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Argentina

The Left is Underestimating the Danger of the Extreme Right

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A victory for the extreme right in Argentina could put an end to the "hegemonic stalemate" that the country has experienced since 2001. The left must prioritise the fight to avoid this possibility above anything else. [1]

It is difficult to overstate the political upheaval arising from the August 13 primary election. Furthermore, it is not easy to capture all its dimensions. Firstly, the extreme right was left at the gates of power. What seemed impossible now seems inevitable. An almost non-existent political force, which does not have a party structure, provincial candidates, senators or governors, achieved a surprising position in a political system designed to prevent the entry of outside forces. And yet to reduce the earthquake of August 13 to the irruption of Javier Milei would be to underestimate the magnitude of the changes underway. As is often the case, it is only the symptom ("morbid", to use the usual expression) of tectonic changes that are not immediately detectable.

Javier Milei's performance is closely related to what is probably the fundamental event of this situation: the crisis of Peronism, the celestial body around which the Argentine political system has orbited since 1945. Peronism is a party unlike any other. Its social capillarity, its mimesis with the structures of the State, its territorial networks (militant or clientelist), its link with the labour movement and social movements, make it a political force of rarely seen resilience. Between 1946 and 1983 it never lost an election in which it ran (that is, in which it was not banned). Whenever it was able to run as a unified slate in presidential elections, its electoral result was always around 40%. In the current framework of primary elections, its most modest result was in 2015 when it reached 38% of the votes, however on that occasion it competed with another Peronist list that reached 14%. On August 13, it went to the polls unified (but divided into two internal lists, which probably avoided a greater fall) and its share of the vote was reduced to 27%. For the first time, Peronism is about to lose its majority in the Senate and is ceding control of governorates historically considered its strongholds (Santa Cruz, San Juan and Chaco are notable examples).

In the face of each of the great crises that the country has experienced since the democratic restoration (1989, 2001, 2019), Peronism appeared as the "party of order", being capable of limiting the collapse of the state and restoring governability. Due to this specific capability, a crisis of Peronism of this magnitude is in itself, to a certain extent, a crisis of the State.

Nevertheless, the impact of the changes that are taking place is not limited to Peronism. The traditional right, which was self-confident, preparing to receive power within the framework of a conventional electoral alternation, is now facing its own possible collapse. In the primary for Juntos por el Cambio [JxC or Together for Change], Patricia Bullrich, the candidate with the most aggressive adjustment programme and the one who openly supported the use of repression against social mobilisation, was the winner. If it were not for the emergence of Milei, she would be the one who would rightly monopolise attention: for the first time since the return to democracy, a majority party presented a candidate with an openly far-right orientation. However, JxC experienced an electoral setback compared to the extremely bad election of 2019, at the end of Macri's term. The right, which hoped to return to power, is now closer to an internal crisis than to obtaining government, and is at risk of being excluded from the second round whilst facing internal divisions.

Finally, the August 13 election marked the highest abstention rate in the history of presidential elections, with 69% of the registered electorate participating. The level of absenteeism increased by more than 6 points compared to the 2019 election, a volume of voters that could be decisive in the final result.

In the context of a probable organic crisis of the State, according to the term that Gramsci coined in the 1930s, the

coming to power of the extreme right would raise the possibility of realising what the social power relations of the previous period had failed to achieve: neoliberal shock therapy that would decisively break the social block against the adjustment that was imposed after 2001. This situation could give rise to a "Caesarist" solution, following Gramsci's terminology, which seeks to unblock the social deadlock that we are experiencing through a solution of force.

The economy and its discontents

Although there would be much to analyse around the sociological changes in the working class, the ideological impact of the pandemic or the tendencies towards the individualisation of the workforce, there is a more obvious explanation for current events: the long phase of stagnation that has affected Argentine capitalism since 2011-2012, which became a recession and open crisis starting in 2018. Throughout an extensive inflationary process, the purchasing power of salaries in Argentina decreased 25% between December 2017 and 2023, with this reduction being even more marked among informal workers. Although the most critical point of this decline was recorded in 2018 during the Macri government, the Peronist government continued the downward trend and worsened the gap between formal and informal workers, a difference that became more pronounced since the pandemic.

This period also saw the destruction of formal private employment and an increase in informal employment. That is, informal workers saw their purchasing power decrease while occupying an increasingly significant segment of the global workforce. This new socio-labour panorama especially makes Peronism crack, as an official party at a time of crisis and by damaging its own social base through the various adjustment measures it is implementing. This continuous deterioration in the material life of the working class, produced in a period that involved governments of the two major political coalitions, has laid the foundations for a growing social unrest that finally transformed into a general crisis of representation.

