Argentina can be understood as the result of the erosion of a collective democratic subjectivity, coupled with the emergence—still incipient, though now expressed from the highest echelons of the Executive Branch—of subjectivities that question its egalitarian democracy core. This disarticulation, we argue, is linked to the inability of the various post-dictatorship governments to uphold the dual promise of the democratic order—both political and social—, leading to a reconfiguration of social conflict and enabling new forms of constructing political legitimacy.

In order to develop this thesis, the article draws, on the one hand, on Francos’s (2025) formulation regarding the “Never Again democratic pact” as the founding myth of the return to democracy, understanding it as a shared framework of meanings centered on the end of political violence, the relevance of liberal democracy and the promise of moving toward a society of equals (Castel, 2008). Simultaneously, it takes up the category of collective subjectivities (Domingues, 1995; 2004) to examine how identities and organizational repertoires, exhibiting different degrees of social centeredness, are configured at the intersection of hermeneutic and material elements. On this analytical basis, we address the conflict among subjectivities surrounding the democratic pact – with particular emphasis on its social dimension—as a key explanatory factor for the emergence of the far right in Argentina.

The article traces a history around the promises and limits of the “democratic pact” since the end of the civil-military dictatorship, attending to the collective subjectivities that have sustained it, as well as to the ruptures, conflicts and tensions present across different periods. The article then presents an argument concerning the emergence of popular subjectivities that calls into question some of the foundations of

¹ A related discussion regarding the Brazilian case can be found in an earlier work by Bringel and Domingues (2018).



the democratic pact. We argue that this emergence, as a construct inseparable from the expectations left unfulfilled by democracy, is a substantive aspect for understanding the electoral victory of the far right. However, despite the rupture this represents for a country that constructed internationally recognized symbolic milestones around human rights, we argue, finally, that it would be incorrect to understand this emergence as the mass consolidation of a far right collective subjectivity in the strict sense of the term, but rather as a moment in the search for alternatives amid a process marked by the failure of progressive experiences.

2. A brief return to the 1980s

In this article, we understand the 1970s to constitute a turning point in historical terms; a rupture (Svampa, 2005) that annihilated an emerging social subjectivity. The crisis of the postwar model, which, in Global North countries, signaled the end of the "short twentieth century" with the fall of the Berlin wall (Hobsbawm, 1995) had already manifested its first signs of rupture in the 1970s—both in Argentina and in other peripheral capitalist countries. In Argentina, the State Terrorism (Duhalde, 1983) produced within the context of the civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983) represented a—tragic—resolution of the tensions inherent in the postwar model. Following the genocide (Izaguirre, 1994; Feierstein, 2007), the restoration of democratic institutions gave rise to diverse expectations grounded in the “democratic pact.”

If the “democratic pact” entailed both the consolidation of the political institutions of liberal democracy—such as the separation of powers, periodic elections, and so forth—and the construction of a hope for a path toward an egalitarian democracy, the “Never Again”, while abolishing recourse to political violence, fostered the articulation of a set of collective subjectivities constituted around the defense of human rights (Svampa, 2016; Jelin, 2002). The significance of the human rights movement in Argentine society is impossible to overlook. Nevertheless, this democratizing impulse encountered concrete limits—revealing the enduring power of the military coalition. The Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws² circumscribed the judicial

² Law No. 23,492 (Full Stop Law), enacted in 1986, established a 60-day time limit for initiating criminal proceedings against those responsible for crimes against humanity, after which such actions became barred



process by limiting both its temporal scope and the accountability of high-ranking military officials. These laws reflected the tension between the deeper process of democratization demanded by human rights organizations, a mobilized citizenry—as organizational forms of a democratic collective subjectivity characterized by a low degree of centralization—and the government coalition's limited capacity to advance democratization. Despite these limitations, the trials, social mobilization, and human rights organizations have remained in historical memory as an early milestone in the pursuit of justice throughout the region. This was a moment of rupture activism (Bringel and Domingues, 2018), in which civil society not only demanded justice but also sought to expand the boundaries of the political sphere into the family and the neighborhood. It is worth recalling that one of the most significant expressions of this expansion was the role played by the iconic Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza de Mayo), who—beyond the traditional spaces of femininity and motherhood—assumed a public voice in defense of human rights, becoming an international democratic symbol (Jelin, 2002, 2017).

In turn, Alfonsín's promise of a democracy grounded in a social program ("with democracy, people eat, get healthcare, and become educated") represented a new attempt to restore a form of organized modernity (Wagner, 1997; Domingues, 2009). However, this project, which sought to establish the centrality of the state in conjunction with social welfare, encountered the historical rupture (Svampa, 2005) brought about by the *de facto* government in the country's socioeconomic structure. The difficulties in geopolitically managing the external debt—the proposed “debtors' club”—another legacy of the *de facto* regime, were decisive in constraining the national economy, while the expectation that the industrial sectors would lead a new productive process as the “captains of industry” failed to materialize. The inflation problem became evident early on and was addressed through heterodox plans that succeeded, albeit only partially and temporarily, in managing it (Torre, 2021). The inability to link the advances of liberal democracy with progress in the social sphere undermined some of the promises of this democratic subjectivity: with democracy, people ate, received healthcare, and were educated—but only inadequately.

by the statute of limitations. In turn, Law No. 23,521 (Due Obedience Law), enacted in 1987, presumed that lower-ranking military officers (below the rank of colonel) had acted under superior orders, thereby exempting them from criminal liability, except in cases involving the abduction of children, rape, or theft.



