

# The taming of prices

## Framing and fighting inflation in the second half of the twentieth century in Argentina

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### Introduction

Historians agree that bringing inflation under control became a crucial challenge for western governments in the 1970s and opened a space for experimentation to neoliberal policy. But inflation did not appear out of the blue with the oil crises. Widespread price rises were a current and persistent phenomenon since the postwar years. The difference was that interventionist states had managed to keep it contained and considered inflation to be a minor problem compared to growth, employment, and distribution. In contrast, from the 1970s price increases climbed and the battle against inflation became one of the main public and political concerns.

Studies on inflation have been more or less monopolized by economists. As their primary purpose was to treat and eradicate inflation on the basis of a quantitative method and a general theory of action, little was done to understand how individuals, families, enterprises, retailers, and associations experienced, understood, and acted upon it. Although scarce, the contribution of other social sciences can be divided into four groups. Political scientists researched the impact of inflation on governments' legitimacy and stability, usually from a comparative perspective (Paldam 1987; Smith, Dua, and Taylor 1994). They also revealed how inflation became a weighting factor for the adoption of market

reforms (Biglaiser and DeRouen 2004). Cultural and media studies analysed the place of experts, media coverage and event framing (Mata and Lemerrier 2010; Harrington 1989). For macro-sociologists, inflation was associated with distributive conflicts, stressing its social and political causes (Baumgartner and Burns 1980). In addition, they studied the relevance attributed to inflation by different social groups (Hibbs 1979; Mora and Araujo 1988; Araujo 1993). Finally, historians, ethnographers, and qualitative sociologists considered the experience of drastic price increase in daily life (for inflation from 1945–1955, see Elena 2012; for hyperinflation in the 1980s, Neiburg 2006; Sigal and Kessler 1996–1997).

As pieces of a complex puzzle, these contributions indicate the multifaceted nature of inflation but they still respect a clear distinction between economy, politics, and society. By setting these disciplinary boundaries aside, a long-term socio-history of inflation could reveal how societies experienced, framed, and fought price disorder in the second half of the twentieth century.

From an economist's perspective, inflation is considered a problem because it disrupts currency value and pricing schemes. Both mediate in establishing equivalence among goods and services, indicate costs and rewards, enable decentralized calculation, and therefore permit the coordination of economic transactions and the planning of mid-term investments. In short, prices are crucial sources of information for market economies. Nevertheless, as Polanyi (1957 [1944]) has stressed, the economy, as a self-regulating domain, is a historical invention. As Callon

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(1998) has pointed out, its existence requires a series of operations of disentanglement of goods and services in which economic science plays an active role. While this process has been observed in several specific markets, inflation offers a prime field to study a macro-social process of distinction and separation that marked the passage between welfare to neoliberal states.

Our argument is that, if we suspend disciplinary distinctions, inflation reveals two contrasting modes of

representing the economy. At least in Argentina, the growing concern about inflation is related to the consolidation of price indexes and the rise of economists as primary actors in public and political life.<sup>1</sup> Numbers and experts did not just add new terminology and interpreters to inflation analyses, they completely changed the way societies and authorities act to tame price rises.

Transcending the debate about the political and economic significance of this phenomenon, Michel Foucault helps us to understand inflation as a problem of government (McCormack 2015). The French philosopher showed how public and physical punishment was gradually replaced by more sophisticated, private and disembodied strategies of control and management. In his lectures of 1978–1979 at the *College de France*, Foucault affirms that, in neoliberal regimes, to govern will increasingly mean to conduct individual behaviours “under the way and model of the economy” (Foucault 2008 and [1978–1979] 2012, 121). Instead of making use of physical violence, surveillance and moral judgments, governments stimulate “economic agents” to freely calculate their costs and benefits in order to align social conduct with socio-political objectives (Miller and Rose 2008). Some critics have pointed out (Harvey 2005) that repressive forces have not been abandoned to the same degree in all social domains. What interests us here is how the economy emerged as a sphere within which individual selfish actions were not only permitted but also encouraged to be coordinated “at a distance” (Latour, 1987). While economists contributed to “make [their] world” (Mitchell 2005), numbers provided an “objectivation of equivalences”, enabling calculations for “multiple decision centres” (Desrosières 2008, 12).