It is likely that we are heading towards an organic crisis of the State. Gramsci used this term to illustrate a symptom of a general hegemonic crisis: a radical rupture of the ties between representatives and represented. Although the collapse of support for traditional parties may be the most visible sign of an organic crisis, it tends to expand to all mediations of civil society. As this crisis deepens, it leads to a decline in the ability of the ruling classes to maintain their leadership through conventional means. However, in a crisis of this type there is an asymmetric relationship in terms of the capacity for intervention between the dominant classes and the subordinate classes, which is only compensated in exceptional situations of mass offensive. According to Gramsci:

The various strata of the population do not have the same capacity to orient themselves quickly and to reorganise themselves at the same pace. The traditional ruling classes, which have numerous trained personnel, change men and programmes and reabsorb the control that was slipping from their hands with greater speed than that possessed by the subaltern classes.

The explosive emergence of a figure outside the political system, in a context of general political crisis, would not have surprised Gramsci, who analysed the political process of Europe in the 1930s. As Stathis Kouvelakis explains:

“The organic crisis triggers a recomposition of the political personnel –” which can take various forms –” from Bonapartism that preserves the parliamentary façade, to the various Caesarisms and the ‘state of exception’, with the aim of resolving the situation in the interest of the dominant bloc. Therefore, the field is open to solutions of force, as represented by Gramsci’s ‘providential men.’ ”

The "providential man" who can impose a "solution of force" does not necessarily have to meet very outstanding personal conditions. Let us remember Marx's caustic comments about Louis Bonaparte, asking what exceptional circumstances "allowed a mediocre and grotesque character to play the role of hero."

The long Argentine crisis

The current economic crisis is not an unexpected phenomenon, but is part of a history of recurring cycles. Argentina is characterised by its constant political and economic instability. As research from different economic schools has shown (Piva, Gerchunoff), this instability has one of its roots in the relative strength of its working class, which hinders a long-range capitalist restructuring that resolves macroeconomic problems through a lasting flattening of wages.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider a second reason, involving factors of an international nature, linked to the transformations in global production in recent decades: the country's long-term trend towards an economic and social decline that began almost half a century ago with the crisis of the Peronist welfare state in the framework of internationalisation of production and the crisis of post-war national development models. Since then, Argentine society experienced successive jumps in poverty and inequality indices, which led each generation to have its own direct perception of decadence, even when their reference points, for reasons of age, are different. The country has gone from having a 4% poverty rate in the 1970s to reaching 40% in recent years, reflecting a trend of almost constant social regression with few parallels in the world. The tendency towards organic crisis becomes, consequently, a distinctive feature of a society that amalgamates relations of force between classes that prevent a conclusive resolution of instability for the benefit of the dominant classes, at the same time that it experiences constant economic deterioration that fuels social tensions.

Although this decline develops gradually and in a non-linear manner, with periods of sharp declines followed by partial recoveries, at critical moments social unrest acquires an explosive character as we observed in the 2001 crisis. Kirchnerism emerged in 2003 as a political response to that crisis, taking advantage of exceptional political and economic conditions. At this moment, we are witnessing the dismantling of that very device that managed to resolve the crisis two decades ago. Furthermore, the crisis affecting Kirchnerism is dragging with it a broader crisis within Peronism, the magnitude of which we cannot yet fully assess.

The particularity of the current situation lies in the fact that, for the first time, Peronism is dealing with the acute crises that periodically affect the country as the government. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this phenomenon. As is often the case, the formation of a mass base for the extreme right cannot be understood without a prior breaking of the links between the popular classes and their traditional political representation. If Peronism has historically played the role of a stabilising factor that has cushioned the recurring tendency towards organic crisis, the current crisis of Peronism could open the door to a political crisis of greater magnitude.

A popular right-wing ideology

Initially, interpretations of Milei's emergence focused on the protest vote that was behind his emergence. That explains part of the phenomenon: there is a still relatively liquid social unrest that found in Milei the most effective instrument to make its discontent known. In addition, there were contingent and circumstantial factors that influenced its electoral performance, such as the splitting of 17 provinces that held their elections on dates other than the national election. This split, driven mainly by Peronist rulers who wanted to avoid the negative influence of a national election that they considered unfavourable, had a decisive impact on the results. In those districts where local

elections were held simultaneously, support for Milei was 13 percentage points lower than in the provinces that split. Among the current factors, the economic and logistical support that Peronism provided to Milei is also important, according to the calculation that fragmenting the right-wing vote would increase its chances in the election.