Toward the end of the decade, an economic shock culminating in hyperinflation forced Raúl Alfonsín's early resignation from the presidency; this paved the way for the structural reforms of the 1990s. The 1980s soon came to be revisited as the "lost decade" because of the difficulties encountered in establishing a sustained path toward both the consolidation of human rights and socioeconomic development; however, our reading against the grain does not regard it as a decade defined solely by failure. On the contrary, we argue that the democratizing milestone of its early years, together with the collective subjectivities associated with it, set in motion a trajectory whose significance still deserves to be revisited.

3. The neoliberal decade

The structural transformations of this second neoliberal phase cannot be understood without considering the conditions created by the hyperinflationary process of 1989–1990. This process played a central role in disrupting the predictability and social discipline of workers with fixed incomes in pesos (Svampa, 2005; Piva, 2012). Money is not merely another commodity in a capitalist economy; it is the universal equivalent that constitutes the general system of prices; to the extent that it ceases to function as such, the convention governing this type of society breaks down. To grasp even a minimal sense of the magnitude of the problem, it is worth noting that the currency lost value at annual rates reaching 3,000 percent. This experience, in turn, represented a profound erosion of state power (Torre, 2021), revealing the state's inability to direct the social order. Protests, looting, and strikes occurred alongside the events surrounding the early transfer of the presidency to a new candidate. Carlos Menem, a provincial political leader, presented himself as a force for "renewal" within the Peronist party. He promised to connect the tradition of popular leaders from the country's "interior" with a new social hope. Menem launched his campaign under the slogans of the "productive revolution" and the "Massive wage boost" in opposition to a Radical Civic Union (Unión Cívica Radical) candidate who was an open advocate of neoliberal reforms. The popular and democratic collective subjectivity voted for this new hope, whose core was centered on the notion of egalitarian democracy.



The governmental transition and the early months of the new administration were marked by profound social, political, and economic instability; nevertheless, the president was determined to stabilize the currency by aligning himself with the country's most powerful institutions, thereby betraying his campaign promises. In the realm of democratic struggles and human rights, pardons were granted to both the military high command and the leaders of the politico-military organizations.³ These pardons were issued despite the massive citizen mobilization articulated through a network of human rights organizations; from this perspective, the decade would be marked by the mobilization, renewal, and emergence of important human rights organizations that remained committed to the struggles for memory, truth, and justice. Established and newly created organizations, along with different generations of activists, converged in a collective subjectivity characterized by a low degree of centering but a strong identity grounded in the defense of human rights.

In 1991, a convertibility plan (1 peso = 1 U.S. dollar) was implemented, which anchored the exchange rate and proved effective in stabilizing the currency; this stability was viewed positively by a large part of society, which, under these conditions, tolerated and/or supported neoliberal structural reforms. Did social subjectivity emerge within civil society to sustain such initiatives? Undoubtedly, yes; however, this question falls outside the scope of the present article. The government adopted the "recommendations" of the Washington Consensus, which promoted, among other measures, a return to orthodox policies of fiscal discipline, the redirection of public initiatives toward profitable sectors, reductions in social public spending, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the opening of the economy (Piva, 2012).

The international availability of foreign currency and the privatization of state-owned enterprises made it possible to finance the program for a considerable period of time. However, by the middle of the decade, the combination of exogenous factors (such as the "Tequila Effect") and endogenous ones (such as the completion of the privatization of the most important state-owned enterprises) created a bottleneck in the sustainability of the convertibility plan and the social viability of the process. Record unemployment rates (18 percent in May 1995) provided social evidence of the

³ Between 1989 and 1990, Carlos Menem issued a series of presidential decrees granting pardons to both the commanders of the military juntas convicted in 1985 and leaders of politico-military organizations, as well as military officers who had rebelled against democracy (the *Carapintadas*). These measures temporarily halted the judicial prosecution of state terrorism until 2003, when the National Congress declared them null and void, allowing the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity.



disconnect between productive activity and the prevailing economic policy. This disconnect became increasingly pronounced as the decade progressed, affecting the ways in which diverse popular subjectivities were constituted.

With regard to the social organization of the democratic collective subjectivity, this decade witnessed the emergence an organization founded by the children of the disappeared, named HIJOS (Sons and Daughters for the Assertion of Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence), which brought renewed vitality to the struggle for human rights (Da Silva Catela, 2001; Maneiro, 2005). At the same time, other organizational forms emerged in response to institutional violence occurring even under democratic rule, such as CORREPI (Coordinate Against Police and Institutional Repression). This organization addresses the violence exercised by the security forces, particularly against young people from working-class and peripheral neighborhoods (Verdú, 2009). A broad and dense organizational network emerged in the public sphere to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the coup d'état, demonstrating both the persistence and the social vitality of the "democratic pact" and the particularities of social time in the construction of memory, truth, and justice.

