



Argentina in the face of the paleo-libertarian abyss: How will we get out of here? A reflection in the light of the Marxist theory of dependency.

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Abstract: After two decades of effort, the neo-developmental strategy in Argentina has collapsed after a prolonged transitional crisis. The new government of the paleo-libertarian Javier Milei proposes to overcome the capitalist crisis through a process of destruction of the state (from within), multiplying extractivist plunder, and expanding the penetration of imperialist capital in Argentine territory. From the people's camp, the tension between neo-development and libertarian political economy can only be overcome based on a praxis that recovers a critical reading of structural dependence. The Marxist Theory of Dependency (TMD) tradition - of Ruy Mauro Marini and Vania Bambirra, among others - can provide key elements for understanding how to promote radical social change in dependent contexts such as Argentina. In this sense, the renewed interest in TMD on a global scale and its articulation with contemporary debates around the ecological crisis, feminism, the theory of value, and the critique of the capitalist state is key. Our work will seek to provide a reading of the Argentine crisis and the options for its dialectical overcoming on a path of social change. We will explain how we got here, what triggered the crisis and its political forms (i.e., Milei), and the role of social struggles. In doing so, we will engage in a critical review of the TMD tradition.

Introduction

The victory of the self-styled anarcho-capitalist Javier Gerardo Milei (and his political coalition La Libertad Avanza -LLA-) in the presidential elections at the end of 2023 in Argentina was a surprise and a wake-up call for everyone in Argentina. The fact that in the context of a brutal and prolonged crisis, the people's choice of a way out was 'to the (extreme) right' should call us to collective and profound reflection.

This stage opens up several questions that we will seek to address. On the one hand, what are the prospects for a way out of a crisis that is already emerging as potentially destabilising from a political and social point of view. On the other hand, what are the nuances that mean that amplified patterns of inequality and fragmentation do not seem to lead to a mass explosion. Finally, what seem to be the axes of the new pattern of accumulation that emerges as the hegemonic consensus from now on, and what are the possibilities for its consolidation in the light of the continuity of structural macroeconomic imbalances and political challenges.

The prequel

The transitional crisis

After a sustained recovery of the economy between 2002 and 2011 (with the intermittent period of 2008-2009), macroeconomic imbalances worsened and the economy entered a process of instability and lasting stagnation. The expansion following the neoliberal crisis (1998-2002) was sustained by the recovery of international prices of export commodities (especially agro-



industrial products) and the fiscal surplus (supported by the partial cessation of payments on the external public debt and the depression of public sector wages). At the same time, a neo-developmental capital accumulation strategy was consolidated, aimed at promoting peripheral re-industrialisation through state action to promote investment in infrastructure, and the containment and channelling of socio-labour conflict through new and old institutional forms.

When it seemed relatively solid, the neo-developmental strategy began to unravel and entered a crisis that accelerated after the global crash of 2008. The Argentine economy quickly went from the consolidation of a neo-developmental project to what appeared to be its transitional crisis (Félic, 2016). Although since the global crisis all countries in the region have faced a fall in their growth rates, in Argentina's case the deterioration was brutal: the gross product per capita fell by 11.1% between 2011 and 2023, the economy was in recession for seven years in that period, and inflation accelerated to almost 300% per year in 2023. After a 'won decade' (which lasted less than ten years), a new 'lost decade' was beginning (Félic, 2013). The improvements of the initial years (circa 2002-2010) were rapidly lost.

The growing macroeconomic imbalances in the period after 2011 were notorious. On the one hand, the public accounts deficit increased steadily. Given the impossibility of financing it through debt, the fiscal deficit was increasingly sustained through monetary financing by the Central Bank. Despite some bold actions (such as the nationalisation of the pension system in 2008), the fiscal surplus that existed in 2003 was diluted in the absence of international credit and the political inability to broaden the tax base on the sources of income, revenue and assets of the upper fraction of the social structure. Simultaneously, the failure of energy policy led to a crisis that led to a sustained increase in fuel imports, which contributed to a deterioration of the balance of payments towards a critical situation (García Zanotti, 2020). In fact, accelerating inflation and exchange rate appreciation (cheap dollar) led to a growing loss of competitiveness of capital, deterioration in its profitability and crisis in the external sector.