However, neither the protest vote nor current factors are sufficient to explain the August 13 electoral results. Firstly, because the way that social unrest finds expression is not usually completely innocuous. The currently fluctuating and heterogeneous nature of this electoral base should not obscure a developing process: the growing consolidation of a popular right-wing ideology, to which Milei contributed by ensuring it reached social sectors that were outside the reach of the traditional right. Likewise, the fluid state of his electoral base changes as the political process progresses, as Milei's rise generates retroactive effects on his base. As Ernesto Laclau used to say, the "representative performs an active function" over the person represented. Political leaders are not only the result of power relations and currents of opinion present in society, but they also model and influence them. We are not only dealing with a discomfort that erupts in random ways, but rather with the reactionary metabolisation of that discomfort. Although this situation is not necessarily irreversible, it is an element that we cannot ignore.

Nancy Fraser's analysis of these issues may be helpful. Fraser coined a term to explain the global rise of the far right: "progressive neoliberalism." She uses this concept to describe the "historical bloc" that combines neoliberal economic policies with progressive policies of "recognition" or "acknowledgment". The politicians of the so-called "third way" (Clinton, Blair, Schoeder, and later their heirs: Obama, Hollande, Matteo Renzi, etc.) implemented neoliberal policies while superficially adopting multicultural, ecological, feminist and LGBTQ+ rights and demands. The working class, attacked by regressive economic policies, and sometimes uncomfortable with the real or apparent advances of oppressed groups (women, LGTBQ+, etc.), began to react against the progressive neoliberal bloc by adopting a "reactionary populist" profile that unified demands for social protection with the rejection of the policies of recognition of its adversary.

The Argentine case finds a parallel with this situation but presents an important difference. On the one hand, the government applied an economic policy that continued the orthodox adjustment of the previous mandate, and lends itself to leaving the government with almost all social indicators (poverty, salaries, inequality) worse than when Mauricio Macri left. On the other hand, it adopted a progressive approach in several aspects, such as the legalisation of abortion, the promotion of inclusive language, the implementation of job quotas for trans people, among others. But the Argentine case allows us to add an additional element. The difference with Fraser's progressive neoliberalism is that in the case of Peronism, it made the neoliberal adjustment in the name of the fight against the neoliberal adjustment. This is what Pablo Semán refers to when he talks about the "mimicry of the State": the preaching of the "present State" was the ideological cover for a progressive deterioration of the material benefits that the State provides in the name of income redistribution and social justice. This is part of the reason that explains the anti-statist response that progressive neoliberalism received. If Trump, Le Pen, Meloni are critics, at least apparent, of neoliberal globalism, Javier Milei is an extravagant anarcho-capitalist who dreams of the complete elimination of the State.

The deterioration of living conditions during a government that promotes a progressive and redistributive narrative paved the way for an anti-statist discourse to find an echo in various social strata, even among those who significantly depend on the State's social protection to survive. The collapse of a populist experience, which maintained its rhetoric of redistribution even when applying harsh adjustment measures, resulted in the costs of orthodox policies not being attributed to their main intellectual defenders. This process demoralised and confused the working class, resulting in social unrest shifting to the right. The crisis of governmental progressivism extends to the crisis of the values and ideas associated with it, such as the progressive redistribution of income, the active role of the State, human rights and social mobilisation. As often happens, the rubble of the crumbling wall falls on the entire spectrum of the left and its ideas.

According to electoral sociology studies, Milei garnered support across all social classes and age groups. In

ideological terms, studies indicate that approximately a third of his voters correspond to a profile of an ultra-right nature, another third represents a classic neoliberal orientation vote and the remaining third comes from a popular and "pro-State" base, affected by indignation and confusion. Even if we discard this last segment and only add the clearly ideological vote that Patricia Bullrich obtained in the primary elections (16%), it is undeniable that there is an electoral base for the extreme right of between 25-30%. These are very high numbers, which can provide a mass base for an authoritarian neoliberal experiment.

This electoral base is still in a fluid and unstable state. However, its mere existence highlights the excessive optimism that has prevailed on the left, which assumes that the experience of an eventual Milei government will necessarily break ties with its electoral base. Many reasons or sequence of events (success in a stabilisation plan, demoralisation of the combative popular sectors, political disaffection of the working class) could lead us towards an opposite alternative, as happened in the case of Bolsonaro in Brazil. Although the former captain lost the elections in a very close second round (51/49), he managed to unite his own base, eliminating any previous loyalty of his voters towards the traditional parties.

Is a Milei government unfeasible?