Another democratic pillar of this period is linked to workers' organizations; even so, the relationship between the organizations described in the previous paragraph and the trade union movement was neither harmonious nor straightforward. Trade unionism advances a different form of participation and maintains a more ambiguous relationship with liberal democracy; nevertheless, it constitutes another strand in the defense of labor rights. In this sphere, significant ruptures emerge; while the more institutionalized sectors of the trade union movement support neoliberal reforms, whether through action or omission, critical currents of trade unionism arise from different perspectives. The emergence of the Argentine Workers' Central Union (CTA) introduces a breath of fresh air into a segmented and corporatist trade union model by opening space for retirees and unemployed workers, in addition to the traditionally represented, formally integrated workers (Armellino, 2004); this opening makes it possible to recognize the problems of integration characteristic of late capitalism and forged a path toward the democratization of social protections (Maneiro, 2019). Meanwhile, the Argentine Workers' Movement (MTA), which brought together truck drivers and transport workers, also opens up a new front in the struggle by mobilizing the most integrated segments of the model (Armellino, 2004).



In parallel, the organization of unemployed workers was one of the main collective subjectivities of this second half of the decade. The move out of the domestic confinement of unemployment (Kessler, 1997) toward the collective construction of the problem and its demands was, in Bourdieu's terms, a sociological miracle (1999). As an active response to the privatization of oil companies in Neuquén and Salta, but also as a patient reply to the process of productive disintegration initiated under the dictatorship on the outskirts of major cities, multiple organizations of unemployed workers gradually organized themselves in their neighborhoods to demand responses from the state and to organize the reproduction of everyday life collectively (Svampa and Pereyra, 2003; Maneiro, 2012). As the effects of neoliberal reforms began to be felt, greater territorial density and diverse forms of local collective action became articulated; unemployed and precarious workers, but above all women living in working-class neighborhoods, began to seek in the territory and through protest what the state's democratic institutions had failed to guarantee (Merklen, 2005).

This failure gave rise to a reconfiguration of collective subjectivities; within certain social fractions, the focus gradually shifted from formal citizenship to territorialized collective action, transforming the territory into a laboratory of resistance (Bringel, 2017). The 1990s, through their neoliberal policies, not only brought about the dismantling of a socio-productive system of organization but also created the conditions of possibility for a particular form of territorial political creativity (Sigal, 2005). During this period, significant innovations emerged in the repertoire of collective action; protest—at least during those extraordinary times—ceased to be a sporadic event in temporal terms and a marginal one in social terms, becoming instead a fundamental component of political life (Schuster and Pereyra, 2001).

The 2001–2002 crisis and the mass protests organized under the slogan "They Should All Go" (*Que se vayan todos*) (Pérez, 2008) revealed the rupture between the promises of democracy and a society that had become increasingly exclusionary. This scenario can be understood as a cycle of uprisings that, by overflowing institutional channels, attained an unusual degree of social legitimacy for the use of direct forms of struggle. Thus, social conflict not only revealed the crisis but also functioned as a driving force for social change, redefining the limits of what was possible within democracy.

Forms of territorialized popular creativity emerged through the proliferation of community kitchens and meal centers, as well as through the emergence and expansion



of popular barter networks and the development of productive alternatives in response to enterprise closures. Regarding the latter, recovered enterprises constituted a significant expression of a collective subjectivity moving from resistance toward self-management (Rebón, 2007).

4. Post-neoliberal experiences

The 2001–2002 crisis prompted a renewal of the "democratic pact" aimed at overcoming the disconnect between an increasingly heterogeneous and complex society, a vibrant social creativity, and governmental institutions that failed to respond to democratizing demands⁴. The presidential administrations of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) addressed many of these social demands and proposed a new order in which policies of memory and justice were reactivated, while production, the labor market, and popular consumption recovered in the aftermath of an unprecedented multidimensional crisis.

A heterogeneous collective subjectivity gradually became more centered through forms of state support, while rising international commodity prices made it possible to finance this new phase of social and economic interaction, slowing the effects of the external constraint. At the same time, these governmental initiatives were articulated with a broader set of progressive experiences within the context of the political reconfiguration of Latin America.

In terms of human rights, the annulment of the impunity laws was promoted, trials for crimes against humanity were advanced, and memory policies were established at sites that had formerly operated as clandestine detention centers (Ohanian, 2012). The reopening of the trials constituted a moment of rupture with the policy of impunity promoted since the 1990s and revived longstanding authoritarian subjectivities that defended those responsible for state repression. At the same time, multiple leaders of human rights organizations moved closer to the national government, giving rise to joint public policy initiatives. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that, despite the historic milestone our society had achieved in developing a politics of memory, truth, and

⁴ On this point, we agree with Tapia's (2012) approach.



justice, this country of human rights also experienced repeated episodes of institutional violence that undermined the promises of the "democratic pact".

