

Imaginaries, Sociability and Cultural Patterns in the Post-Neoliberal Era: A Glance at the Argentinean, Paraguayan, and Venezuelan Experiences

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Introduction

Toward the mid-1980s, the intersection between developmental *cepalismo* and the foreign debt crisis destabilized the political and cultural consensus regarding development in the region. This allowed the emergence of adjustment policies that leaned toward neoliberal measures as anti-crisis economic programs. Neoliberalism presented itself as a vast economic, political, and legislative redevelopment plan, providing the right answers when it came to the economic policies needed to target the systemic chaos in the region. The new bureaucrats managed to turn their structural adjustment program into a *new mantra* and into economic policies through the construction of meaning as a powerful offensive strategy. This was mainly due to the historic consequences that gave their creed a new epochal meaning. The introduction of disciplinary neoliberalism into governments brought about the austerity, docility, and repression of the emergent new age. It presented itself as a structural adjustment policy for democratic transitions, implying the closure, crisis, and death of developmentalism.

The breakdown of “development” as a tool for social integration, and the simultaneous neoliberal discourse based around economic growth becoming the new center, implied the strengthening of a market-based austerity model. The symbolic effectiveness of neoliberal discourse was achieved through links between think-tanks funded by transnational corporations and the mass media, and the conversion of important intellectual segments in the region. The political-spiritual union of neoliberalism as the discourse of the accumulation of wealth, and of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism managed to produce a radical mutation in the global system of culture. From this pattern, a variety of ways to act, think, and feel emerged, and they modulated subjectivities, territories, and institutions, producing *spiritual neoliberalization* (Contreras Natera, 2013, p.254).

Social imaginaries became fields of symbolic contention, negotiation, and interpellation where the subjects, individual and collective, re-signified their concepts of “happiness,” “dignity,” and “personhood” along consumerist lines. Subjects’ modes of reception included a negotiation field distinguished by the ambivalence, porosity, and mutation of the social imaginaries, themselves oscillating between adaptation and resistance. In topological terms, the discourse’s interpellation-reception-negotiation acted as a conflictive combination of cultural patterns, modes of sociability, and imaginaries. All of this produced molecular changes within a global process of implantation, union, and consolidation of this new awareness:

- a political-cultural offensive from mechanisms, practices, and discourses of transnational mediation;
- a production of a molecular mutation that expands, combines, and adjusts inside the middle class and popular sectors of the population; and finally,
- a “proliferation of the ways of life that reorganize the notions of freedom, calculation, and obedience, projecting a new rationality and collective affectivity.” (Gago, 2014, p.10)

The end of history as a *regressive utopia* represents the political and economic transition to the consolidation of the Washington Consensus’ structural reforms in the context of a profound symbolic unraveling in the continent.¹ This change coincided with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of the Eastern European socialist regimes, the promotion of liberal-democratic regimes, the re-evaluation of the United Nations, and the strengthening of the United States’ unipolarity. The emergent political-economic landscape consolidated as an

interpellator of a subjectivity anchored in the social representations of *possessive individualism*. Popular uprisings in Caracas, Buenos Aires, and Quito in 1989 represented, along with the Zapatista movement in 1994 Chiapas and the election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998, the foundations for the confrontation against the neoliberal episteme. These popular uprisings showed the reactive, multitudinous, and localized forms of political conflict against the new spirit of capitalism, consolidating the emergence of modular subjectivities in social networks, and disrupting the historically capitalist system. In the words of Sidney Tarrow, it would seem as if

the foundation for a society of movement was being set, in which the disruptive, even catastrophic, conflicts would become quotidian to a large part of the population ... The world could be experimenting a new, far-reaching, mobilization ability in our time. (Tarrow, 1997, p.29)

This way, intensely popular movements began to dismantle the Washington Consensus, an act that pointed toward the critical construction of new intersubjective universes. This shift in the neoliberal agenda coincided with the development of transformative forces in the plurified relations that eroded the statehood of the Washington Consensus, strengthening popular subjectivity. The historic *novum* generated a “before” and “after” in the field of political-cultural forces that faced off against each other, freeing previously stagnant processes which surpassed the experiences of individuals and generations, connecting with the *long memory* as deposits of experiences grafted onto the strata of time. The dual crisis (of economics and legitimacy) of the neoliberal hegemony at the beginning of the 21st century followed the intense popular protests campaigning for isonomy that unfolded in the region at the beginning of the 1990s.

The symbolic split of neoliberal regulation mechanisms coincided with the activation of popular movements inscribed in the *long memory* of political-cultural processes of resistance against colonial-modern logos.² The idea of projecting new institutions into the imaginaries opened up the possibility for a creative force to emerge in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Paraguay, and to a lesser extent in Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The debate was set for a National Constituent Assembly, which rolled back colonizing processes, going beyond demo-liberal premises and radicalizing the criticisms aimed at neoliberalism. At the start of the 21st century, an ascending economic cycle, coinciding with increasing prices of commodities,

allowed for the reevaluation of the state's role in political maneuvering of the region. At the same time, a creative process of social mobilizations started, as did changes in the repertoire of popular demonstrations, the revisiting of cultural practices embedded in the long memory, and a restructuration of political-cultural forces. In short, the configuration of an agenda antithetical to the neoliberal grammar helped to strengthen a *post-neoliberal epochal spirit* as a way to criticize, overcome, and generate an alternative to neoliberalism.

This chapter centers on a genealogical reconstruction of popular experiences in Argentina (moderate change), Paraguay (containment of change), and Venezuela (radicalization of change), social imaginaries, modes of sociability and cultural patterns, all in their variations, resemblances, and transformations. We know of the theoretical-methodological importance of these concepts for understanding the stability, expansion, or transformation of this historic totality in the global system. In the words of Cornelius Castoriadis, the social imaginary is sociohistorical magma, incessant and indeterminate creations that are embodied in institutions. "What we call reality and rationality are a product of it ... This action and that representation/verbalization are historically instituted." (Castoriadis, 2013, pp.12–13) Therefore, imaginaries as instituted norms intersect in their historicity by an instituting imaginary, within which a potential alterity is contained. A duality always exists: *the instituted*, a relative stabilization of a set of institutions, and *the instituting*, the dynamics that drive its transformations. Sociability as a spontaneous, ludic, and relational relationship not ascribed to material interests finds its form in the instituting, constantly proposing self-alterations. Sociability as a reciprocal action mediated by the common good is reconstituted in the solidarity of expansive community networks that are not mediated by the westernization of America. Likewise, imaginaries as intersubjective universes contain in their constituent form "structural patterns whose origins and nature" (Quijano, 1989, p.29) are plural, conflicting, and opposed. The long memory as critical anamnesis is opposed to the processes of ontological erasure established since the uncovering of America, and it is taken over by indigenous, peasant, and popular movements of the region.