One way to diminish the perception of the danger posed by the far right is to assume that a Milei government will lack political support and will crumble under the pressure of popular mobilisation. This is the predominant approach in the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores – Unidad [FIT-U or Workers Left Front-Unity]. The Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas [PTS or Socialist Workers Party] even compared Milei to Liz Truss, the British Prime Minister who in October 2022 was thrown out of power 45 days after taking office. This is a dangerous prognosis, largely imaginary and tailored to the political needs, not of the class struggle, but of the presidential campaign of the Left Front. The FIT-U candidacy has the problem that it could encounter a democratic response from society that will try to block the way for Milei by resorting to the only position that can have a practical impact in that sense, which is that of Peronism. Focusing the electoral campaign on reducing the danger that Milei represents, in order to slightly influence the electoral result of the Left Front, is a petty and irresponsible strategy.

It is not surprising that the PTS downplays the threat posed by the far right, given its attitude in previous similar situations. Given the rise of Bolsonaro in 2018, the PTS maintained that "a possible Bolsonaro government is already born weak" and, in another text, expanding its position, it noted that "when Bolsonaro wants to apply privatisations, legislation that degrades working conditions and life of the working and popular population, among other attacks on the democratic rights of women and oppressed minorities, he will have to face the class struggle (...) In a context of political and economic crisis and polarisation, we can expect great social explosions." They developed similar reasoning in their analyses of Erdogan's Turkey or the French National Front. None of their predictions were confirmed.

These errors of analysis are not accidental, but reflect theoretical and strategic limitations, which manifest themselves in various aspects: the tendency to underestimate the democratic risks represented by the extreme right, the assumption that it could only lead necessarily to weak governments, the fantasy of possible social explosions as a by-product of their arrival in power, the disdain for unitary defensive tasks and the emphasis on combating reformist or progressive currents, which often seem to be a more important enemy than the extreme right itself.

This ultra-leftist conception led the PTS to call for a null vote in all the recent elections in Latin America that were settled in a second round between a progressive or center-left force and the extreme right: Lula against Bolsonaro, Castillo against Fujimori and Boric against Kast. Their allies in the Left Front held similar positions. Ultra-left blindness to the danger of the extreme right is not an exclusive property of the Stalinism of the 1930s.

Governance and “authoritarian populism”

In any case, we will have decisive battles ahead. Thatcher could only advance after the great defeat of the miners' strike of 1985 and Menem after defeating the great struggles against privatisation. The future is uncertain like few times. The legitimacy of an eventual Milei government will be more fragile than the electoral result would imply. It cannot be ruled out that a wide-ranging social response and political and parliamentary instability will lead his government to a dead end. However, we should not exaggerate this possibility or play with fire on the edge of the cliff.

The conditions to provide political and parliamentary sustainability to a future Milei government can be built (Bullrich, for her part, would not have this problem). There could be a fracture of the right that would add a relevant sector to a new government coalition. Parliamentary support from a large part of the Peronism in the provinces in the interior of the country is also likely; this has already given governance to Macri, and is also in charge of territories where Milei swept the presidential election. While the internal affairs of Peronism are resolved for the next cycle, which could take several years, it is likely that a significant part of it will come to the conclusion that it would not be bad policy to support a new government that can take care of a heavy burden, that frightens all political forces (stabilisation plan, structural reforms, confrontation with the mass movement). In this sense, there were already sectors that showed signs of rapprochement, and there was even no shortage of relevant leaders of the union bureaucracy who made their rapprochement public. An eventual government led by Milei, especially if it manages to overcome a short-term crisis, could begin an unprecedented political reconfiguration. This would imply the possibility of breaking the other two political blocs and attracting sectors of both coalitions, obtaining the parliamentary support necessary to consolidate his leadership.

Both Milei and Bullrich seem not to fear, at least in the same way as the Macri government, social mobilisation. On the contrary, as happened, for example, in Sarkozy's France or in Thatcherism, they are willing to use it to their advantage, responding in an authoritarian manner and assuming a profile that we could call populist: the people represented in their president against corporate minorities who defend their "privileges."

This is a combative right that will try after years of economic crisis and demobilisation controlled from above, to take advantage of the combination of partial erosion of the capacity for resistance, to isolate social protest so that it appears as a blockage to the resolution of the country's economic problems.

Here the term “authoritarian populism” with which Stuart Hall characterised Thatcher may be useful. Regardless of its viability, Milei announced that he will resort to a plebiscite when Congress opposes his measures. Milei can claim to directly represent the people against the political or social opposition that will be accused of being undemocratic and not letting them govern. We would be facing a plebiscitary populism, in which Milei will speak on behalf of the people against sectoral interests (all those to whom they are referred to through the empty signifier of “caste”: politicians, union leaders, picketers, etc.) A discursive construction of this type would have a precedent in Macrista criticism of the “privileged.” In the language of the Macri government, “privileged” were the mafias and corrupt politicians, but also unionism, the formal worker protected by labour rights that “inhibit the generation of employment” or those who are “above the law”, for example a picketer who blocks an entrance to the city. Although it is not necessarily the majority, this type of ideological construction has been building up in relevant sectors of society for years.