The political shift to the far right was built on this crisis, which deepened over time. The succession of governments with different political orientations, but which assumed a neo-developmental hegemony that was ultimately fragile, showed the inability to dismantle the imbalances and contradictions of a peripheral and dependent capitalist economy. After the government of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), the presidencies of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2011, and 2011-2015), Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) and Alberto Fernández (2019-2023) only increased the sense that the crisis was more than just economic.

The structural crisis of developmentalism as a backdrop

Our interpretation of the current crisis of Argentine capitalism requires an understanding that it is built on a combination of more far-reaching processes. On the one hand, Argentina was, together with Brazil, one of the few countries in South America that managed to constitute a peripheral industrialisation process in a dependent country in the course of the twentieth century. While Brazil managed to become a global potential with sub-imperialist overtones in the South American region (Marini, 1972), Argentina was configured as a junior partner, with an important industrial base, a developed scientific and technological system, and an



extractivist export base based on agro-industry and - to a more limited extent - the hydrocarbon sector.

Particularly in Argentina, this process managed to include an important fraction of the working class, which became the political heart of these development strategies. The organised labour movement managed to deploy its strength within the process of capital valorisation. Indeed, within capital there is always the working class as the subject producer of social wealth (Negri, 2002), always in the process of being ‘subjected’ by capital as abstract, alienated labour (Bonefeld, 2011; Féliz, 2023a) but always disputing that control (Cleaver, 2005). In the case of Argentina, this strength was institutionalised and expressed in political forms that allowed it to gain significant portions of social wealth.

Even through neoliberalism, which in Argentina we can clearly locate from 1975 until the end of 2001, the organised labour movement persisted as a strong social force (Féliz and Pérez, 2004). Even through the structural transformations of that period, the working class maintained its structural power, with a base of instituted rights and legal norms that shape considerable social power. In particular, this is manifested in the persistence of a series of labour and trade union rights that were maintained, albeit weakened, for an important subset of the working class: the fraction of formal wage earners in the private sector and the state. This core of the workforce was at the base of the processes of material wealth production, albeit increasingly accompanied by a mass of workers in more precarious conditions. While the core of the labour movement persisted as a social and political force, a dual labour market was consolidated, sustained by a growing inequality between a fraction with formal salaried employment and a sector of informal salaried workers and an increasing mass of self-employed workers.

In this context, from the end of the 2000s onwards, capitalism in Argentina faced the irruption of China as a world market power (WTO, 2001). Since it entered into the WTO, China has embarked on a process of global expansion with radical impacts on the industrialised economies and, in particular, on dependent economies with intermediate industrialisation such as Argentina. Chinese industrial capital is becoming a competitor that is progressively wiping out the possibilities of valorisation of local capital under previous conditions. This is the basis of the de-industrialisation that has pervaded the economies of the world in recent decades and, in particular, the semi-industrial but dependent economy of Argentina.

During the first neo-developmental stage, the high dollar at the end of the 2001 crisis, low wages and state redistribution of agricultural income allowed the impending crisis to be averted (Féliz, 2014). However, after 2008, the development of imbalances definitively opened up the pressure on local capital. As we have pointed out, the Argentine economy entered a process of unparalleled decline.

The immanent tendency of capital is to increase the exploitation of labour. In the context of the current crisis in Argentina, the strategy of the sectors of capital is mutating into a war of attrition that aims to reduce the capacity of resistance of the popular sectors and working classes, destroying their historical conquests and increasing the super-exploitation of labour.

By 2010, all the major firms began what Kalecki called an investment strike, but on a scale and depth never seen before. Investment in fixed constant capital stagnates and with it, the fall in



the rate of profit accelerates. The dominant fractions of big capital operating in Argentina are faced with the dilemma of dislocating the structural crisis or facing the threat of a massive devaluation of local capital, especially manufacturing capital. The internal tension between rentier capital (fundamentally agro-export capital) and manufacturing capital is growing, while the general pressure to improve the competitiveness of capital increases, definitively dismantling the historical conquests of the workers' movement.