Argentina: moderation politics

Peronism in the 1960s and 1970s, with its ability to build unlimited chains of equivalence, allowed for the subversion of the principle of equivalence. The journey of the *descamisado* toward an organized

community implied an ideological movement's takeover, which tied the initial stages of the revolutionary process together. It was also a moment of institutionalization for the revolutionary process that was supposed to be completed at a third stage, as proposed by Juan Domingo Perón.³ Both the repertoire and depth of social and economic policies put into place during the Peronista term built the necessary material base for the Argentinian populist's peculiar discourse (Boron, 2000, p.191). The coup d'état in 1955 transformed the debate on new revolutionary policies, contributing to turn Perón's long exile into a new form of populism⁴ that signified a symbolic rupture with classical political-institutional forms. The massive emergence of two new characters from within Argentinian society builds a radically new *demos*: "Perón-the workers; and a literally unclassifiable situation in terms of political tradition" (Barciela, 2015, p.162). Retroactive foundation of this symbolic union establishes an identity inside the workers' subjectivation as Peronistas. Undoubtedly, the space for this policy was built on ethnic homogeneity, consequence of the indigenous population's extermination, which in the big urban centers allowed for a wide distribution and influence of Perón's statements. The division between the declaration's content and the action that took place allowed for a multiplicity of meanings to emerge, which established a symbolic wholeness, unifying the popular field around Perón's expected return.

The most contradictory meanings can be gathered together, as long as the subordination of all of them to the empty signifier is maintained ... this would be the extreme situation in which the love of the father is the only bond between brothers. (Laclau 2005, p.270)

The polysemic character, ambiguous and multiple, that resulted from the uncoupling between the action and content of Perón's declarations loses its symbolic effectiveness with his return to the presidency in 1973. Internal differences between various factions of Peronism expanded, producing an accelerated deinstitutionalization that intersected with the disruption of neoliberalism, culminating in the 1976 military coup d'état. Jorge Videla's dictatorship in Argentina constitutes, along with the de facto coups in Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Uruguay, an experience of systemic violence embedded in the instrumentation of a diagram of terror, anchored in the vanguard of *disciplinarian neoliberalism*. The instrumentalization of fear, repression, and exclusion as a political-cultural strategy became one of the main mechanisms for generating social discipline. The state of siege and the establishment of a curfew,

forced entry into people's homes and arrests, forced disappearances and kidnappings, all embodied the deepest fears of a political society. A culture of fear is produced, segmenting gathering spaces, fragmenting social conversations, and inoculating experiences with existential insecurity; both social retraction and resigned disenchantment emerge.

The official acknowledgment of the social and political consequences of forced disappearances "contributed in making authoritarianism and its political overcoming the decisive problem of the seventies" (Franco, 1998, p.122). The path from dictatorship to democracy implied strengthening the symbolic nuclei bound with a subjectivity centered on political stability. This *Schmittian* realism, which regarded the democratic pact as sovereign will, capable of ensuring civil peace, had as a central premise a normative consensus that could be summarized in the following formula: order arises out of power bound by rules. In the words of Norbert Lechner, "the goal of materializing a political system is undercut and even contradicted by the necessity to govern" (Lechner, 1990, p.32). This shift in perspective reconfigures the *transformation of society* to the demand for a *change in political power*. In the field of subjectivity, the conflict to recover their respective historical plotlines, fragmented because of the military dictatorship, refers to a field of representation where knowing one's self and being known became an essential objective of politics found in the democratic transition period. In the prologue to the *Nunca Más* report, Ernesto Sábato said

from justice, we should expect the definitive word, we cannot stay silent in the face of what we have heard, read and registered; everything which goes beyond that which could be considered criminal, achieving the shadowy category of "crimes against humanity". (Sábato, 1984, p.7)

The debate regarding past disputes and subjectivity, for memory and justice, for memory and politics, conflicts with the depoliticization strategies of the dictatorship's victims, integrating them to a neutral field of liberal rules and values. Particularly, the political-moral content of popular struggles begins to be recovered, where the singularity of the memories and the possibility to activate the past-present is inserted into the networks of relationships, groups, institutions, and cultures. The discussion on memory transforms into representations of unexplored possibilities and forbidden roads resulting from lived experiences (Jelin, 2002). This sign is inscribed into dilemmas of historic truth and faithfulness of memory as a field for political dispute. "The return of the past is not always a moment which frees memory,

but instead an advent, a capture of the present.” (Sarlo, 2006, p.9) Justice as collective experience and repair as subjective experience become central, anchoring points for the democratic transition. Paradoxically, as mundane sociability becomes dominant, the frailty present in the exchanges regarding the policies of fear remains and is introduced into cultural practices.

The ghostly specter of the military dictatorship, fear of public disorder, a First World country’s social imaginary, and access to differentiated forms of consumption constituted naturalized representations when faced against the symbolic violence of capital (Bloj, 2004, p.135). In the 1990s, stability as a significant articulator for a threatened order became consolidated when facing uncertainty and political instability. “Daily tasks acquire unusual meaning. ... To reestablish normality is to reestablish routines.” (Lechner 1990, p.95, p.98) The trek of a socially constructed subject built on the universalist political promises of an individual subject, branded by social disappointment and focused on political stability and consumption, represents the place where the neoliberal discourse knots itself symbolically. This subjective shift of the political-economic scene embeds itself in a double political-cultural movement. On one hand, it supposes the loss of the state’s central role as the warrantor of social rights and, on the other, it implies a reevaluation of the discourse found in a civil society. The solid neoliberal consensus in the party system that included Peronism gravitated toward the necessity to *consolidate political stability* in the same way as it contributed to the conformation of neoliberal common sense.