This is simply a hypothesis, since in a situation as uncertain as the current one, no one can be certain about the future. However, this is a possible scenario supported by historical precedents and feasible conditions. In such a critical context, it is unreasonable to take unnecessary risks.

Taking the risk of the far right seriously

It is curious to note that there are two contrasting responses on the part of progressive sectors to the rise of the extreme right. On the one hand, some are paralysed by panic, sometimes with exaggerated characterisations that lose all sense of proportions. However, on the other hand, it is also common to observe a general feeling of disbelief in another sector. What until August 13 was a prediction of the type "this-cannot-happen" (a victory for the extreme right) became in some cases a "this-cannot-be-that-serious", which is actually an adapted form of the first. This is what happens in cognitive dissonance: the psychological discomfort generated by the experience of contradictory perceptions, generally the contradiction between previous beliefs and information from reality, is resolved through secondary adjustments that allow congruence and essentiality to be restored of the initial ideas.

The extravagance of some of Milei's proposals facilitates disbelief: the sale of organs, a market for minors, the privatisation of the streets. Nobody thinks that these measures are implementable on planet Earth. Even his star proposal, the abandonment of the national currency in favor of the dollar, is highly problematic in terms of viability. But the problem is not in the extravagant proposals. There is, however, another package of measures that are not in the realm of fantasy, whose successful application would mean a long-term defeat for the working class: an aggressive labour reform, like the one carried out by the ultraliberal Paulo Guedes in Bolsonaro's government, a fiscal adjustment based on the privatisation or closure of public companies and the massive dismissal of state workers, a large-scale attack on public education and health or a pension transformation that eliminates the state pay-as-you-go system, among others. On the other hand, it is evident that the extreme right would seek to launch an ambitious offensive in the area of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights (illegalisation of abortion, elimination of sexual education, the trans quota, etc.), generating state endorsement to hate, homophobic and patriarchal speeches, just as Trump and Bolsonaro did.

Such an anti-popular shock policy will not be able to do without an authoritarian hardening of the State: the judicial persecution of social leaders, support for police violence, free access to the carrying of weapons, the revitalisation of the Armed Forces, the pardon for the military condemned, an attempt to weaken the influence of unions in the workplace and, above all, the fight against the presence of the picketing social movements in popular neighborhoods, a fundamental social subject of the last political cycle. (The latter could be the preferred enemy of a future extreme right-wing government, which could count on the support of a part of the union bureaucracy and would find some support in a certain "anti-piquetero" common sense built governmentally over the last few years taking advantage of the social fatigue caused by the constant presence of street demonstrations).

In summary, if these measures were carried out successfully, it would mean a great social and democratic regression, hand in hand with an authoritarian hardening of the State and an attempt at social discipline and demobilisation of protest. In other words, it would represent a strategic defeat for the working class.

How would one build a sustainable mass base amidst such aggressive shock therapy? The main source of eventual support, passive or active, is if the future government is preceded by a catastrophic economic crisis that offers authorisation for drastic measures. At the time of writing these lines, we are bordering on such a crisis. In the experience of Menemism, the hyperinflation of 1989-1991 sowed despair in the population, liquidated the outgoing government and allowed Menem to take office with a huge delegation of presidential authority and with a blank check to take unpopular measures "to restore order." As Adrián Piva shows, this economic catastrophe offered weak hegemony around a negative consensus: economic stability built on the shock of the preceding hyperinflation. Perry Anderson, in the same sense, when analysing stabilisation plans in Latin America, wrote: "There is a functional equivalent to the trauma of military dictatorship as a mechanism to democratically and non-coercively induce a people to accept the most drastic neoliberal policies: hyperinflation."

An extreme right-wing government (and in this aspect Bullrich and Milei will not present significant differences) will

also play with the fragmentation of the working class and the contradictions between the victims of adjustment policies: informal sectors against the "privileges" of the unionised working class, workers against unemployed who survive on social assistance, "uberised" jobs against unions, etc.

In any case, it must be noted that an aggressive process of counter-reforms does not necessarily require massive support from the population. To refer to the classic example of Thatcherism, which has mobilised countless studies, Thatcher's offensive against the social State did not have the support of the majority of the population (as shown in the classic texts by Bob Jessop and others published in the *New Left Review*). Domination can accept forms that combine consent and coercion but also resignation, apathy or disaffection.