With regard to socioeconomic policies, although the early post-crisis years saw the creation of socio-productive initiatives aimed at including unemployed social fractions (often through social management), and the idle productive capacity was gradually brought back into use while broad social fractions were reintegrated into the labor market, the number of workers covered by social protections never returned to its previous levels.

This integrative capacity reached a plateau in 2008. As in previous historical moments, the industrialization model required a greater inflow of foreign currency to sustain its financing and, consequently, the national government proposed a change in the export withholding tax rates (Piva, 2012). This proposal was rejected by agricultural employers' organizations, triggering a conflict between the state and agricultural producers that repolarized society; the government failed to implement this measure, and a new bottleneck emerged. The conflict between opposing collective subjectivities, channeled through the confrontation between the opposition and the national government, would gain considerable intensity and mark the prelude to a hegemonic crisis that would only be—temporarily—mitigated by the death of former President Néstor Kirchner in 2010.

Nevertheless, the national government introduced significant initiatives to address the complex social situation. Through three major policy initiatives, it implemented a reform that expanded and deepened social security and social protections; these measures were essential in providing a minimum level of income, protection, and security for the most vulnerable sectors of the population; we are referring to the pension moratorium, the Universal Child Benefit (Asignación Universal por Hijo, AUH), and the Argentina Works Program (Programa Ingreso Social con Trabajo – Argentina Trabaja, PRIST). These measures constituted a key source of economic support in a society in which, depending on the period, between 30 and 50 percent of the employed population lacked the social protections associated with formal employment.

The Universal Child Benefit (Asignación Universal por Hijo, AUH) is established by national law and consists of a conditional cash transfer paid monthly; it is paid for each child under the age of eighteen whose parents are unemployed, engaged in



informal employment, or employed as domestic workers. The AUH is administered through the banking system by the National Social Security Administration (Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social, ANSES). The incorporation of this benefit into the social security system constitutes a significant innovation, since historically only formally registered workers had access to family allowances (Arcidiácono, Carmona Barrenechea y Straschnoy, 2011; Arcidiácono, Carmona Barrenechea, and Straschnoy, 2013). Likewise, the pension moratorium, also established by national law, enabled broad social fractions of workers who had worked without making pension contributions to gain access to social security as well (Danani and Beccaria, 2015; Pautassi, Gherardi, and Giacometti, 2011). Finally, although the Argentina Works Program forms part of the trajectory of conditional cash transfer programs that began to be implemented in the late 1990s, it possesses several distinctive features. In particular, it is more fully oriented toward socio-community work, represents an advance in the co-management of social policies, and links beneficiaries' income, to some extent, to the Minimum Living Wage (Salario Mínimo, Vital y Móvil) (Maneiro, 2018). It is important to recognize the significance of these initiatives in terms of providing for and sustaining the lives of ordinary people; nevertheless, it is equally important to acknowledge that these policies were insufficient to construct an imaginary of social integration and a horizon of future expectations. In other words, although many poor workers received these "benefits," few felt satisfied with this form of social integration; to borrow from classical studies, the "democratic pact" provided them only with a fragile identity as "poor citizens" (Dubet, 2010; Merklen, 2005).

Let us examine this aspect in greater depth: fieldwork conducted over the past fifteen years has shown that the collective subjectivities of workers, even those with limited experience of rights-based employment, continue to associate expectations of well-being with participation in the labor market, revealing only weak identifications with forms of identity whose income is linked to social security and/or social protection. In an article based on fieldwork conducted in 2014, we distinguished four profiles of representations regarding social security: the exclusionary wage earner, the proactive worker, the ascetic beneficiary, and the claimant citizen. The first maintains that income should derive exclusively from wages, without any state subsidy; the second—although receiving social benefits and/or participate in social programs—rejects identification with them and regards them as temporary, since the emphasis is placed on individual



proactivity; the third recounts personal hardships in order to justify deservingness; and the fourth corresponds to a profile that approaches the demand for a universal citizen's income (Maneiro, 2017).

It is important to note that, without diminishing these social advances, some of the profiles identified among the most impoverished sectors of the popular classes already displayed a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the very policies that targeted them. At the same time, other collective subjectivities also began to emerge, further complicating the argument. In the first two interviewee profiles, a more robust critique of social programs and allowances became evident. Some of these interviewees, including beneficiaries themselves, regarded such policies not only as insufficient but also as counterproductive. Toward the end of Cristina Kirchner's second administration, a strategy of distinction became a central feature. Can the exclusionary wage earner and/or the proactive worker be understood as early expressions of what the literature would later describe as self-improvementism (*mejorismo*) (Semán, 2023)? Our fieldwork suggests that, although there are diverse forms of discomfort with the "social program" model and, among certain profiles, an intensified emphasis on individual effort as the core of personal advancement had already become evident by the middle of the previous decade (in explicit contrast with the experiences of their peers) this subjectivity remains segmented, volatile, and contradictory. We argue that it is segmented because it continues to assign a limited role to state security and social protection (restricting them to social groups regarded as legitimately vulnerable: women with children and older adults); volatile because it emerges when interviewees are able to sustain their social reproduction through labor income but fades in the face of accidents or illness; and contradictory because it requires the constant justification of exceptions and counterarguments ("My wife receives the benefit, but only for these few months"; "We receive the allowance for our children, but that money is only for them—the adults do not touch it," etc.). At the same time, even among the most vulnerable groups, we encountered interviewees who appealed to the concept of rights and emphasized the importance of the universality of a social income for the poorest social fractions, thereby demonstrating the capillarity of the social dimension of the promise embodied in the "democratic pact."