Argentina is a country unmatched globally in terms of its history of inflation. Even for a continent that has suffered high and persistent levels of price increase, Argentina constitutes an extreme example of an inflationist society: no other country has presented such high levels of inflation and for so long (Schvarzer 1998). Since the 1940s, Argentinian inflation has been consistently above the international average (by 28% a year from 1940–1970), reaching 400% in 1976 and 3000% in 1989, with no recorded levels under 90% until the last decade of the twentieth century. Even today, Argentina is fifth in the global ranking of inflationist countries IMF 2019).

Mass media provides an ideal platform to observe social practices and their publicization. According to McCormack (2015, 135), mass-media intermediations “are particularly important with respects to efforts to govern prices.” The public dissemination of information is fundamental to channel moral condemnation and disciplinary sanctions, as well as to spread public numbers and coordinate social practices

at distance. Based on a systematic archival analysis of the two major national newspapers – *La Nación* (LN) and *Clarín* (CL) – during four decades (1950–1990)<sup>2</sup>, this article presents the preliminary results of a long-term history of inflation. We focus on how it was experienced, framed, and fought in the second half of the twentieth century in Argentina. The paper is organized in two sections that reveal contrasting modes in the attempts to tame prices and disentangle the economy. Each section focuses on three main aspects: the way inflation was experienced and presented in the public sphere, the actors that participated in complaints and interpretations about it, and the political strategies followed to stabilize prices.

## Collective actions and coercive strategies against a confusing problem

### A vague experience embedded in other socio-political concerns

Leafing through the pages of Argentinian newspapers, it is clear that inflation was neither the most important public concern nor a discernible problem for contemporaries in the post-war years. Of course, the sudden rise of prices in 1959 (reaching the unprecedented level of 114% a year) was portrayed in the media as a source of worry and uncertainty. Nevertheless, it was difficult to separate this anxiety from others that were closely linked to socio-political issues.

On the one hand, social conflict was expected because, for most observers, the increase in prices hit the working classes especially hard. In a generalized disruption to relative price stability, there was no doubt about the focus of public attention: foodstuffs, medicines and public services. The prices of bread, milk, sugar, meat, transportation, and electricity were among those most frequently mentioned by the press. For both newspapers, inflation had to be addressed to protect people’s wellbeing:

“The spiral of high inflation, far from stopping is getting worse. (...) So flour, tea, vegetables, powder milk, soda and others like meat and coffee became unaffordable. The high cost of living has become extremely alarming” (CL, 01/27/1959: 9)<sup>3</sup>.

“Lower classes representing the majority of our social structure only know everyday life, manifested in their salaries and incomes that are insufficient. Even civil servants, retired people feel the same. People have already dramatically tightened their belts” (CL, 05/09/1962: 8).

On the other hand, the crucial question was that inflation complicated governability: rising prices made it harder to calm down the lower classes' belligerence in a very instable political regime. After the overthrow of Peronist government (1945–1955) by a military coup, the mobilizing capacity of unionized workers and popular associations allied to this movement became a threat to national authorities. For civilian governments elected under the proscription of Peronists, inflation encouraged military interventions. While easier for military officials, social repression was not without its costs.

In this tense social climate, inflation was far from being a defined phenomenon. Several names were used to refer to this vague and disturbing experience: “*carestía de la vida*”, “*alza del nivel de precios*”, “*círculo vicioso del encarecimiento recíproco*”, “*erosión del poder adquisitivo*” o “*aumento del costo de la vida*”. Newspaper sections were not yet as clearly defined as they are today, but inflation could appear anywhere: on the front page and next to economic information, as well as in the union, trade, politics, sports and culture sections!

Lacking a name, there was not a widely recognized index to give an accurate representation of the extent of inflation. Cost of living indexes had existed in Argentina since 1918 (Fernández López 1994) and different public agencies monitored price evolution, however none of them had been able to impose their measurements in the public sphere (Daniel 2013). Some indexes were used by trade unions to claim wage updates during the 1930s and 1940s (Daniel 2011). It was not until 1962 that most popular newspapers, like *Clarín* and *La Nación*, started to publish them regularly. Such numbers only became significant in the press in the 1970s. Before, when mentioned, they were frequently criticized and distrusted (cf. *LN*, 12/26/1965: 22).

As official numbers were surrounded by suspicion, participants in public debates about inflation did not need to draw on any quantitative support to claim to have an authoritative voice on the subject. Statistical language was complementary and could appear in actors' speeches without reference to the source or with no comment about the reliability of the numbers invoked.