A cesarean solution to the social stalemate

The extreme fragility of the economic situation which the reactionary rise is part of is a characteristic that differentiates the Argentine situation from the global wave of far-right governments. The risk involved in that conjunction cannot be underestimated. There is no need to refer to the German hyperinflation of the 1920s to illustrate the point. This scenario has several recent precedents, one of them especially expressive. During the 1980s, Peru also suffered the effects of a long decade of stagnation that accelerated into a hyperinflationary peak. In that context, Alberto Fujimori took office. It is important to remember that his meteoric electoral rise was with a marginal political force (Cambio 90), basically electoral, without great social or business support. The economic catastrophe provided him with the legitimacy to apply shock therapy: a stabilisation plan, privatisation of public companies and liberalisation of the economy, as well as authoritarian hardening that included the closure of Congress. The neoliberal remodeling of Peruvian society and the massive violation of human rights (victims number in the tens of thousands) constituted a historical turning point from which the Peruvian working class has still not managed to recover.

It is curious that this correlation (inflationary crisis-authoritarian government) is not sufficiently present in the public debate of the left, especially in a situation where monthly inflation has reached double digits and the net reserves of the Central Bank are negative. A banking crisis cannot be ruled out in the event that one of the two far-right candidates prevails, especially taking into account that they seem to be aware of the benefit that would result in triggering economic panic by announcing radical "pro-market" proposals with catastrophic effects on the short term (such as the abrupt exit of banking "stocks", the elimination of withholdings on exports, dollarisation, etc.). Milei's good result on August 13 already showed a tendency towards panic in the "markets": falls in bonds, increase in "country risk", stagnation in stocks.

In his book on the last political cycle, Fernando Rosso takes up the term "hegemonic tie" from the Argentine Gramscians of the 1970s, who used it to describe the long period of instability in Argentina between 1955 and 1976. Rosso recovers the term to characterise the political dynamics during the last twenty years in which social relations of force have prevented the dominant classes from launching a full-fledged offensive. But an impasse of this type may find an opportunity to unblock itself in the combination of economic catastrophe and political authoritarianism. Precisely Gramsci's analysis leads to evaluating a scenario of this type, hence the "catastrophic" character of the "catastrophic tie." If Rosso is inclined to think that Milei will once again crash into the "cemetery of hegemonic projects" that is Argentine society, he would be prematurely ruling out a typically Gramscian alternative: that Milei embodies the possibility of overcoming that blockade.

It is striking to refer to Gramsci to analyse the "hegemonic tie", but not to evaluate the central hypothesis that the Italian thinker proposed as a possible solution for this type of situation. What Gramsci detected in situations of tied power relations is that they generate the conditions for an alternative leadership that has a catastrophic effect for the tied forces. Gramsci said:

"It can be said that Caesarism expresses a situation in which the forces in struggle are balanced in a catastrophic manner, that is, in such a way that the continuation of the struggle cannot but end in mutual destruction. When the progressive force A fights with the regressive force B, not only can it happen that A defeats B or vice versa, it can also happen that neither of the two conquer, that they weaken each other and that a third force C intervenes from the outside, dominating to what remains of A and B."

Gramsci in his analysis most likely considered first the specific conditions that allowed Italian fascism to emerge. In this regard, it is relevant to remember Angelo Tasca's formula when he defined fascism as a "posthumous and preventive counterrevolution" that arose in an intermediate situation where revolutionary threats had been defeated, but the labour movement had not yet been completely suppressed. Fascism did not directly defeat the revolution, but rather intervened to consolidate its power when revolutionary attempts had already failed. This is also a way of describing the "hegemonic tie": the working class was no longer in a period of ascendancy with the expectation of imposing its own project, but it still retained enough strength to stop a global capitalist offensive. In that interval a strong solution emerged from the exceptional characteristics of interwar fascism.

Of course, currently there are no revolutionary attempts in sight (nor fascist threats in the strict sense for the moment), but we are witnessing a prolonged situation of social stalemate that is exhausting the energies of the actors involved. In the working class camp, this translates into a tendency towards social demobilisation and political disaffection. Although the popular classes still maintain the ability to block the adversary, their relative weakness at the same time opens the door to the possibility of a "Caesarist" solution. Confirming this gives Gramscian analysis of the "catastrophic tie" an importance and precise meaning, which are often overlooked in current uses.

Gramsci's analysis also serves to avoid overreliance on a simplistic assessment of the accumulation of forces of the Argentine working class as a reserve insurance against an authoritarian reaction. Solutions of force arise precisely in places where there are social forces that block a conventional resolution (classical fascism in countries like Germany, Italy and Spain illustrate the point).