All of the foregoing reflects fractures and distinctions within collective subjectivities. A first, still limited, cleavage emerged in response to the trials for crimes



against humanity, although only a highly active minority aligned with those responsible for state repression appeared publicly in opposition; however, the "agrarian conflict" mobilized diverse social strata, albeit with a strong class dimension; a geographical tension emerged, reactivating the rural-urban dichotomy through complex forms of social articulation characterized by different degrees of centering. This tension between the expansion of rights, political centralization, and the persistence of fragmented subjectivities constituted one of the conditions of possibility for the subsequent neoliberal reconfiguration. Finally, despite the scope of the state measures implemented, the policies aimed at expanding and deepening social security and social protection established a fundamental foundation for the social reproduction of the popular sectors, yet they encountered difficulties in producing the centering of an active social subjectivity. We therefore argue that, although Kirchnerism succeeded in reconstituting the democratic pact during its early years, over time it failed to stabilize a hegemonic collective subjectivity capable of integrating demands for socio-labor affiliation; this difficulty was fundamentally linked to the problem of the external constraint⁵, which, in Piva's (2023) formulation, gave rise to a shackled democracy.

5. The neoliberal return

In 2015, after twelve years of Kirchnerist governments, the incumbent coalition lost the national elections, and a center-right alliance led by businessman and founder of the new right-wing party Republican Proposal (Propuesta Republicana, PRO), Mauricio Macri, assumed office. The Macri administration (2015–2019) found popular expression and reorganized itself around the previously described dissatisfied collective subjectivities, while also advancing a strong anti-union offensive; this national government represents an attempt to reconfigure the "democratic pact" through an operation that discursively replaces egalitarian and rights-based discourses with a narrative centered on merit as the organizing principle of social inequalities and hierarchies; this mode of legitimizing inequality sought to depoliticize social conflict.

⁵ The external constraint in the post-convertibility period possesses several features that distinguish it from previous periods. According to Wainer and Schorr, Wainer (2015), the main components underlying this problem are the extensive foreign ownership of the leading business groups (and the resulting remittance of profits abroad), the local industry's high dependence on imported inputs, and the persistent capital flight.



Along these same lines, the government promoted a revisiting of the 1970s that challenged the basic post-dictatorship consensus and opened the way for initiatives aimed at reversing the processes of justice. The attempt to apply the "2-for-1" sentence reduction benefit to those convicted of crimes against humanity represented a direct challenge to the core of the "democratic pact," insofar as it sought to relativize the foundational character of the process of memory, truth, and justice (Franco, 2018; 2025). However, as would later occur in other areas, this initiative encountered a limit in the emergence of a collective subjectivity which, through a broad and cross-cutting mobilization, reaffirmed the social rejection of impunity⁶.

The government of Mauricio Macri sought to implement fiscal austerity, restructure labor relations, and expand the role of the private sector in the economy; however, its capacity to transform society in these areas remained limited. Throughout his administration, the country experienced a deepening economic recession—marked by rising poverty, extreme poverty, and unemployment—an imbalance in public finances, and, as an attempt to address these problems, a sharp increase in external debt. Argentina returned to the International Monetary Fund and, one year later, negotiated a stand-by loan of unprecedented magnitude (Morresi and Vicente, 2019). By contrast, the process of indebtedness—driven by the external constraint, but also by a more pronounced process of financialization of the economy—did constitute a substantial transformation of society, one whose effects remain evident today.

Within this trajectory, the neoliberal offensive followed a specific path: its primary focus was not the most precarious and impoverished workers but, rather, the promotion of the financial sector and the transformation of the regulations governing workers with labor rights, seeking to reconfigure this solid core of the capital–labor relationship (Morresi and Vicente, 2019).

Although, at the beginning of the administration, there was a certain degree of social legitimacy for introducing cuts and limitations to social protections, by the end of 2016 the national government yielded to pressure from social movement organizations to enact the Social Emergency Law. This law was demanded by a heterogeneous coalition of organizations that mobilized on a massive scale, negotiated within the

⁶ On May 10, 2017, more than half a million people gathered in Plaza de Mayo and in the main public squares across the country to repudiate a ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice of Argentina that authorized the application of the repealed "2-for-1" law—which counted one year as two for individuals held in pretrial detention—to a former state agent convicted of crimes against humanity.



legislative branch, and pressured the executive branch to secure its approval (Maneiro and Núñez, 2021). The law provided a minimum income support through a complementary social wage and granted these organizations public recognition. Along the same lines, during this administration, the coverage of the Universal Child Benefit (AUH) was extended to low-income self-employed workers (those registered in the lowest tax categories under the *monotributo* regime), whose significance became increasingly evident in the context of the growing fragmentation and heterogeneity of the economically active population.