### Damaged interests, social protests, and opposing interpretations

As the experience of inflation remained a confusing socio-political problem, with periods of rampant price increase and others where inflation stayed within moderate limits, a variety of social groups complained about it. Representatives of trade unions

and employers' associations had a leading role in advocating for an adjustment of salaries or for the authorization of new prices. Housewives, taxi drivers, consumers of public services, local governments, and meat exporters all appeared mixed up on the streets or in newspaper articles and “open letters” explaining how their activities were hampered or even threatened by inflation.

Social protests were as diverse as these claimants. Those led by the unions and expressed in strikes are the most studied. While the *Confederación General del Trabajo* was important in coordinating workers' demands in the national scene during critical circumstances, smaller trade unions led most of the local complaints registered daily in the press. There are many examples of the vivid and creative organization of local communities, from neighbours' revolts to organized movements. In La Plata city, neighbours rejected a rise in prices by posting the phrase “closed because of speculation” on every electricity meter (*LN*, 03/22/1959: 3). In Corrientes, the *Comisión Pro Defensa del Contribuyente* invited shopkeepers to turn off the lights in their showcases and a brigade of volunteer electricians was organized to reconnect electricity in case of a cut (*CL*, 03/16/1959: 19).

Besides social protests, consumers developed three other forms of collective action: they grouped together to obtain better prices, boycotted retailers and products, and organized new distribution channels to avoid middlemen. In 1962, for example, the Housewives League called on “every housewife to express its solidarity with the campaign and to not buy potatoes until they experience a ‘fair reduction’” (*LN*, 10/7/1962: 8). Some of these initiatives were conducted in collaboration with public officials. The city of Buenos Aires, like many others, provided “sugar directly to street kiosks in order to offer lower prices than shops” (*LN*, 02/1/1959: 4). Businessmen, producers and merchants, frequently pointed to as responsible for price increases, were not passive observers of the disruption. Collective demonstrations and lock-outs became their own strategies to protest against maximum price restrictions.

How was the price disorder understood and what were the recommended treatments? There was not a dominant interpretation of rising prices during the post-war years. After a period of generalized perplexity, in the 1960s two different interpretations began to consolidate in parallel with the circulation of economic theories and the organization of public conferences with prestigious scholars and intellectuals. *La Nación* and *Clarín* became the expressions of a deep and wide ideological divide in Argentinian society.<sup>4</sup>

For liberals such as *La Nación*, inflation was much more important than for “desarrollistas” like

*Clarín*. In the former publication, the volume of articles dedicated to the subject was higher and the number of editorials double that of its competitor. From a liberal perspective, the state should be blamed for monetary disorder and its main responsibility was to restore the value of the national currency. From very early on, the editorial line was against price control (LN, 01/13/1962: 6) and any state intervention in markets and individual enterprise. Particularly worried about inflation, *La Nación* stressed its consequences for investments and private companies and, according to an editorial (01/24/1959: 4), the solution was “to withdraw politics from the economy ... money will have value once it can be supported in everybody’s productive labor. The rest is just an alchemy of paper and ink, an alchemy as fictitious as medieval magicians”. Public expenditure was pointed to as the main cause of inflation and public austerity was demanded daily.

On the contrary, for *Clarín*, the rise of prices was related to the underdevelopment of the country and should be solved, in the long term, by a national take-off, associated with industrialization and economic autarchy. *Clarín* underlined the consequences of inflation for people’s wellbeing and asked for patience while persisting in the efforts for development. In a 1966 editorial, the journal expressed the opinion that “... printing money is not always something bad. When it gives companies the required conditions to produce, it can certainly be good.” (CL, 02/23/1966: 8)

High-ranking public officials were everyday characters in the press, while there was little space for experts. Newspapers articles quoted the explanations of the former very respectfully, reserving the editorial section only for their interpretations. But, when economists did appear, far from showing a unique and original interpretation, they simply reproduced the opposing perspectives previously presented.

### Moral judgments and physical violence as a stabilizing strategy

Faced with the instability of prices and the belligerence of social groups, authorities switched between two main strategies. Interventionist governments called “price commissions” and studied prices and productive chains in order to fix the “real” value of goods and services. Liberal ministries preferred to set prices free and re-establish the laws of supply and demand.