It is precisely from here that the optical illusion of the "instrumentalist" explanation of fascism, widely criticized in specialised literature, emanates. Fascism was not an instrument or an epiphenomenon of the needs of capital, as the Communist International believed, but the product of a complex and autonomous process, where ideological issues, political dynamics and even unexpected accidents converged. But, in its own way, the instrumental explanation captures something important about the dynamics of action and reaction in critical moments of the class struggle, where the specific conditions that favour the advancement of solutions of force tend to take shape. These authoritarian reactions serve the functional needs of the dominant classes, not because they are mere instruments, but because they represent political outcomes that become plausible in particular political contexts.

To illustrate this with Argentine history, it can be remembered that the military dictatorship in 1976 did not appear because the country had a weak union and social organisation, but on the contrary: because the working class had managed to block attempts at a capitalist offensive by conventional means (The Rodrigazo of 1975 was the last example). This social force, by having the capacity to block the adversary project but not to impose its own, gradually created the conditions for its exhaustion: by not being able to resolve the situation in its favour, its blocking capacity tended to generate chaos, instability and social fatigue. This not only facilitates the formation of a mass base for radicalisation to the right, but also puts pressure on the working class itself, which progressively begins to feel that it is in a dead end, loses confidence in its own strength and begins to demobilise. It is in this conjunction of elements that the feasibility of a force solution emerges. Due to this combination of factors, the 1976 coup was experienced by broad sectors of the population as a relief.

An electoral victory for the extreme right could, then, have strategic content. The ruling classes could find an alternative way to take direct combat for the benefit of an ultraliberal policy. For at least a decade, power relations

have prevented the counter-reforms demanded by the business community. Now the ruling classes could, in Caesarist fashion, delegate to an "external" figure the dirty work that the organic forces of the bourgeoisie do not seem to be in a position to carry out. Too much dependence on social consent wrecks all political projects. Perhaps a "madman", with little past and without fear of the future, without his own strength that demands sustainability, can be useful to cut the knot that has blocked Argentine capitalism for two decades.

If this were to happen, in the future we will analyse the current political moment as a decisive turning point, where Milei's electoral victory played a strategic role, offering an instrument and a reorganisation to the bourgeoisie that it itself could not find.

The political moment of the class struggle

An instinctive response of the social and political left to the advance of the extreme right is to call for mobilisations and social struggle. However, this strategy has an important gap: the extreme right is on the verge of seizing state power. Is a response in the political field necessary and feasible or can we do without that dimension?

There are usually two ways of underestimating what is condensed in a presidential election: on the one hand, the movementist rejection of all "institutional politics", and on the other, classic ultra-leftism for which all bourgeois options are on the same level. More in line with this second option, the predominant strategy on the left is based on calling for protest against the effects of economic policy as a way of confronting the extreme right, according to the reasoning, largely correct, that the extreme right emerges on the ground built by the destructive effects of economic adjustment. But we are not witnessing any relevant social struggle, and in a few days we will face the election that can concretise an extreme right government! An exclusively social struggle diverts from the need for a mass political struggle against the extreme right. And weeks before the elections, this is what worries relevant sectors of the population and affects it in such a way that it could unleash currently latent social energy.

It is essential to understand that the State is not simply a passive reflection of "external" relations of force, which are resolved only in the "power of the street." The State is an actor that influences power relations and has the capacity to change and modify established political balances. Not understanding the importance of a presidential election leads to underestimating the political moment of the class struggle, in favor of a predominantly "social" approach, which during the electoral period can be accompanied by abstract political agitation that does not confront the real dilemmas that the conjuncture presents.

What to do?

A peculiarity of the next presidential election is that we are not simply facing one, but two far-right formations, which could lead to a nightmare scenario in which both reach the second round. We are also witnessing another peculiarity: the division of the electoral panorama into three large blocks could lead to Milei being elected in the first round, if he manages to obtain 40% of the votes and a 10-point advantage over the next candidate, as allowed by the Argentine electoral system. These circumstances precipitate tactical decisions for the radical left that are normally reserved for the second turn.

The threat to democratic rights that this situation represents forces us to play a role without hesitation in the field of combat against the extreme right. However, today we face an additional difficulty. The political cycle is changing, which means that many categories we thought about in recent years are becoming anachronistic. For years, a tactic

of broad defensive unity against the right established a bridge that communicated with the majority sensitivity of the popular classes, identified mainly with Kirchnerism. But years of orthodox adjustment applied by Peronism has changed the landscape. Now it is no longer simply a matter of acting together with the popular classes against a traditional right that has its waterline in the anti-populist middle classes. Now, to a certain extent, it is the popular classes that are reacting, in an extremely problematic way, against the adjustment of Peronism.