The attempt to carry out a structural reform of the capital–labor relationship through a comprehensive labor reform, together with the legislative initiative to modify the regulations governing the social security system by proposing an increase in the retirement age, constituted clear indicators of this trajectory (Gradin and Soto, 2020). Nevertheless, the path encountered a limit in popular mobilization. While the reform of the social security system was successfully imposed in Congress, the labor reform was not (Pullero Socarrás, 2023). Organized workers, many of them mobilized through trade unions, constituted the organizational expression of a working collective subjectivity that, although discredited, remained active and succeeded in placing limits on this new offensive (Campos, 2020). The trade union form, regarded as outdated by certain social fractions, nevertheless demonstrated some of its capacity to exert pressure and continued to function as an organizational reference for other social groups. At the same time, popular organizations, previously organized as unemployed workers' movements, succeeded in strengthening an organization founded in 2011 to organize the "popular economy," a process that, a few years later, culminated in the establishment of the Union of Workers of the Popular Economy (Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular-UTEP) (Hudson, 2024). In this sense, one can observe a certain degree of centralization of popular collective subjectivities produced through practices of street resistance to neoliberalism.

In parallel, although with a lower degree of centralization and exhibiting more heterogeneous forms of expression, the feminist movement—organized around the demand for a law legalizing Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy and the implementation of public policies to combat gender-based violence—constituted an expansive and highly dynamic social subjectivity, mobilized by the expansion of rights.



Within this context, the second half of Macri's administration constituted a milestone in social mobilization. Argentina ranked among the countries with the highest levels of social conflict, with a notable increase in contentious events by 2019 (Pullero Socarrás, 2023). The main demands centered on the defense of wages, labor rights, policies to protect the popular economy, gender-related demands, and the defense of public education.

Far from stabilizing a new order, Macrism deepened the crisis of the "democratic pact"; its attempt to depoliticize social conflict coexisted with an intensification of mobilization and the growing fragmentation of collective subjectivities. With its legitimacy markedly eroded, the final years of the administration revealed the precariousness of social support for the neoliberal project. In this scenario, the rearticulation of these collective subjectivities in the streets constituted one of the conditions of possibility for Peronism's return to government with renewed political and social promises.

6. "Back better"

At the end of 2019, Alberto Fernández, accompanied by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, assumed the presidency. The inauguration of the new administration and its first months in office rekindled a certain degree of popular enthusiasm—fueled by early signals reflected in the composition of the cabinet and in the announcement of social policies—but shortly thereafter everything was upended by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the Mandatory Preventive Social Isolation (Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio, ASPO).

The pandemic unfolded in an extremely critical social and economic context. Gabriela Benza, Pablo Dalle, and Verónica Maceira (2022) argue that two crises converged: the pre-pandemic crisis of Macri's administration and the pandemic crisis itself. The former resulted from a process of financial weakening and indebtedness stemming from the government of Mauricio Macri. The latter exposed the difficulties of confronting a pandemic while guaranteeing rights in a society characterized by such limited and precarious social protections. Both crises had adverse effects on employment and household incomes.



Toward the end of March 2020, Mandatory Preventive Social Isolation (Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio, ASPO) was decreed in a society in which nearly 36 percent of the economically active population was employed as wage earners without social protections, while just over 22 percent was self-employed (INDEC, 2020a). In previous work, we asked what conditions made it possible for millions of people—lacking social protections and adequate housing infrastructure—to comply with the lockdown (Maneiro and Pacheco, 2023). Indeed, during the first months of the pandemic, the policy of preventing mass contagion enjoyed strong popular support, combining diverse political expectations with confidence in the authority of biomedical science (Maneiro and Pacheco, 2023).

The ASPO profoundly disrupted everyday life and devastated the livelihoods of poor workers, while unemployment rose to 13 percent, affecting nearly one and a half million workers (INDEC, 2020b). In response, the national government introduced the Emergency Family Income (Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia, IFE)⁷, increased the amount of the Universal Child Benefit (AUH), and expanded the financial assistance provided to families with children and adolescents for the purchase of food⁸ (De Sena, 2020). At the same time, in popular neighborhoods, social movement organizations organized collective care initiatives to provide food assistance and support households affected by COVID-19 (Fernández Bouzo and Tobías, 2020; Señorans, Fernández Álvarez, and Pacífico, 2021). In practice, the emergency gave rise to a further step in the social co-management of public policies. If the public health system constituted the first line of care, social movement organizations formed the zeroth line (Maneiro, 2025).