The two orientations faced critics, opposing both the “fair” and “unfair” determination of prices. People expected “socially fair behavior” from their providers and accused them of making arbitrary decisions. Producers and merchants denounced the “lack

of reality” of state standards. Intense debates about “maximum prices” or “liberalized prices” illustrate the hybrid nature of inflation. As price disorder concerned private providers and public authorities at the same time, responsibility was hard to define.

This troublesome phenomenon not only confronted citizens. The authorities also accused speculators and invoked the possibility of severe punishment. The idea that rising prices were caused by or at least propagated by opportunists lay behind this public prosecution and social belligerence. The allegations against speculative selling maneuvers – through prices, hiding of goods and merchandise stockpiling – were frequent in 1959 and 1962. Public repression of “speculators and loan sharks” was demanded, while denouncing an “abusive regime created by those who take advantage of people starvation.” (CL, 02/25/1959: 15) Those who adopted these kind of practices were considered unscrupulous salesmen or “dishonest and antisocial” businessmen (CL, 07/16/1959: 10) and strong disapproval was expressed of those “playing with inflation.” (LN, 05/16/1962: 1) References to common good were also evoked, particularly when competition over distribution seemed to slip into selfish sector disputes.

As speculative practices and speculators received clear and strong public denunciation, severe intervention and even the recourse to physical violence was permitted. On the one hand, there was a state of intense social revolt: consumers protested against merchants, families refused to pay certain bills, unions asked their bases to stay “alert and mobilized,” authorities from different municipalities declared the suspension of payments to resist the adjustments. On the other hand, many volunteer inspectors offered to monitor the price of selected goods. Producers and merchants were horrified by this civil control of their activities and denounced the arbitrariness of the inspections. Merchants claimed that repressive state acts against inflation should not include small shops. From their point of view, controls should focus on “big fishes”: wholesalers and distribution companies. *The Federación de Centros de Almaceneros* (grouping of grocers), deplored that “we are sending grocers to Villa Devoto (a prison).” They assured the public that “an omnipotent State is violating the basic rights of honest citizens.” (CL, 07/13/1959: 19)

Physical intimidation was not the prerogative of any political regime: civil as well as military governments adopted different strategies to threaten speculators and control prices. Exceptional procedures were admitted in the context of the “State of Siege” declared by president Frondizi (1958–1962): in 1959, authorities could force sellers to offer their stocks at fixed prices. In other measures, under stabilizing strategies

based on direct or indirect control of prices, producers were required to communicate their prices in advance to the authorities and to obtain authorization for possible adjustments. Price controls became so frequent<sup>5</sup> that they led to a learning process of adaptive behaviors for businessmen, public officials, and consumers (FIEL 1990, 8). In 1972, newspapers published a list of companies that had not respected the fixed prices as a method of public calling to account (*CL*, 05/19/1972: 16 and *LN*, 05/19/1972: 1).

Despite the predominance of coercive strategies to fight inflation, there was still no agreement about their efficiency. The repressive interventions in coffee houses, shops, hotels, restaurants were disseminated by newspapers, even if suspicion about the measures persisted. The success of these actions was questioned (especially by liberal observers who insisted on the pursuance of fiscal deficit), thereby weakening public support for the authorities. As an alternative, liberals promoted “economic freedom” and “competition”.

## Experts and numbers to re-establish “economic” stability

### A long illness with measurable symptoms and individual antibodies

For many years, authorities managed to keep inflation rates relatively contained and the presentation of rising prices remained confusing, wide open to interpretations and complaint by laypeople. Things changed in 1975. The austerity plan of the Peronist Economic Minister Rodrigo provoked an unprecedented quantitative leap: the annual price increase climbed and stayed in three digits. As a result, stabilization objectives concentrated the attention and actions of public authorities, leaving other concerns such as development or distribution in the background. Inflation was considered a threat to the bases of the economic and social order and, once the military were back in government in 1976, its eradication became an absolute priority (Fridman 2010; Heredia 2015). Biological metaphors proliferated and newspaper editorials emphasized that inflation was long an Argentinian illness that had deeply affected the institutional body of the Republic (*LN*, 08/17/81: 6). Under the new authoritarian regime, social protests, labour conflict, and guerrilla actions were subject to censorship and lost the attention of journalists, being replaced by accounts of economic policies and the difficulty of curbing prices. After the democratic transition of 1983, inflation remained a top priority for authorities until 1991.