Menem’s government, as a shining example of neoliberal programming, managed to spread through the popular imaginaries the idea that the patient wait for the “trickle down” effect resultant from economic policies would have the expected result promised by the media. The visual proliferation of hunger, poverty, and pain contrasted with media framing, where “the fatal combination of devaluation, recession and inflation led to a desolate panorama, accentuated with the already dramatic hues of millions of lives” (Arfuch, 2008, p.101). The pluralization of spaces where pots and pans were *signs* of weariness, protest, and politicization coincided with the massive protest of the *piqueteros* and the unemployed, as well as the blocking of roads, along with a new repertoire of protests, interrupting neoliberalism’s symbolic density. Massive rejection of the neoliberal program, evidenced by the popular prominence of emergent neighborhood assemblies in December 2001, contrasts with the privatized and fragmentary character of the 1990s’ civil citizenship.

The conquest of public space as a symbolic space for confrontation, construction and creation of meaning made visible debates regarding common rights, associative and enterprising, that overflowed and infringed on civic liberal identities. The participatory transformation of the imaginary as an undifferentiated unit gives way when faced with “union in diversity” as the field for constructing collective policies. The ludic and festive spirit manifests in dynamic and changing modes of expression, fluctuating and active, spreading throughout the plurality of popular spaces. Inside the context of the assembly, the slogan “*que se vayan todos*” acquires a global stamp that immediately defines the subjective acts of popular movements. Efficiency in the public administration becomes essential in politics as a necessary condition for good government. Imposing itself as an idea-force, paying attention to cultural change became indispensable when building new forms of government.

The political legitimacy crisis was characterized by successive changes in government, repression, and political prosecution brought upon militants belonging to popular movements. The government and banking system’s collapse, as a civilization meta-tale, brought into view the profound epochal break of the neoliberal political-economic crisis. The growing tension between economic and social rights, which had been restricted because of the Washington Consensus program and the defenders of neoliberalism, volatilized the political environment. The confrontations found in the political sphere regarding democracy radicalized inside the neighborhood movements’ imaginaries with modular, assembly, and experimental forms in regard to the instituted liberal structures of political representation. Tensions in this political force field were provisionally solved during the elections of May 2003, where a radical variant of instituted imaginaries imposed itself as macro-policy. In this political-intellectual dispute, popular movements are expropriated from political protagonism, being circumscribed into the pre-political sphere.

Nestor Kirchner’s victory in the 2003 elections meant a double process of political normalization and economic restructuration. Undoubtedly inspired by an agonistic political model, his triumph emerged from the impossibility of eradicating antagonism, even as it established the construction of a new democratic order as a plausible objective. In other words, he made the immanent contradictions between political stability and economic reform strategically compatible, as a conflictual consensus. Coming out of the hegemonic, practical, and contingent character of all social order, society would be a product of practices that had as an objective the establishment of an order in a context

of contingencies. In the words of Chantal Mouffe, “an effective democracy demands a confrontation of democratic political positions ... it recognizes the constitutive character of social division, and the impossibility of a final reconciliation” (Mouffe 2014, p.26, p.33).

This paradigm shift meant the construction of a political consensus answering the need of government institutions to strengthen their abilities to face the challenges of poverty and inequality. The rupture of political legitimacy in 2001 managed to interrupt neoliberal symbolic influence in that it would inscribe itself into the continental critical sequence and challenge of the Washington Consensus. Its mutative capacity allowed combination, recreation, and reorganization with other social imaginaries, managing to adapt to political contestations, inscribing its symbolic persistence into the folds of state institutions, which were revitalized through the language of the numerous dissatisfactions of 2001. The conflicting duality of macropolitics as a discourse for the recuperation of sovereignty before the economic crisis, and the proliferation of new modes of work (slave, informal, clandestine, subversive) established a new paradigmatic situation.

The overlap in the diversity found in the modes of labor configures a fragmented, destabilized, and heterogeneous sociability. “This makes it possible to conceive the job market as a pluricultural group where mixed and hybrid forms coexist.” (Gago, 2014, p.32) In this context, post-neoliberalism would not mean overcoming the policies inspired by the Washington Consensus, but instead creating new forms of political and economic articulation of the transnational capital in the region. An essential trait of the popular economy developing in the capital city, structurally connected with globalization, is that it is indelibly branded by the migrant presence, as well as by the innovation of modes of production, circulation, and organization of its collective dynamics. The simultaneous nature of the informal and the underground, the legal and the illegal, in the transnational value chains combines both destabilization and high levels of economic expansion.

Even the massive unemployment rate contrasts with high levels of political organization and the public problematization of labor. The pluralization of informalization spaces, as spaces of intersection and crossing, as laboratories of collective construction, turns the informal experiences of big urban centers into places of new political and economic articulation. Presenting itself as new modes where the community, the family, and the individual weave rationalities, it is ambivalent in that it is “a new territory in which the new regimes of submission and new places of social innovation are seen” (Gago, 2014, p.34). Neoliberalism as a producer of radical mutations in subjectivity

survives in interlocking and growing informalization, with enterprising dynamics in a context of flexibilization and dispossession of rights. The dialectic between movement and insubordination, servitude and exploitation, expresses the complex polyphony of the economy, movements, and popular subjectivities in Argentina. The irony of this process is the persistence of deepening social exclusion, generalized violence, and the emergence of a criminal economy, among other things. But above all, we see the “intercrossing of vectors which coincide in their emergence as the double metamorphosis of social matters, and the crisis of political representation” (Biardeau, 2015, p.101).

Paraguay: contention politics

The Triple Alliance War⁵ consolidated a *field of exclusion*—in Roland Barthes’ sense—in the Paraguayan subjectivity that persists even now in its political-cultural performance⁶ as a tendency toward *repetition*.⁷ Expressed in its dramatic dimensions, the effects of the war set up subjective forms of relating, both among the elites as in the popular field. The *Guerra del Chaco*, the long military dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner, and the agreed upon transition to democracy in 1989 (Arditi 1993, p.161), strengthened the role of political violence as a central mechanism of political change. Historical facticity has configured an exclusive regime where both the large part of the social majority, as well as the ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities,⁸ lack real incidence in the construction of a democratic will. “More than a republic ... the form in which our institutional order functions is, in practice, that of an autocracy.” (Arditi and Rodríguez, 1987, p.23)

When transitioning toward democracy, the state is configured as a space of discord, where the client-based devices of traditional political parties are privileged as the means of constructing political consensus. Using this logic, the *coloradismo* operates as a patronage party that filters, selects, and places its political scene in essential places inside the state bureaucracy. Democratic demands confront institutional weakness, displacing the political debates toward new problems. In counterfactual terms, the emerging social movements overflowed by acting on their localities, building political subjectivations that counter the client-based, corporate, institutional framework. The liberalization of the economy, the announcement of a new constitution (1992), and the transition from a military government to a civil one (1993) define the characteristics of the shift toward democracy. The economic measures inspired by the Washington Consensus included: liberalization of the

exchange rate, internal costs, and the interest rate; tariff reductions; restructuring and privatization of public companies; suspension of credit; and a state-subsidized currency exchange.