However, although this organizational fabric made it possible for the popular sectors to cope with the first months of the pandemic, social tolerance for the ASPO gradually waned, while care policies weakened and infrastructure deficits laid bare social inequality. In the popular neighborhoods of the urban peripheries, although community workers were recognized as essential workers, this did not entail either

⁷ The Emergency Family Income (Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia, IFE) "consists of an exceptional, non-contributory cash benefit intended to compensate for the loss or substantial reduction of income among individuals affected by the public health emergency declared under Decree No. 260/2020" (ANSES, 2020). The amount of the benefit was equivalent to nearly 60 percent of the National Minimum Wage, although it was not paid on a monthly basis. Nearly 8.9 million people were selected to receive the first installment, making the IFE, together with the vaccination campaign, the most extensive population-wide policy implemented during the pandemic.

⁸ The Alimentar Benefit was introduced under the new administration as part of a broader set of policies implemented in response to the declared food emergency. This benefit provided an additional cash transfer to recipients of the Universal Child Allowance (AUH) for the purchase of food.



formal recognition or adequate remuneration; overcrowding, inadequate access to potable water, and other infrastructural deficiencies stood in stark contrast to the public messaging promoting the ASPO; moreover, the IFE was disbursed only three times despite the prolonged duration of the ASPO, further deepening social vulnerability. Social and economic conditions became extremely severe and, within this context, support for the ASPO gradually unraveled, along with the social subjectivities that had sustained it.

In the context of the pandemic, the "democratic pact" was renewed, albeit with important ambivalences; on the one hand, there was an appeal to the value of collective life and to the state's duty to protect the population, which served as the core justification for the exceptional public health measures embodied in the ASPO; on the other hand, the legacy of memory organizations and public policies of symbolic reparation continued to constitute a normative horizon that required the management of the crisis to be conceived in terms of dignity and reparation. Nevertheless, persistent structural inequality and the widespread sense of abandonment in the popular neighborhoods eroded the practical centrality of these references. The defense of human rights remained an important rhetorical and identity marker, but it lost some of its effectiveness as an articulating principle for distributive expectations.

The narrative of "Back Better" coexisted with a tension between the invocation of human rights and collective care, on the one hand, and the state's material inability to guarantee economic and social rights, on the other. This tension undermined the stability of the democratic pact and fostered segmented collective subjectivities which, although they did not—at least in the majority of cases—advocate the delegitimization of the human rights repertoire, nevertheless subordinated it to the immediate demands of social reproduction (Kessler and Vommaro, 2024). At the same time, social movement organizations became increasingly tied to the erosion of the governing coalition's political strength and ultimately constituted the weakest link in the institutional dismantling of socially managed public policies.

In this context of mounting difficulties, the enactment of the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy Law at the end of 2020 renewed social confrontations that emerged not only around material issues but also across cultural and symbolic



dimensions; while, for the feminist movement⁹, the law represented an expansion of rights that broadened the democratic pact (Singer, 2022), for other collective subjectivities it functioned as a source of polarization that the far right successfully capitalized on amid its criticism of the ASPO policies.

It should not be overlooked that the policy of controlling mass contagion was successful in preventing the public health system from coming under extreme strain (Ariovich et al., 2022). At the same time, however, it is also important to recognize that old class resentments resurfaced among the most vulnerable social fractions, particularly those who lost their sources of income and either did not receive government "assistance" or considered it insufficient. These social fractions gradually gave shape to a collective subjectivity that, although partially present in earlier periods, acquired greater solidity and broader social reach. Semán conceptualizes this phenomenon through the notion of self-improvementism (*mejorismo*) (Semán and Welschinger, 2023), understood as a substantial component of a collective subjectivity in which persistent expectations of upward mobility and well-being coexist with an increasing individualization of strategies for personal advancement. Consistent with other studies (Elbert and Morales, 2022; Núñez and Infante, 2024), our fieldwork conducted in peripheral working-class neighborhoods between 2021 and 2024 does not reveal a complete displacement of demands directed toward the state. Rather, it points to a markedly critical attitude toward the state's inability to deliver well-being, together with an explicit strategy of horizontal distinction vis-à-vis other social fractions within the same social segment. In this regard, we identify a new moment in the decentering of identities within popular subjectivity. This decentering can be observed across different profiles: the young self-improvementists (*mejorista*) , who, despite having benefited from youth educational completion programs and/or the Universal Child Benefit (AUH), expresses a critical and dismissive attitude toward social policy initiatives; young female self-improvementists (*mejoristas*) , who, although prioritizing individual effort, nevertheless acknowledge the (limited) role of the state and the importance of community networks; middle-aged individuals who, with a marked gender dimension, articulate a tense relationship among individual, community, and state responsibilities; and older adults, who tend to place greater emphasis on the state's responsibility for

⁹ Following a highly significant struggle, remembered as the "Green Tide" (*Marea Verde*), Law No. 27,610 on Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy (IVE) was enacted on December 30, 2020, legalizing abortion up to and including the fourteenth week of pregnancy without requiring any justification for the decision.



social provision. Whereas the democratic pact once functioned as an organizing center of meaning, the experience of the pandemic deepened the decentering of popular subjectivities, producing a coexistence of contradictory elements: demands directed toward the state alongside a simultaneous disparagement of its policy instruments. Nevertheless, these profiles are not crystallized but remain shaped by gender and generational differences.