The most popular Argentinian price index (Consumer Price Index, CPI) had to wait until 1975 for its celebrity. Since then, *La Nación*, like *Clarín*, started to publish it every month, drawing attention to controversies around the index (*CL*, 04/16/78: 1) and informing readers about its construction criteria (*LN*, 01/24/82: 1). The relevance of numbers became unchallenged, beyond doubt, and journalists considered their usefulness in calculating other values, taking into account their accuracy. As indexes succeeded in being considered as the “thermometers” of inflation, they quickly began to nourish social expectancy. On the one hand, newspapers competed for the scoop by trying to anticipate the results before the official calculation was finished (*CL*, 06/26/1975: 10) or publicly estimating its probable value (*LN*, 2/1/1972: 13). On the other hand, public polls revealed and nourished growing social anxiety about the topic. Regardless of their ideological orientation, both newspapers celebrated the attention given to inflation, considering that rising prices were “the number one enemy” to be fought (*CL*, 04/21/85: 1).

But social anxiety was now related to a new repertory of actions, associated with lessons learned from inflation and the development of “antibodies” to inflation. Compared to the collective actions showed by newspapers in the late 1950s, what is astonishing – especially since the 1970s – is the growing importance of individual strategies to confront inflation. From the mid-1970s, moral and imperative judgments were progressively replaced by “neutral” descriptions and later on by the provision of information used by readers to protect themselves or take advantage of the price disorder.

Journals were given new tasks. Since 1978, *La Nación* had a section called “rent office” to teach owners and tenants how to agree their rental contracts and another one called “City beats” to provide daily financial information to their readers. Advertising also reinforced strategies that had already been adopted, but now appealed to atomized individuals and rational private actions rather than collective forces). The Chamber of Supermarkets and Consumers, for example, published price lists in newspapers. According to them, “Consumers can do more than complain about inflation. ... Every Thursday we will provide a weekly guide. You will be able to compare and buy at fair prices. With higher participation, inflation will be reduced.” (*CL*, 05/30/85: 14).

Collective strategies of defense were gradually replaced by a generalized search for “microeconomic salvation” (Juan Llach quoted in Botana and Waldman 1988, 96). The press portrayed individual behaviours that show that protection and speculation were no longer distinguished: butchers avoided popular meat

cuts because they provided no real gain (CL, 5/8/1972: 15), merchants adopted “preventive price rises” for popular goods that barely reached shop shelves (CL, 09/15/1972: 11); long queues were organized to buy food (CL, 7/6/1975: 20) or to anticipate rises in the price of petrol (LN, 6/1/1975: 14). In more technical terms, journalists described the preventive real-estate investments as an option for discouraged savers (CL, 11/8/1975: 30). As suggested by an editorial of *La Nación*, “with inflation everybody ends up speculating, each one within his or her possibilities.” (LN, 2/3/1972: 6)

Some skilled and ambitious Argentines had also learnt to play highly sophisticated and short-term financial games. Responding to government stimuli, savers placed their money at very high rates to obtain profits (LN, 3/6/82; LN, 1/14/85, CL, 1/19/85). Nevertheless, sooner or later, Argentines placed more reliance in the US Dollar than in the Argentinian currency and local banks. Newspapers showed repeatedly the “desperate search of the parallel dollar that values the double of the official price ... as well as the existence of a black market that enriches speculators.” (LN, 4/28/75: 4) “From the less important economic agent to the biggest businessman, we all consider that the free dollar is the lighthouse indicating advantages and risks.” (CL, 4/20/89: 3) The humorous sections of the newspapers illustrated many individual strategies to take advantage of inflation. In 1981 (LN, 7/9/1981: 12), a little man in a cartoon affirmed:

- “As I am Argentine, I will sign the contract in national currency.
- And what will you do with your salary?
- I will buy dollars.”

### The appearance of new actors and the authority of experts

Trade unions and social movements did not disappear from newspaper pages, but shared their importance with actors of a very different nature. As Fridman (2010) has shown, much energy was devoted to creating associations of consumers and to promoting pedagogic campaigns to shape a new economic mentality and try to discipline prices. Compared to previous consumer organization, the new consumers had no repressive powers but decided, through their individual and independent “economic” actions (purchase, information publishing, boycotts), how to punish or reward their providers.