If we want to combat the extreme right in the long term, we cannot subordinate ourselves to the "extreme centre" or progressive neoliberalism. They are the representatives of the status quo against which the reactionary revolt rises. If the left presents itself as the "far left" of the status quo, popular discontent will continue to move towards authoritarian solutions. In the same sense, we must prevent "everyone against the right" from becoming a disciplinary slogan that ends up justifying the orthodox policies carried out by traditional political forces. In other words, we must prevent progressive neoliberalism from finding in the extreme right the perfect antagonist that allows it to demobilise through the fear of an increasingly disturbing "greater evil."

Supporting progressive neoliberalism against the extreme right is equivalent to supporting the cause to try to avoid the effect. And yet, although it may seem paradoxical, there are critical moments that require specific actions "with cause versus effect" with the precious objective of gaining time to change the situation. In the next elections it is necessary to use the vote that can have the practical effect of blocking the way for the extreme right (in this case, the presidential body of Peronism), but this is not the same as accepting the slippery slope of the logic of the "lesser evil." Trotsky's classic writings against fascism continue to offer useful lessons in this regard. Trotsky emphasised that in critical circumstances one can still agree "with the devil and his grandmother" but "with the only condition of not tying one's hands." That is, he defended unitary tactics that do not imply political subordination or lasting agreements. In his "Letter to a Communist Worker", in which he makes an urgent call to constitute a workers' united front (communist-social democratic) to defeat fascism, he writes:

"We, as Marxists, consider both Brüning and Hitler and Braun as representatives of one and the same system. The problem of knowing which of them is a "lesser evil" is meaningless, because their system, against which we fight, needs all its elements. But today these elements are in conflict, and the party of the proletariat must absolutely use this conflict in the interests of the revolution."

And he continues: "For those who do not understand, let's take one more example. If one of my enemies poisons me every day with small doses of poison, and another wants to shoot me from behind, I will first tear the revolver from the hands of the second, which will give me the possibility of finishing off the first. But this does not mean that poison is a lesser evil compared to the revolver." And he added a final comment, which we could convey to the leaders of Argentine Trotskyism: "To tell the truth, one feels a little embarrassed explaining such an elementary thing!"

Although there are conditions to promote a democratic mobilisation against the extreme right, we face a very serious problem. Although it may seem surprising, the two main political agents who could promote it are not interested, at least for the moment. On the one hand, the FIT-U is committed to carrying out its own electoral campaign, which is in competition with any social movement that prioritises the fight against the extreme right, since the latter could have the effect of diverting electoral support from the left towards the official candidacy. On the other hand, the sector most directly linked to Cristina Kirchner seems to be absent from any action against the extreme right, even in the most basic electoral campaign. Apparently, the strategy of this sector, similar to the one used in 2015, focuses exclusively on retaining the strategic governance of the Province of Buenos Aires. It is possible that they are following the logic that a victory for the right at the national level would be preferable, since this would allow it to maintain leadership in Peronism, while at the same time embellishing by contrast the legacy of Kirchnerism and laying the foundations for a possible return to power in the future. The irresponsibility of this calculation is extreme.

A large social movement against the extreme right could play a fundamental role in changing the course of the

The Left is Underestimating the Danger of the Extreme Right

elections. This is not a leftist commonplace, which one routinely repeats in every situation. In this case it acquires a special meaning and importance. A polarisation between a democratic mass movement and the extreme right is key to modifying the electoral result, because no one is more unauthorised than the government itself to raise an alarm "against fascism" or against "the attack on rights." In this aspect, the situation is less like Lula's second round against Bolsonaro, and more like Macron against Le Pen. If the fight against Milei remains exclusively in the hands of Massa and the ruling party, defeat becomes more likely. An alarm must be given about the social and democratic danger that the extreme right represents, but for it to be effective, as Ezequiel Ipar rightly pointed out, a displacement of the speaker of this warning must be moved: a democratic social movement that polarises the political situation.

Even if the extreme right comes to power, it is essential that it does so within a framework of broad democratic mobilisation that is the support point for the social and political battles that are to come. Nothing is more important right now.

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Translated by David Fagan from [Jacobin Latin America](#).

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[1] This article was written before the first round of the presidential election and the legislative elections on 22 October. The second round in the presidential election is on 19 November. Although the far right Milei was beaten into second place in October he was subsequently endorsed by the third placed candidate. See *The Guardian* 23 October "[Argentina: leftists celebrate after far-right Milei fails to win election victory](#)" and "[Javier Milei endorsed by defeated rival who once sued him for defamation](#)".