These findings, moreover, do not imply the replacement of previously existing collective subjectivities. Rather, they reveal a more or less conflictive articulation both within individual profiles and across different profiles.

The diverse modalities through which everyday provisioning is organized intersect in ways that require caution when interpreting the profiles described above. Even before the pandemic, Gago had drawn attention to the extractive operations of capital in peripheral neighborhoods, demonstrating not only tensions but also relations of interdependence with community networks (Gago, 2015; Maneiro, 2024; Manzano and Barreto, 2025).

Previously constituted popular subjectivities did not dissolve; instead, they were rearticulated within an increasingly polarized field in which social expectations of improvement were expressed in articulated, divergent, and sometimes antagonistic ways, reaching heightened levels of aggressiveness.

The "return to normality" produced a more unequal society, marked by higher levels of poverty and vulnerability. Government policy shifted toward expanding social programs that reached more than 1.2 million people and, in a context of structural crisis, once again became essential for the social reproduction of the popular sectors, although they proved insufficient to integrate them on a sustained basis. The adaptation of these policy instruments came under increasing strain as a result of widespread social discontent generated, among other factors, by extremely high inflation, resource scarcity, social polarization, and macroeconomic constraints. The administration was also marked by its own internal difficulties, as it failed to overcome the multiple conflicts within the governing coalition or to implement coherent policies beyond the ASPO. In social terms, the post-pandemic period was characterized by persistent inflation, which exceeded 200 percent annually in 2023 and eroded workers' incomes. The government's inability to organize the economy became yet another manifestation of the fragility of state authority, even though this fragility condensed multiple overlapping crises.



As argued in previous sections, inflationary processes have profound effects on workers' incomes and undermine the institutional foundations of social security. Demands for social and economic order emerged as one of the principal sources of expectation surrounding a political alternative advocating rupture. Nevertheless, our fieldwork did not reveal substantial opposition to human rights policies. Rather, this element appears as a complementary component of this new political project and has not yet—even in the face of the violence expressed by leaders of the far right and their core activists—crystallized within popular subjectivities.

7. Final Remarks

By the end of 2023, in the complex conjuncture marking the transition between the pandemic and the post-pandemic period, Javier Milei, a far-right political outsider, won the presidential election. This article has sought to offer a different perspective for understanding the conditions of possibility that made this rise possible. Based on the arguments developed throughout the paper, we do not propose a definitive interpretation according to which the rise of the far right constitutes the final closure of the political cycle that began in the early 1980s. Rather, we argue that it reflects a profound crisis of the subjectivity associated with the "democratic pact" as a core of centering and collective identity.

One of the central arguments advanced in this article concerns the difficulties faced by the democratic state in fulfilling its democratic and egalitarian promise. The post-pandemic experience and the inflationary process—which exceeded 200 percent annually—became two major sources of erosion for the classical democratic subjectivity that had already entered a crisis by the middle of the previous decade. While the government of Alberto Fernández promised to "Back Better", the prolonged continuation of the ASPO, followed by accelerating inflation, eroded not only workers' incomes but also the authority of the state itself. For popular subjectivities, the state increasingly appeared capable of managing only the minimum conditions of subsistence, while proving incapable of guaranteeing a horizon of predictability and integrative certainty.



Our fieldwork suggests that Argentine society has not become uniformly aligned with the far right. Rather, what we observe is an intensification of the conflictive coexistence of different meanings and orientations. A contradictory and dual demand has emerged: while people continue to demand protection from the state, they simultaneously disparage some of its principal policy instruments. The far right succeeded in politicizing this contradiction, transforming individual discontent into a youthful subjectivity of rupture that, nevertheless, we cannot yet affirm has become fully consolidated.

One of the principal findings of this research is that, although the leadership of the far right deploys an aggressive narrative against the repertoire of human rights, this discourse has not crystallized—at least not on a majority scale—within popular subjectivities. Among the most vulnerable sectors, the urgency of material reproduction has subordinated the human rights agenda without erasing it. The "Nunca Más democratic pact" continues to operate as an important marker of collective identity, although it has lost much of its capacity to articulate distributive expectations.

Argentine society is currently undergoing a transitional process—perhaps what Alejandro Grimson (2024) describes as an in-between liminal democracy, composed of a frontier condition that has not yet become something else; or perhaps, as Maristella Svampa (2025) suggests, we are experiencing a polycrisis—that is, a superimposition of multiple crises that reinforce one another and amplify their effects. In some respects, we agree with José Maurício Domingues (2025), who argues that we inhabit a moment in which democratic projects have become weakened and constrained within inherited models that struggle to compete with alternative projects of society. What remains clear is that the twofold promises of a genuine "democratic pact" may still open a horizon of possibility, provided they become articulated with forms of social and political creativity that do not seek to imprison them within old formulas that have already demonstrated their limitations.

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