Newspapers show the growing importance of this consumer figure: “The opinion of consumers organically established could become one of the most

important to face efficiently this hard economic problem.” (CL, 9/5/1972: 14) When the Consumers Council of the Metropolitan Area was created in 1972, the Commerce Secretary gave an active role in price fixing to consumers: the Council had the remit of “watching out for the production, marketing and distribution of goods and services satisfying common peoples’ needs as well as any negative practice against fair competition.” (LN, 7/13/72: 1) Advertisements and open letters from the Secretary of Commerce reveal the importance attributed to the consumer: “Buy better: plan your purchases + compare prices + note good shops + calculate = you will have an additional salary.” (LN, 7/7/1972: 11)

As another expression of the dilution of collective actors, a new type of expert emerged. By the 1980s, both newspapers started to include contributions from younger experts belonging to a different generation of economist than the ones who had regularly expressed opposing ideological perspectives. They informed the public about economic variables and forecasts and judged the economic situation. From a historical perspective, the growing importance of media professionals and academic economists was concomitant to the retreat of social representatives and ideologues. In 1959, a businessman participating in a discussion organized by *La Nación* could regret the “lack of scientific rigour to investigate [the] issues [of economy]” asking for “technical criteria for effective conclusions.” (LN, 7/19/1959: 10) Thirty years later, his wish had been granted. Discussions of inflation were practically monopolized by economists, most of them with no organic relation to specific businesses, trade unions or the state. In the 1970s these economists introduced technical terms that went hand in hand with a new rhetoric: numbers appeared as an instrument that could provide neutral (non ideologically-driven) bases for public discussions and experts affirmed their participation in public debate as impartial analysts of national reality.

The rise of experts is also clear in the role of public policy-makers. While during the dictatorship the first young consultants were called upon to assist authorities and gained a certain public interest, “independent” experts (external to political parties) were considered to be in the best position to understand and solve instability in the civil administrations of the 1980s. *La Nación* asked several times that professionals should be recruited for main governmental positions (LN, 7/6/1985: 14). References to “technocrats”, “professionals”, “experts” appeared when discussing economic policy making (see for example: CL, 2/24/1985: 12). The rise of experts was strongly associated with the growing importance of foreign advisors

and creditors. “International opinion” about the nomination of economic authorities or the orientation of domestic economic policy was therefore also mentioned (*CL*, 2/20/1985: 7 y 2/21/1985: 20).

The strict respecting of expert authority, even among lay citizens, became the way opposing social perspectives were disqualified. With the dominance of liberal perspectives, journalists, entrepreneurs, and governments could ask social leaders to accept specialists’ diagnoses and treatments, even if they required deep sacrifices.

### The coordination of expectations as a solution from a distance

The long experience of inflation, as *Clarín*, *La Nación* and their columnists reminded readers, was now presented as a sign of governments’ inefficiency. From the 1970s on, instead of referring to social conflict or underdevelopment constraints as causes of inflation, journalists of both newspapers started to focus on the state’s faults and the inability of public officials to explain (and manage) the rise of prices. As shapers of public opinion, newspapers began to use the CPI as a test for public policies. Having illustrated the rise of several prices, an editorial of *Clarín* concluded, “controls and so-called voluntary bilateral agreements have been revealed to be totally inefficient because they do not attack the powerhouses of inflation.” (*CL*, 4/17/1972: 10)

Compared to the public debates in the 1950s that had pointed out several causes, public discourse in the 1970s and 1980s assumed that the state was directly or indirectly responsible for the disarray, installing the liberal perspective as common sense. In an editorial, *La Nación* insisted on “...lack of proficiency [of authorities] to conduct economic issues in a serious and efficient way.” (*LN*, 1/8/1972: 8) *Clarín*, which had always supported interventionist policies, accorded with part of the diagnosis. In an editorial titled “The problem of prices”, it affirmed: “the measures adopted by the government are insufficient and inefficient because they do not face the problem deeply ... They want to solve an economic problem with legal laws. Government had no authority over markets. With legal laws, it is impossible to correct the problem of disinvestment and production insufficiency.” (*CL*, 7/3/1972: 10)

If physical violence seemed to be acceptable in the 1950s and 1960s to control prices, since the mid-1970s authorities had concluded that the challenge was to coordinate expectations. Neither the officials of the 1976 dictatorship nor the civil governments after 1983 considered the possibility of punishing producers, merchants, or financial speculators. Instead of

monitoring and discouraging selfish practices, authorities decided to coordinate them. As can be seen in Economic Ministers’ speeches, authorities looked for a “convergence of efforts between the public and the private sector to achieve the outcomes and results we are exposing.” (Martínez de Hoz in *LN*, 12/21/78: 1).