The reciprocal interactions between economic adjustment, opening up politically, and long-postponed needs all allowed for the confluence of critical subjectivities as a consequence of the emergence of new forms of social and political organization. As society became more political, social mobilizations—of workers and peasants—increased. Social and cultural exclusion of subaltern subjectivities became more visible, along with the demands of inclusion and participation which countered neoliberal policies. “The first great peasant demonstration happened in Asunción, 1994, as did the first general strike to be held in more than 30 years. There were three additional strikes between 1994 and 1997.” (Quevedo, 2015, p.49)

The deepening social, economic, and political crisis, visible through the accentuation of inequality, the neoliberal economic model’s failure, and the corrosion of the client-based apparatus, coincided with the region’s epochal, post-neoliberal spirit. In June 2002, the peasant movement blocked roads off en-masse, demanding the repeal of laws that brought about the privatization of water, telecommunications, and train systems. This defense of common goods was aligned with historical struggles of peasant and popular organizations of different ideological orientations, all of which confronted oligarchical and neoliberal policies. Social mobilizations denounced the concentration and foreignization of lands,⁹ dispossession of local knowledge, intensification of agro-export monoculture, loss of native seeds, rise of illnesses, and intoxication of both the communities and the territory. Above all, they mobilized because the expansion of the “agro-business in Paraguay promotes the uneven distribution of land, and impinges against the agricultural system of subsistence and cooperation of small producers” (Winer, 2015, p.195).

Through their collective action, peasant demands question the oligarchic state, embedding their struggles in the need for an integral agricultural reform. The paradox of the peasant efforts presents a fundamental division between social demands for access to the democratization of lands, and the conservative character of their political demands. “The political process isn’t represented as being linked to the social process, and their struggles aren’t represented as being political.” (Ortiz, 2014, p.77) The structural contradictions of the land monopoly, irregular foreign occupation, smallholder peasants, who were impoverished as a *residual* effect of the oligarchic state, are all maintained by the decoupling between the social and economic

spheres, and the policies of peasant organizations (Fogel, 1998, p.197). Fights, mobilizations, and the building of alternative subjectivities become more radical, consolidating the post neoliberal spirit found at the beginning of the century.

Fernando Lugo's candidacy held the promise of political change, which crystallized the desires, dreams, and imagination of a society repressed by the state. These political forces translated into the historic election, asserting that

it could be the final blow to the oligarchic Paraguayan State, pointing to its imminent collapse, in a critical situation that is reminiscent of March 2, 1860, in which a country in ruins was reborn, as the Phoenix rises from the ashes. (Ortiz, 2014, p.148)

Lugo's election meant the fall of the *Partido Colorado*, the first peaceful alternative in power, and the emergence of a middle-left government. President Fernando Lugo,¹⁰ along with the *Teko Porã* plan, managed to implement a series of policies that attempted to revert inequality by means of a social pact centered on redistribution policies. The renegotiation of the *Itaiput* Treaty started with Lula da Silva's government in Brazil,¹¹ aiming to favor Paraguayan interest. Above all, it attempted to set in motion policies of global reform, which meant confronting the factional oligarchic power in the National Congress.

Internal divisions, interests pitted against each other, and political renegotiations became unavoidable obstacles for the *Alianza Patriótica Para el Cambio*, and for a public administration that reproduced in its governing logic the oligarchic state's client-based co-optation of mobilized actors. The parliamentary coup d'état carried out on June 22, 2012, against Lugo's government managed to translate oligarchic interests into a political-mediatic offensive, aligning its political questioning with the Curuguaty peasant massacre. President Lugo, "by not undertaking decisive action to solve the agrarian problem favored the tension that supported it" (Ortiz, 2014, p.178). The Curuguaty massacre as a political event condenses in its gory facticity the *colonial-modern dispossession* that installed itself as the way of being for the Paraguayan oligarchy. Policies of death, silence, and impunity that emerge from the massacre are faced with the previously postponed necessity for democratization of the popular subjectivity and, above all, with the desires of *transhistorical justice*, where movements are inscribed by the long memory. The Curuguaty massacre has the indelible sign of a return to policies of terror¹² as *intermittent collusion* of force and fear in

the programmed demobilization of society. “Irrefutable proof: deaths and urns that legitimize Cartes’ government.” (Soto and Carbone, 2015, p.289)

Tensions in the internal struggles of the oligarchy ran high as conflicts linked to the transnational economic project erupted between landowner patrimonialism and other emergent factions. The conflict works its way up to the legislative power where, through the practice of *orekuete*,¹³ the landowner oligarchy found an effective symbolic and historical political cohesion. This way, two objectives that are incommensurable among each other become consolidated: on one hand, President Lugo’s political trial revalidates mechanisms for the *patrimonialista* faction; and, on the other hand, these mechanisms, by promoting skepticism, make room for social representations of neoliberal antipolitics. Thus, the oligarchy managed to secure its interests, *interrupting* the timid agrarian reforms set in motion by the Lugo administration. The democratic demand’s chain of equivalence cracked, gravitating toward more atomized, de-ideologized, and client-like participation. The transition from *redemptive messianism* (Lugo) to *corporate bonapartism* (Cartes) would define the essential characteristics of Paraguay’s neoliberal restoration.