In the transitional crisis stage, neo-developmentalism as a political project with hegemonic pretensions begins a path of productivist radicalisation (Félic, 2016). A general perception begins to emerge in the dominant sectors that the way out of the crisis is through labour deregulation (weakening the labour movement) and the reduction of the tax burden (weakening the social state). The strategy aims to accelerate the development of labour productivity, reducing unit costs and improving the social competitiveness of the economy. At the same time, in this transitional stage, the different governments promoted forms of green neo-development, encouraging the expansion of the extractivist base of capital accumulation in the mining (in particular, lithium and copper) and hydrocarbon sectors (Félic, 2024a).

The failure of this strategy is resounding: in more than ten years, capital accumulation has stagnated, productive and financial instability has multiplied, and inflation has accelerated. Growing inflation expresses how structural tensions are channelled as the different social fractions dispute, always precariously, the appropriation of social wealth. These tensions manifest themselves in the fiscal crisis of the state and a general devaluation of domestic capital.

Crisis and transformation of the working class

Throughout the crisis, we observed a process of accelerated precariousness and transformation of the labour market and the socio-labour structure in Argentina. In this period, formal private employment hardly grew at all after 2010, while employment in the public and precarious salaried sectors increased, but, above all, non-wage employment multiplied. In parallel, popular incomes plummeted along with the fall in average labour productivity. Paradoxically, and unlike the neoliberal transformations of the 1990s that led to a jump in the unemployment rate, in this new stage unemployment has not increased significantly. Everyone is working, especially young people, who are increasingly working in new forms of precariousness, often linked to the use of new technologies (i.e., gig economy).

This change in the labour market's response to the crisis leads us to consider the transformation of the popular subject at the centre of capital's development. In Argentina, as we have pointed out, historically it has been the organised labour movement - sustained in formal wage employment in the manufacturing industry and with a masculinised, heterosexual, 'white' and adult composition - that has positioned itself as an agent promoting social change. Social conflict and the responses of the state and capital have had this labour force at their dynamic core. Controlling this social force and channelling it productively for capital (i.e. for its valorisation) has been the problem of the political management of society, the heart of biopolitics. In the neo-developmental era, this exercise of control was organised around a scheme of labour policies and institutions that attempted to contain demands for wages and



working conditions within the framework of collective bargaining between unions and employers, with state mediation.

Labour policies - in and through the unions - served to displace the destabilising powers of the working class. Not any more. In the new configuration, social policies operated as political strategies to try to order the demands of the precariat operating outside the institutions of the integral or extended state described by Gramsci (Thwaites Rey, 1994). Since the neoliberal crisis, the new neo-developmental state constituted a new pattern of social policies that sought to order and integrate the main forces organised outside the traditionally unionised proletariat. The social and political figure of the ‘*piquetero*’ (activist and member of new social movements) represented this quite well. This politically organised sector at some point came to refer to its labour activities as part of a ‘popular economy’ (Stratta and Mazzeo, 2024). The political organisation of a fraction of these workers contributed to the demand and institutionalisation of partial responses from the state (Dinerstein et al., 2010). The multiplication and generalisation of conditional income transfer policies sought to respond to the demands of new generations of precarious workers, with intermittent jobs (*changas*, gigs) or unpaid work in reproductive and care activities in households and communities.

However, for more than a decade now, the crisis of Argentine capitalism seems to have opened the way to an acceleration in the transformation of the new morphology of the working class. The precariat appears as a social subject, and at the centre of this new collective working subject is the precarious and fragmented, feminised, racialised and rejuvenated worker, and at the same time flexible, underpaid or not paid at all. But even more: this new precarious generation began to discover itself invisible and abandoned by a state that appeared impotent in the face of the multiplication of its deprivations. Unlike the *piquetero* generation (born from the entrails of neoliberalism and the social struggles against it), the core of this new precarious workforce is not politicised in an active demand to the state but in its rejection.

Towards a new popular subjectivity: the paleolibertarian subject?