Therefore, newspaper articles not only informed their readership about developments in the prices of basic goods but also regularly included accounts of the sophisticated discourses of Economic Ministers and financial information (in particular the exchange rate and the interest rate) in their pages. In addition to the examination of the consequences of economic public policy for the country and its different social groups, there were financial analysts teaching readers how to understand economic information and, especially, how to act rationally using it. Their intention was not to judge the virtues of public decisions but to instruct economic agents in the maximization of their incomes and saving.

After decades of moral judgment (now limited to public interventions by the Catholic Church), speculative practices could be recognised and even defended in the public sphere:

When someone had the possibility of making huge economic gains with low risk is too much to ask not to envy this profit with the argument that it is bad for the country because he is becoming a parasite speculator (...) the devil speculators just enjoy what is given to them on the platter for mistaken policies (...) It is essential then ... to finish once for all with fiscal imbalance. Once this done, we will also finish with the *patria financiera*. (Roberto Bullrich, *LN*, 3/24/90: 12)

## Final remarks

Socio-historical analysis of inflation allowed us to show a transition between two ways of fighting social problems and managing population. Our main conclusion is that, since 1970s, inflation not only rose as measured by its annual rates, it also became an increasingly precise public concern, framed and treated in a brand new way with the help of numbers and experts. From the 1950s to the 1970s, inflation was presented as a social and political phenomenon, intermingled with other sources of popular contention. There were a plurality of actors (social leaders, politicians, newspapers) vying for interpretations and solutions to price increases, rooted in diverse and conflicting representations of the economy. In this regime, we find public interventions led to physical and even violent expressions in the public sphere. From the mid-1970s, when inflation skyrocketed to three digits per year, its framing changed. Inflation was now linked to

a unified statistic (CPI) and considered an economic problem. At the same time, it became the domain of economic expertise, involving all members of society with no further distinctions, requiring an aseptic intervention from a distance based on the recognition of individual freedom and the management of decentralized calculations.

The diffusion and acceptance of the national index CPI enabled people to have a common measure to follow and adjust local and singular prices. This number allowed abstraction (in the sense of disentanglement for singular goods and agents), generalization (in the sense of creating a common experience across different national population and territories), as well as de-territorialisation of control and coordination (in the sense of fixing expectations to govern them at a

distance). At the same time, with mathematical tools on hand, economists could participate in the public sphere with an accuracy and authority unreached by other actors. Thanks to numbers, they could appear as impartial and efficient mediators even if members of the professional community were involved in the decision-making process behind very unpopular and even ineffective policies.

Most studies about inflation are focused on the later period; the in-depth analyses of the post-war years provide a contrasting point of reference to highlight Foucault's argument that the rise of neoliberalism was linked to a new pattern of government. At least for the economy, from then on, moral judgments and physical violence were replaced by the respect for and coordination of selfish individual practices.

## Endnotes

- 1 Eyal and Levy (2013) stressed that the design and diffusion of economic indicators constitute the most important mode of economists' intervention in the public sphere.
- 2 We built our corpus on a sample of newspaper articles selected according to the following criteria. We collected articles for those years registering the highest levels of annual inflation as well as those in which the curve of prices increase was once again rising. We also selected them in order to assure a certain distribution over time: 1959 (with 114% annual rate of inflation), 1962 (26%), 1965/66 (28.9%–31.9%), 1972 (58.5%), 1975 (182%), 1978 (175%), 1983 (343%), 1985 (672%) and 1989 (3079%). With the exception of 1965–1966 (analysed from July 1st to June 30) and 1981–1982 (from July 1st to June 30), the other years were taken from January the 1st to December the 31st.
- 3 The authors have translated quotations from newspaper articles and from Spanish references.
- 4 As *La Nación* has always been considered the journal preferred by big businessmen from concentrated urban and rural activities (in particular the exporters of grains and meat) from both national and foreign origins (Sidicaro 1993), *Clarín* has been associated with medium and large national industrial concerns nourished by tax incentives, state subsidies, and commercial protection (Ramos 1993). For decades, both were strongly related to political movements: *Clarín* was led by "desarrollistas" and "liberals" drove *La Nación*.
- 5 Unlike most western countries, from 1945 to the mid-1980s, Argentina adopted price controls almost permanently. There were only a few, brief periods in which companies could freely fix their prices. Even governments with opposing economic orientations adopted these types of measures (FIEL 1990, 7).

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