President Horacio Cartes, with his previous *Acuerdo Por Paraguay*,¹⁴ quickly allowed for a neoliberal restoration by approving militarization laws. The Armed Forces were given powers not bound by legislative control, laws of fiscal responsibility or the private-public alliance (APP/PPA). This allowed for the privatization of common property, as well as the limiting of public and fiscal spending, creating a favorable environment for foreign investment and a new political program called *Un Nuevo Rumbo*. Debates regarding social issues¹⁵ became aligned along with the post-liberal integration policies of popular sectors, to circuits of accumulation of wealth through consumption. In other words, the policy seeking to lower poverty opts to reduce shift policies, looking to increase the labor supply (unstable labor) instead of favoring consumption in popular sectors. This project contradicts the oligarchy’s *patrimonialista* factions by opening up national markets to big capital. First, Cartismo’s Nuevo Rumbo establishes a new diagram of political alliances with traditional oligarchic sectors,¹⁶ centering its new architecture on enterprise instead of the state. Second, it unfolds a collection of mechanisms that damage traditional client-based devices used by the *patrimonialista* faction. Lastly, the integration of a transnational economic project that goes against the landowner oligarchy’s interests opens up new political horizons of confrontation for the political subjectivity of popular movements. The consolidation

of new methods of oppression of the territories, along with the deepening of agro-business, acts as a platform for the transnational capital of global domination.

Venezuela: politics of radicalization

In Venezuela, “development” as an imaginary of social and cultural integration, represented through the different variants of the modernizing discourse, was the guiding and legitimizing force for policies in the 20th century. Despite limited achievements and constant failures, there was a general belief that the country had progressed gradually toward that objective since the reestablishment of democracy in 1959. The *Pacto de Punto Fijo*,¹⁷ as a political-institutional arrangement which intertwined foundational agreements on wealth, labor, and political parties, became the legitimizing mechanism used by political-economic actors. Above all, as the compromise settled on the appropriation of income from the state’s extraordinary oil revenue, it solidified *rentist bonapartism*. Representative democracy, another name for the state’s authoritarian regime; political parties, the mediators of political representation; the state itself, a *promoter* of economic development processes and distributor of the oil revenue: all of these have been found in the country’s modernizing discourse since then.

Venezuela advanced gradually but constantly toward modernity until the 1980s, when “the awareness of the necessity to introduce changes on the management of the development process, and even its objectives” (Gómez Calcaño and López Maya, 1990, p.53) spread through the political system. The exhaustion of the developmental model was manifested in the “collapse of the formula that had guaranteed the modern economy and political life: a vast oil income distributed through an enormous central State, and strong political parties to pay clients with and satisfy demands” (Levine, 2001, p.12). In global terms, a crisis, which undermined the fundamental pillars of a system that had guided the discourse on economic, social, military and political action, was expressed through “economic recession, paralysis, political stagnation, and growing protests” (Levine, 2001, p.14). Toward the end of the 1980s, the need for a profound reorientation of the economy became increasingly evident. To this end, the *Gran Viraje*’s politics, instrumented during Carlos Andrés Pérez’ second term, entailed strengthening a vast program of privatization, price release, and labor flexibilization, which corresponded with the symbolic construction of the market as a new center of gravity for economic policy.

The instrumentalization of neoliberal policies meant a radical shift in forms of regulation for the state-society relationship that had dominated for the previous 30 years. The 1989 Caracazo as a *limit-event* represented a profound break in the “development” imaginary, shook the Venezuelan society to its core and “was the first of the social fractures that signaled the end of the social pact, foreshadowing the turn towards the left” (Beasley-Murray, 2010, pp.260–61). This uncertainty configured the political system as an *empty place*, and formed the conflict’s constituent tension. The disruption of an emerging protest cycle, promoting social solidarity as counterfactual sociability to the representation of individualism, induced political innovation along the system’s margins. Sociopolitical conventions instrumented by the *Punto Fijo* that had acquired a naturalized character began to break down, shaping a plurality of modes of interaction in general, and establishing new roads for social and political action. In a way, the logic of de-naturalization of the social was pierced by what Jacques Rancière called the *equality effect*.

For the country’s political crisis, the 1990s meant a sharpening of the conflictive as the social became more deeply politicized and the split in Venezuela’s institutionalized forms of politics deepened further. Front and center of a profoundly dislocated and fragmented stage, with a popular interpellation discourse that captured the latent anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist feelings of subaltern imaginers, Chávez triumphed in the 1998 national elections. The interpenetration between radical and historical struggles and a present of renewed hope built new nets of political subjectivation in a carnivalized and celebratory environment. Simultaneous to the multiform display of popular mobilizations, President Hugo Chávez Frías’ figure is built as an evanescent mediator¹⁸ in the sense expounded on by Frederi Jameson. As a negative trope that reorganizes our perception, and in a scandalous procedure of negative rewriting, Chávez transforms into a *catalytic agent*. His figure’s semantic elaboration as a nodal field condenses, stops, and sets the accumulation of floating signifiers, and builds him up to be the only efficient agent among the horde of barbarians. The mimesis built between Chávez and barbarism, between the horde and popular mobilizations, between noise and disorder, settles and naturalizes a nostalgic semantic around a *Threatened Venezuela*, threatened by the imminent chaos, destruction, and conflict that Chavismo represents.

This happens in moments where the social and political rallies for or against Chávez become intrinsic in the multiple spaces of discussion, mobilization, and confrontation of quotidian Venezuelan politics. The conflicting imaginaries produced an emotional environment,

the vibrations of which were felt in the surface of social and political phenomena, in what Appadurai (1996) calls a *community of feelings*. Profound aggressiveness of *the political* rested against the affective contagion of shared feelings, participation in imagining and feeling in a joint way, as a social and cultural group. Conflictive and mutual incomprehension between manifestations and divergent social expressions reflected the tension between antagonistic projects that had imaginaries incommensurable among themselves. Either way, in the imaginaries' designation, nodes critical for the understanding of transformative cultural processes could be perceived. The knotting between the *instituted* as a reactive force and the *instituting* as a force of transformation for the contemporary topography of Venezuelan politics represented a turn that nominated a profound paradox between a *Hobbesian moment* as a place of order and a *Machiavellian moment* as a place of strategic conflict in the field of imaginaries.