Within this new morphology of the working class, a new ideology of work was constructed. Historically, work was perceived as something that society provided, through companies and state policies. Unemployment was presented as a macroeconomic problem, which the state had to address from that place. However, the idea that in the absence of employment and the inability of the state to generate the conditions to ‘create’ it, the main alternative for survival was to become an entrepreneur (Nunes, 2024a, 2024b) began to be increasingly consolidated. As early as the late 1990s, the idea began to emerge that with state support, workers in small productive enterprises could become their own bosses and build a destiny for themselves and their families. Numerous state programmes of ‘social inclusion’ had entrepreneurial content, even if they were presented as forms of ‘self-management’ promoted and encouraged by the state. As the crisis deepened, the entrepreneurial spirit began to permeate popular subjectivity.

The figure of the entrepreneur and the collaborator advances into the heart of the precarious labour force. This displacement operates the substitution of the boss as the personification of capitalist exploitation by the market as a real but naturalised abstraction. The market appears as a *dit* divine presence, beyond collective social control, let us say as a natural force (or ‘forces of heaven / *fuerzas del cielo*’, to which President Milei constantly refers). Exploitation is



presented as a veiled fact, and the only thing that everyone faces is their own effort, skill and, above all, cunning, to excel and succeed. This ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2020; Berlant and Golubov, 2012; Haber, 2020) places the merits of individual success and, above all, the costs of failure on everyone. The connection with religious rhetoric, especially that propagated by evangelical churches in Latin America, is clear: any stumble will be a test on the path of the chosen ones, who will be no more and no less than the few who can eventually succeed. Milei’s election in 2023 was built on these transformations.

Consolidation of a conservative political formation

The paleolibertarian discourse of the then anarcho-capitalist candidate Milei strikes at the heart of neo-developmentalism. If the precariat assumes the form of entrepreneur or collaborator of capital, it does so by rejecting the state as a means of solving the problems that capitalism produces. The state (no longer capitalism) appears as the cause of such problems, or at least as a hindrance to popular meritocracy operating without restrictions.

We might assume that this is a recent political phenomenon or born in a vacuum, but we know that this is not the case. In reality, the foundations of mass support for the destruction of the social state have been ‘with us’ for some time (Iuliano, 2024; Semán and Welschinger, 2023; Vázquez, 2023). Since the beginning of the transitional crisis, there has been a more conscious appreciation of the ‘values of freedom’, which is expressed in the consolidation of a new centre-right space in the electoral arena. The victory of businessman Mauricio Macri in 2003 as Head of Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), the consolidation of his political force (PRO) and then his election as President of the Nation (between 2015 and 2019) confirmed this path. Even after the deepening of the crisis between 2017 and 2019, President Macri obtained almost 41% of the votes in his failed re-election attempt. At some point we speculated that this space (the liberal right-wing coalition Cambiemos, which included Macri’s PRO) could indeed channel the political representation of the precariat (Félicz, 2019) but in fact it did not happen that way.

In Milei’s case, the combination of an anti-statist and pro-individual initiative discourse (i.e., based on the field of meanings constructed by entrepreneurialism) opened the way to forming the hard core of a new ultra-right political space. This new space put in crisis the foundations of the agreements built in Argentina after the last civil-military-ecclesiastical dictatorship (1976-1983). With a violent discourse of hatred towards democracy and the social state (embodied in what LLA calls the ‘political caste’), Milei was able to attract a significant fraction of the precariat and the traditional conservative forces. Among the former, the hard core seems to be among youth and male sectors, particularly affected by the precariousness of employment and harshly challenged by the rise of the feminist movement (whose institutionalisation advanced significantly between 2019 and 2023 with the creation of the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity at the national level). The traditionally conservative sector is mainly inhabited by a majority of older adults and the ‘lower upper middle class’ (Nunes, 2024b), whose relatively well-off position is constantly haunted by the spectre of negative social mobility. The latter see the organised labour movement and the beneficiaries of social policies (in particular the *piquetero* sectors) as a symbol of the privileges granted by the state to certain fractions of society.