The insurgent imaginaries (*Chavismo*) were contraposed to a restoration logic that had a dynamic, and changing, fluctuating, and active forms of expression, where public spaces get reevaluated as *areas of joy, transgression, and revolt*. Massive popular events marked the place where this new regime of political truth was being disputed: streets, public squares and spaces, among others, gained new symbolic meaning, allowing the emergence of a *popular universalism* which achieved a *symbolic split* with the neoliberal regulatory devices. The coup d'état of April 2002, the oil sabotage strike in 2002–03, and the recall referendum of August 2004 become nodal points of the political mobilization in a force field crisscrossed by the confrontations of divergent imaginaries. The symbolic density of these events grants new meaning to popular mobilizations, intensifying the enthusiasm of insurgent imaginaries and clearing new paths of action. Chávez as a symbol of transformation became the popular mobilizations' object, which traced new epochal destinies, radicalizing the political-ideological contents of insurgent imaginaries. The creative self-alteration process of these movements strengthened through their collective action at the same time as they reinforced Chávez' leadership. Toward the end of 2004, framed by the end of the First Encounter of Intellectuals and Artists in Defense of Humanity celebrated in Caracas, President Hugo Chávez Frías declared “we have to retake the study of socialist ideas. Socialism, its authentic thesis, its original thesis. Revise mistakes, revise successes, refocus and take the path we have to take” (Chávez Frías, 2006, pp.306–07).

In 2006, with the electoral proposal to set *Socialismo del Siglo XXI* in motion, Chávez triumphed in the elections, producing a new transformative gestalt, founded in the simultaneous need to

build socialism and the communal state as new critical agencies for the Bolivarian Revolution. Toward the end of 2006, the process of constructing the only socialist party started with a government proposal titled “*Los Cinco Motores*” (The Five Motors), which included a constitutional reform. The conjunction of both proposals configured a technocratic sign by strengthening the corporative tendencies of popular participation that had formed partly due to Chávez’ criticism of the previous political system. In this extraordinary context of centralization, the appeal to the popular became a supplement of the constituted powers as it utilized itself as a rhetorical inscription of the government’s action. The constituted power supplanted the constituting one as the forces of emergent corporate order traced insurmountable limits of a popular subject-turned-object. The government corporatism’s removal of the *General Intellect* of popular movements’ transformational value became the most challenging political consequence moving forward. The centripetal and congressional process that opened in 1998 started to have an inverse centrifugal effect. The autonomy of corporative and bureaucratic interests produces distance in regard to utopic energies and historical solidarities of popular movements. This distance expands in the same measure as the people, as much a source of sovereignty and legitimacy, are perceived not as a protagonist subject, but as an object susceptible of organization.

In a way, Chavismo, by expanding, deepening, and radicalizing the contents of democracy in the region, became a specter that, to paraphrase Marx, tormented the liberal groundwork of the colonial-modern logos. Acquiring a statute of indecibility, “in this sense, chavismo reflects the ambivalence of the *specter metaphor*, sometimes working as a companion to democracy, but in occasion also becomes its antagonist” (Arditi 2009, p.157). The impulse that had begun on a theoretical, programmatic, cultural and political plane began to have serious flaws in terms of programs, strategies, and normative horizons. President Hugo Chávez Frías’ health became the fundamental political event at the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013. His death on March 5, 2013 triggered a multiplicity of events that turned the *interpretation of his legacy* into an *object of political-cultural dispute* for the internal workings of Chavismo. The triumph of Nicolas Maduro (the chancellor in Chávez’ government) in the March 2013 presidential election by a small margin meant an intensification of political conflict as it opened a space for electoral competition. This event *fractured* the force field’s homogeneity, transforming the stability, order, and the differences that had organized the political conflict in Venezuela since the Caracazo. The figure of Chávez as a center of gravity that polarized, organized,

and unified imaginaries exerted a global magnetism that strained the dynamic intersection of conflicting imaginaries.

This vector field's fracturing pointed toward the exacerbation, confrontation and dissemination of *political violence* in a context of intensification of the economic, social and political crisis, configuring a *nebulous distribution* of the imaginaries. The force field's constitutive tension became re-signified in new social and political circumstances, where the precarious nature of the links displaced the center of gravity between the instituting and the instituted by deepening the manifestations of economic crisis. Social and political violence became the *leitmotif* of daily life amid the economic indicators of rising inflation, scarcity of essential products¹⁹ disseminated as issues into the totality of Venezuelan society. At this point, Venezuelan society is confronted with the negation of its historical existence when the designation of its citizen conflict points toward the parable of the two cities. In metaphoric terms, the city possessed by war is opposed to the plural city of repetitive time of social practices, a matter that directs us toward the constitutive heterogeneity of society. The colonial-modern *visibility regime* negates its constitutional fracture, sensible as it closed the cultural and class conflict, appealing to natural law as a mechanism for naturalized construction of racialized and hierarchized identities (Contreras Natera 2014, p.28).

The sensible order that partially sutured society opened the profound wounds of *stasis*, conducting negation as a dialectic between the same and the Other, pointed toward the annihilation of the enemy, following the famous *Schmittian* distinction. Political violence traverses the crisis of the political representation modes in its double manifestation: on one hand, as an undermining of democracy's procedural mechanisms with the deepening of the State's deinstitutionalization; and on the other, as absence of a shared national project by means of the emergence of an extreme confrontation of existential negation. The violent confrontation that defines Venezuela's everyday political present is between an imaginary that points toward the reestablishment of neoliberal grammar, in all its colonial appellation to the United States' modernity, radically contraposed to an insurgent imaginary that becomes inscribed into the recovery of the long memory's historical debt. The instituted and the instituting face off against each other in changing, dynamic, and contradictory historical circumstances in regard to the political architecture of antagonism, which lays bare the difference in the privileges of voice and word. It rigorously distinguishes between those who possess the *logos* (patricians) as those who recognize the just, the beautiful, and the good; and the talkative beings (plebeians),

who are without qualities, identifying themselves instead with the noise, tumultuousness, and transgression (Rancière, 1996, p.31).

Society is then presented as a composite social body; social divisions are the disease of this organism against whom we must fight—the enemy being Chavismo, a carcinogenic institution that must be exterminated to recover the ailing social body's health. The gestures of separation, classification, and cleansing are used to evidence the deterioration of health, the dangerous contagion of the political body with an unprecedented symbolic load. Only exaggerating the differences of the inside and the outside is the appearance of a *coming order* created. Chavismo becomes a doubly evil object, worthy of reproach, first for crossing the line, and second for threatening society. The identity standing between contamination, purification, and security establishes the political propaedeutic of existential confrontation in Venezuela. The main issue in the dramatic political debate is the geopolitical, strategic, and continental character of its political, social and economic consequences, as much as they are inscribed in an antagonism that, in their constitutive germ of existential negation, can turn into a breaking off from the democratic order.

By way of conclusion

The persistence of political-cultural tensions at the beginning of the century, the return to the neoliberal agenda as an anti-crisis program, and the absence of alternative programs to the systemic crisis manifested strongly in the economic, political and social consequences of the mortgage bubble's explosion of 2008. The semantics of the crisis' return displaces the debate from the political to the economical, installing in its central position of political action the contents of global technocracy, written in a neoliberal tone. And above all, imposing itself as a political-economic diagnostic in that it reinstates the critique of the state as a producer of waste, inflation, and inefficiency, comparing the logic of the market with its axiology of efficiency, productivity, and performance. The state becomes the fundamental interface, as capital depends on the legal-institutional framework, the socio-spatial and work conditions for the process of accumulation of wealth in its double dimension of appropriation: as relative or absolute surplus. Apparent de-territorialization linked to financial globalization represents just one dimension of the complex socio-spatial process on a global scale. "The perpetual change that is produced in capitalist modes of production guarantee that the requirements, definitions of qualifications, systems

of authority, division of labor, etc., are never stable for long periods of time.” (Harvey, 2007, p.127)

The attempts to conjure, domesticate, and normalize the region’s processes of change become a subtext for the reaction of neoliberal nostalgia. The emergence of deinstitutionalization, the split of regional alliances, and the deepening of economic, political, and social crises meant a symbolic break with the transformative assumptions of the political turn toward the left in the region. Toward the end of the century, the regional cartography was characterized by the simultaneous nature of the progressive decline of the *cepalista* industrializing paradigm and the emergence of structural adjustment policies anchored in the Washington Consensus. Globally, the consolidation of deindustrialization and refocusing processes, combined with the dependent transformations of commercial, financial, and productive international structures, has driven a pattern of accumulation of wealth centered on the exporting of commodities and importing of industrial goods. This is a return to the structural conditions of the 1950s. The profound transformations of historical capitalism that are leading toward systemic stochastic confrontations (hegemony, recentering, and systemic change), accelerate the processes of economic, political and social crisis of a region in a scheme of dependent transformation.

The decadence of US hegemony, with its new perfectionist politics (in the Trump era), together with the decisive emergence of China, in the restructuring of international commerce points toward systemic confrontation, affect the construction of commercial, productive, and political alliances in the region. In the words of Elmar Altvater, “the economical mechanisms won’t be enough to maintain inequality and, in consequence, they must be complemented with political or even military coercion. Rich nations are getting prepared for that situation with new military strategies and expanded security concepts” (2012, p.253). Undoubtedly, the transformations of the imaginaries were signified by the dialectic between the instituting as a transformational moment, and the instituted as a reactive moment in its point of inflection. But also, in their interpolations, negotiations and receptions, they indicate the persistence of neoliberal assumptions as social ontologies in middle- and lower-class sectors; this demonstrates the perseverance of the forms of *possessive sociabilities* anchored in the mercantile representations of neoliberalism. The media-based offensive anchored in the expansion “of a way of life, mythical and demobilized, for the professional and intellectual middle class, highly remunerated, ideologically and politically conservative, of a renewed promotional, internationalist and individualist culture” (Contreras

Natera, 2015, p.22) has continued to have a fundamental and constant presence in the political-cultural debate. Epochal censuring points toward the contradiction on a global level with uncertain regional consequences and, above all, the restructuring of loyalty, compromises, and challenges of popular imaginaries in a context of simultaneous political pugnaciousness and systemic destabilization.

Notes

- ¹ Carlos Andrés Pérez' election in Venezuela, Carlos Menem's in Argentina, and the post-Stronist transition in Paraguay, which allowed for a political liberalization process, become inscribed into this phase of destruction of the social fabric and the stability of the economic adjustment coded in the neoliberal key. Reforms to political systems meant eliminating critical, plural, and democratic parliamentary discussion, as well as simultaneously reinforcing executive power.
- ² "If the logos (being) is an imperial instrument of colonization, one of the urgent tasks which we must achieve is becoming decolonized (getting rid of) the colonial-modern logos ... The affinity between the eurocentral humanist project and the imperialist one shows the persistence of the scientific, cultural and spiritual theater of operations that began in 1492, and which hasn't yet ended its effective time of action." (Contreras Natera, 2014, pp.342–3) The colonial-modern logos represents the programmatic continuity between colonialism and modernism in forms of being, representation, and thought of the elites endogenous to the regions.
- ³ The Chamber of Commerce's 1944 speech specifies that Argentina must prepare for a third stage. Above all, "to prevent the masses which have obtained necessary and logical social justice to go any further in their pretensions, the first remedy is the organization of these masses, so that, forming responsible organisms, logical and rational, well-run, which won't produce injustice, because the common sense of the organic masses ends up imposing itself over the exaggerated pretensions of some men. This would be insurance, the organization of the masses. The State would then organize the reinsurance, which is the necessary authority that, when in place, no one can step outside it, because the statal entity has an instrument that, if necessary, will set things straight and let them run their rightful course if necessary. This is the integral solution put forth by the state at this time as a solution to the social problems. It's been said, gentlemen, that I'm an enemy of capital; if you look at what I've just said, you wouldn't find a more, let's say, staunch defender than me, because I know that the defense of businessmen, industry, and merchants, is the same as the defense of the State."
- ⁴ Populism is "the synthetic antagonist set of popular interpellations which face off against the bloc in power" (Barciela, 2015, p.154). It is the principle of articulation in its relational complexity that unifies popular identity in an equivalence chain. "Populism is not, therefore, an expression of ideological delay of a previously-dominated class, but, on the contrary, an expression of the moment in which the articulatory power of this class hegemonically imposes itself over the rest of society." (Laclau, 1980, p. 30)
- ⁵ "Paraguay, since its birth as a republic at the beginning of the 19th century (1811), went through dictatorships, a genocidal war, and a period of oligarchic democracy until finally reaching, in the mid-twentieth century, one of the longest and cruelest authoritarian regimes in American history: the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner."