As we have indicated, the long-standing economic crisis operates as a war of attrition against the popular classes (Féliz, 2024b) that progressively calls into question democracy as a system of political representation and the state as a way of promoting ‘social justice’ (Borovinsky et al., 2024). The ‘included’ sectors that continue to enjoy some protection from state policies (collective bargaining and labour legislation, income transfer programs, or even forms of positive discrimination for women, LGBT+ groups, or others) are presented by the LLA and its supporters as defenders of privileges, no longer of rights that should be extended. In this context, organised popular sectors face a progressive deterioration in their capacity to sustain their resistance to the permanent siege they suffer.

The Paleolibertarian Plot

The political programme

As noted, Milei won thanks to a rhetoric focused on the destruction of the state and the liberalisation of the economy, as well as opposing the rights of minorities and the marginalised. Having assumed the presidency on 10 December 2023, during his first year in office, he exceeded his promises. However, his government, and in particular his strategy to pull Argentina out of its protracted economic crisis, has also suffered major setbacks. Nonetheless, his government continues to have great momentum, as popular support remains quite high despite the harsh impact of his policies: on average, during the first year in office, Javier Milei's government has had a much higher value for the confidence index (ICG) than the three previous governments in their first stage (Escuela de Gobierno :: Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, 2001).

Predictably, once in power, the newly formed LLA coalition had some setbacks in Congress during its first months. Underestimating the complexities of state management and parliamentary politics, the government took almost six months to pass its ‘Law of Bases and Points of Departure for the Freedom of Argentines’ (*Ley Bases*) bill, after an initial setback in February 2024. Finally, amid scandalous negotiations (including allegations of bribe payments to Deputies and Senators) in June of the same year, a scaled-down version of the bill was finally passed. The new law allows the government, for 12 months, to radically transform the structure of the state, promote large investments with tax breaks and regulatory privileges (based on the Regime of Incentives for Large Investments, RIGI), privatise several state-owned companies and advance in the substantial flexibilisation of the labour market.

Meanwhile, President Milei pushed through a new macroeconomic policy aimed at short-circuiting the economic crisis, reducing inflation and stimulating economic growth. The new policies began with a huge devaluation of the national currency just three days after Milei took office: the peso was devalued by more than 50 per cent against the US dollar (whose value increased by 120 per cent). This was followed by the liberalisation and consequent increase in regulated prices in the economy (in particular, privatised public services, private medicine and education, among others). This price increase went hand in hand with reduced subsidies for water and sewage, electricity, gas and public transport. These subsidies had become an indirect benefit for millions of people (especially in the Greater Buenos Aires area, including the country's capital) while becoming a very significant source of public spending (Bona, 2012).



On the other hand, the government established policies of national fiscal surplus and zero currency issuance by the Central Bank. While inflation soared after the devaluation, the government implemented austerity policies that entailed freezing or reducing public spending such as pensions, civil servants' salaries, public universities, and even a drop in compulsory transfers of funds to provincial states and investments in public infrastructure. Direct spending cuts were referred to by the government as the 'chainsaw' policy, while freezing them or increasing them below inflation was referred to as the 'blender' policy. The federal government's public spending was reduced by around 25 per cent in real terms during 2024, while inflation continued to rise to an all-time high of 289.4 per cent per year in April 2024. From there, inflation began to plummet to reach levels hovering around 2 per cent per month in December 2024.

In addition to the freezing of spending (blender effect), the government advanced in the effective closure of ministries, institutions and entire programs (chainsaw effect), such as the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity (created at the end of 2019), the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI) or the National Commission for the Right to Identity (CONADI), created to help in the search for children illegally appropriated during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Some of these cuts were part of the new far-right government's 'cultural battle' (in Milei's terms) against the cultural left, 'communists' and advocates of 'social justice', which the president considers an aberration. Arguably, this is the main point of contact with the global far-right movement: the claim to be fighting a battle against progressivism, 'woke hegemony' and communism, which are presented as the same and overlapping in Milei's discourse.