(Ortiz, 2014, p.10) Paraguay's economic uniqueness in the 19th century cemented a state model of public expansion and investment, the absence of foreign debt, and economic autonomy. Paraguay's national industry, anchored in fluvial and railroad transportation, had the most cutting-edge technology in the region. With Bartolome Mitre's victory in Argentina in 1861, strategies were set in motion to *produce* the military conflict that would eventually destroy Paraguay. The War of the Triple Alliance (1864–70) caused the death of 90% of the male population, territorial devastation, and dispossession of public lands by the Anglo-Argentinian and Anglo-Brazilian elites. "A pattern of plundering and inequality imposed itself after the war, the Paraguayan State gave out immense tracts of land at laughable prices to English, Argentinian, Brazilian, American, French, and, to a lesser degree, Paraguayan businessmen." (Guereña and Rojas Villagra, 2016, p.11)

- ⁶ Popular imaginaries in Paraguay show the persistence of the colonial-modern logos as an instituted form of sociability, and simultaneously, it recreates spaces of opposition and resistance from critical interstices in an instituting sense, with the re-appropriation of the long memory reproducing consuetudinary relationships of reciprocity and autonomy in the popular, peasant, and indigenous field.
- ⁷ The profound *mnemonic footprints* of these events are, in the traces of subjectivity, testimony of a tendency toward repetition, where imaginaries looking to reclaim different representations of the past cross. On one hand, official celebratory representations that *selectively* mystify the past, and on the other, the ways of being Paraguayan that highlight the static, immutable and hopeless as *ontologized*. In terms developed by Sigmund Freud, through the compulsion toward repetition, the subject reproduces sequences, actions, ideas, thoughts, and memories that generated suffering, retaining its painful character. "Lacan observes that unconscious repetition is never repetition in its usual meaning of identical reproduction: repetition is the movement that sustains the search for an object, always located beyond this or that particular thing, and therefore, *always out of reach*." (Roudinesco and Plon, 1998, p.922)
- ⁸ In Paraguay, dynamic relationships between Spanish and Guaraní, which are cemented on a pyramid-like organizational structure anchored on the processes of colonization, allow us to understand the random transmission of Guaraní, supported by the immense vitality of the communities for which it is the mother tongue.
- ⁹ For an author such as José Carlos Rodríguez, it is unacceptable to call a society in which 60% of the population lives in cities and half of the rural population doesn't work in agriculture or livestock farming "agrarian" (Rodríguez, 2015, p.144). This facticity implies historicizing the *community of feelings* shaped since colonial times until the present to understand nomological patterns which form the basis of the colonial-modern logos in Paraguay. A social structure persists in its recursivity, unequal and anchored as it is in the consolidation of colonial-modern relationships, favoring the interests of the landowner oligarchy. Social relationships are constructed over this *original trauma*, based on recreating the patronage relationships present in the Paraguayan state. During the Stronist dictatorship, great tracts of land were spuriously handed out to those logical to the regime, without this transaction being revised during the democratic transition to *landowner dispossession*. "During the Stronist regime, mechanisms for popular participation in resolving all the different topics which make up the national problematic have, by definition, been absent: the dictatorship confiscated the rights of Paraguayan citizens until 1989, the year of its fall." (Ortiz, 2014, p.102) Political resistance to the popular field's colonial-

modern logos introduce difficulties into the construction of the democratic demands equivalential chains.

- ¹⁰ The Frente Guasu as a political platform includes a variety of left-leaning and progressive political parties, such as Tekojoja, Frente Amplio, Partido Revolucionario Febrista, and Pais Solidario, among others.
- ¹¹ None of the six formally renegotiated points were endorsed by the Brazilian congress, even though most of its members were supporters of President Lula Da Silva.
- ¹² “The *Chokokue* report (assembled for the Coordination of Human Rights of Paraguay, *Codehupuy* in 2007 and updated in 2014) investigated and certified 115 cases, proving that in none of them did the Paraguayan State fulfill its obligations of investigating and sanctioning those responsible.” (Soto and Carbone, 2015, p.293)
- ¹³ This practice implies a radicalization of the *ore* scheme, which consists of the express intentionality of those who “make up part of a system of relationships inside a closed circle, of excluding the others and creating favorable conditions only for those that are part of the group.” (Juste, 2015, p.98)
- ¹⁴ Commonly known as the *Azulgrana* Pact.
- ¹⁵ “Today, without a doubt, there is a systematic plan of attack against landless peasants which supports soy landowners in their determination to have peasant-less fields. Indigenous settlements are also victims of the agro-export, soy monoculture model, as their ancestral lands are being deforested.” (Zambrano, 2015, pp.195–6)
- ¹⁶ The naming of Chancellor Eladio Olaizaga (high Stronist bureaucrat) is irrefutable proof of the upward direction taken when building bridges by the factions within Paraguayan oligarchy.
- ¹⁷ The Pacto de Punto Fijo, agreed on October 31, 1958, constitutes the most important agreement between the political, economic, and military elites, as it represents the compromise of the main parties at that moment, AD, COPEI and URD, to back whoever was elected, and conform around the victor in a coalition government. The rules of the game and the basic political agreements of the pact crystallized in the Constitution of 1961 (Levine, 2001, p.10).
- ¹⁸ An evanescent mediator is a catalytic agent that allows for the energy exchange between two terms that would otherwise be excluded among themselves. In any case, it functions as an agent of change and social transformation, only to be forgotten once this change has ratified the reality of the institutions involved. This concept, of Weberian inspiration (Weber, 2008, p.126), contests that “social change is relatively undecidable: it postulates the intervention in a series (social tradition) of an event by another series (religious and political) that is completely different, in which the resurgence of the charismatic or prophetic figure provokes a mix in the traditional situation and allows the formation of a totally new situation in its place” (Jameson, 2004, p.187).
- ¹⁹ The explanations for the economic crisis oscillate between economic sabotage, used recurrently by the government as causal explanation, and the failure of the economic model, emerging from sectors of the political opposition. The debate regarding the rentist character of the current economy, along with the discussion of the socialist-inspired economic development model becomes one of the political agenda’s fundamental themes. The reappearance of neoliberal phraseology such as adjustment, privatization, and competitiveness emerges as a response to the economic crisis, revealed as *post-liberalism* as it deepens the global crisis of historic capitalism.

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