Although the political system is still awakening from the shock of Milei's triumph (an outsider, with no political experience or mobilisation apparatus), there have been mobilisations and resistance since the beginning of the new administration, albeit with worrying difficulties. The government won with significant support in the second round of elections and, in the first months, mobilising against it was seen by a majority of the population as a meaningless response. Various polls have shown that a considerable number of people were (and still are) willing to give the government some room for manoeuvre and time. Austerity measures are perceived as the necessary evil to overcome the accumulation of instability and failure of recent years. Although in those first months the sources of income of ordinary people deteriorated violently, many still hope that the situation will improve soon, and hope outweighs the current hardship. In the sense noted above, Milei's government promotes a messianic and sacrificial political philosophy, where the president comes to lead his people through the wilderness to one day reach the promised land.

The sectors mobilised against austerity are harshly confronted by police action, which operates with a wide margin of manoeuvre to 'liberate the streets'. The fear of imprisonment, injury or even job loss undermines the possibilities for contested collective action. This is especially true of many of the *piquetero* social movements, which the Milei government has turned into an example of the kind of social action that will not be tolerated. Not only have these movements been particularly affected by repressive actions, but they are also being legally persecuted. Many organisations and their leaders have been accused of embezzlement and mismanagement of public resources granted to them to run soup kitchens and other initiatives in slums. Although these accusations often turn out to be false, in the meantime they function as a mechanism to



stigmatise the activities of these movements, which are usually racialised, led and composed mostly by women. The combination of racial and gender stigma is at the heart of the current political climate.

Structural and macroeconomic contradictions

As we have pointed out, the structural basis of the Argentine crisis lies in the contradiction between the historical configuration of the process of peripheral industrialisation and the novelties of the current stage of global capitalism. It is in this framework that the macroeconomic contradictions and imbalances that Milei's government must somehow resolve if it is to fulfil its medium and long-term political objectives are to be achieved.

As noted, the devaluation of the national currency at the beginning of the government's programme was followed by a macroeconomic programme of fiscal surplus and therefore zero monetary financing to the national state. This was accompanied by negative interest rates (below the inflation rate), the continuity of a strong exchange control regime (installed in 2014, abandoned between 2016 and 2018, and re-imposed in 2019) and a scheme of programmed and progressive devaluation of the official exchange rate.

This strategy led to an initial depression of economic activity and the appreciation of the real exchange rate (cheap dollar). On the one hand, the fall in economic activity was concentrated in all activities aimed at the domestic market (in particular, industry, construction and trade), only partially offset by the recovery of the agro-export sector (which is recovering from a deep drought in 2022-2023), the mining sector and the hydrocarbon sector. On the other hand, the lower dollar leads to a rise in the cost of all local production in international currency terms, sharply reducing the competitiveness of all sectors of the economy. In particular, there is a sharp increase in wages measured in dollars, in line with a significant fall in their purchasing power in local currency. The overall result is a process of sustained deterioration in the balance of payments. Together with the accumulation of external debt payments (public and private) in subsequent years, this dynamic is the thorn in the side of short-term economic policy. With no international financing still available and few foreign direct investment projects materialising despite the benefits available under the RIGI, the economic program is immediately dependent on securing a new IMF arrangement.

In this regard, the most pressing challenge is how to grow the economy while repaying the public external debt to both the international financial sector and lending agencies (in particular the Fund). The government is currently negotiating with the IMF for further financial support to remove controls on capital movements and encourage a rapid flow of incoming financial capital to help refinance the debt. However, the Milei administration is still not yielding to the IMF's call for a further devaluation of the currency which, because of its effects on domestic prices, would jeopardise its main merit so far: the lowering of the inflation rate. This is the economic dilemma facing the government: without IMF support, it is difficult to see how it will be able to pay next year's debt maturities and it will probably be forced to devalue, but to get that support, it will probably also have to devalue. The resolution of this is at the top of the agenda.



In the medium term, Milei's government seeks to deepen the development of green capitalism, without its developmentalist imprint. In this sense, through the RIGI and other incentives, it hopes to multiply investments in strategic areas for the development of lithium, copper and shale oil and gas exploitation and exports. Many of these projects were initiated some time ago, especially the extraction of shale oil and gas in the Vaca Muerta shale formation after the re-establishment of YPF in 2012. Now the anarcho-capitalist government intends to create conditions so that with minimal planning or state intervention, big international private capital can turn Argentina's territory into a space for plunder, in a new circle of dependency.

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