

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

Essay

Notes about Racist Argentina and a Class-Based Government

Mariano Perelman

National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Argentina

“White Argentina” is a powerful ideal—and myth—that, for large sectors of the country’s population, generates practices and discourses of exclusion and serves as a way of distinguishing themselves from “Others.” Another mythical trope is that Argentinians “descend from the ships,” meaning that the nation was constructed by migrants and not Indigenous peoples—especially migrants from Europe. There is a long tradition of anthropologists (and other social scientists) who have tried to intervene in these discourses, both academically and publicly. They—too many to name in this short essay—have shown the silencing (Trouillot 1995) as well as the murders and massacres behind the myths. In public, some works have sought to intervene in order to denaturalize the idea that there are no “Indians” or “blacks” (the latter being a category that, in Argentina, focuses on skin color and does not communicate the same things as it does in other countries where “black” tends to be associated with African ancestry).

Paradoxically, the denial of the existence of Others within Argentina requires a recognition of the presence of Others, including through powerful practices that manifest differently through different historical periods to attempt to negate the actual population of Indigenous and Afro-descendants. At the same time, and somewhat ironically, people from neighboring countries, such as Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, are referred to as *los negros* and *los indios*. This instantiates a geography of whiteness at the center of which is Argentina’s capital city, Buenos Aires, nicknamed *la ciudad blanca* (the white city).

Currently, there is a pervasive discourse that Argentina has no racism—a myth that depends on the idea that it is a white society. Gordillo (2016, 242) is right when he writes that:

In Argentina this self-congratulatory narrative about a racism-free society has long coexisted with the everyday use of a heavily racialized language to name, with disdain, *esos negros de mierda*: the millions of Argentines who are explicitly marked as the despised nonwhite part of the nation. This racialization is part of a hierarchical class formation, for “los negros” also names the poor. However, that the poor are called “los negros” and *not* something

else actually reveals how racial sensibilities inform perceptions about class in Argentina.

Academics in Argentina have begun to discuss the race-class relation more forcefully in recent years. Many of these studies offer an alternative to the idea that Argentina is a white society. These studies tend to develop an analytic view that allows us to understand realities beyond the myth of Argentina as a white and European nation, a myth forged by the elites and hegemonic academic centers.

The current government, under Mauricio Macri, is centrally shaped by this racist discourse of and about class and is made up primarily of the elites of Argentinian society. Macri, then head of the government of the city of Buenos Aires and an entrepreneur, ran under the Cambiemos (Let’s Change) Party, a big-tent alliance of several political parties headed by the PRO (Propuesta Republicana, or Republican Proposal). After gaining the second-most votes in the first round of voting, Macri bested his more Kirchner-like opponent from the Frente para la Victoria (the Front for Victory) Party, Daniel Scioli, in the second round of elections in November 2015.

Macri’s election broke a pattern. Until Macri’s election, there had been three consecutive terms of the Frente para la Victoria: Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2011 and 2011–2015). In the 2003 elections, Néstor Kirchner won only because the leading candidate, Carlos Menem, pulled out of the race. Menem had been president in the 1990s and brought about wide-ranging neoliberal reforms. Under Kirchner, as I have previously argued (Perelman 2015), Argentina experienced high social-economic growth, social security benefits extended to nearly the entire population of Argentina, investment in education grew markedly, and rights were extended to—or sought to be extended to—population sectors that were historically marginalized. Despite social, political, and economic gains under the Kirchner governments, however, these sectors continued to be repressed and relegated to the margins. This welfare politics, at the same time, generated displeasure in dominant sectors of society, which saw themselves losing power more than losing economic benefits.

Macri showed himself to be a misogynist during the electoral campaign and, among other things, prejudiced against gays and lesbians, against legislation seeking gender equality,

and against the rights of minorities. But in the presidential debates he came across as closer to the politics and positions of the liberal Kirchner governments. Macri promised to continue with a series of measures that benefitted the popular (working-class) sectors of the population, such as not devaluing the national currency, maintaining government subsidies to public sector services, and free televising of soccer matches. He has yet to keep any of these promises. The campaign benefited from a marketing strategy that “hid” the ideologically neoliberal and conservative discourse of the PRO. The idea of change—“Cambiamos”—was key.

But despite his appeal to the working class, the Macri government has taken a series of measures that have benefitted the economic elites of the country. These measures have harmed the working-class sectors of the population. Income inequality has grown quite a bit, wages have dropped more than 10 percent, and some taxes on big landowners, exporters, and mining companies have been eliminated. The country’s debt has grown by billions of dollars. Macri has dismantled social programs, human rights policies, and anti-money-laundering offices.

As people well know, it is difficult to reduce politics to electoral votes. I bring these facts to the discussion here in order to (re)think processes like the election of Donald Trump in the United States as well as the growth of right-wing parties and movements around the world. At the 2016 AAA annual meeting in Minneapolis, I heard many people say that the election of Donald Trump (and his xenophobic language) had a lot to do with unemployment. Macri’s government, like Trump’s, pushes forward a repressive immigration policy but invokes insecurity more than employment in its rationale.

The current Argentinian government is unlike other right-wing movements or governments. It stands for strong economic liberalism coupled with a strong upper-class conservatism. According to Macri, we needed change because we were in crisis, a crisis of class. Macri linked Argentina’s problems to Kirchnerism’s “corruption” and popular waste that had given the poor “bread and circus or spectacle,” making them believe that they, too, could live well. The current administration demonstrates a vicious and racialized contempt for the poor and working classes. The head of Banco Nación referred to the children of very poor slums (*villas miserias*) as little wild animals (*animalitos salvajes*). Pamela David, the television head and wife of media entrepreneur Daniel Vila, said it in a very telling way: “Please, I want to be able to re-live that balcony photo with Juliana [Awada, wife of Macri], with Mauricio [Macri] and Antonio [daughter of the two of them]. A white family, attractive, pure.” She referred to Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner’s family as “that dirt they had to take out.”

According to the Panamá Papers and subsequent investigations, Macri and his family have dozens of accounts in fiscal oases. Yet Macri’s administration reserves the accusation of corruption only for working-class leaders. In 2016, for instance, the administration illegally detained Milagro Sala,

the Indian woman who led the Tupac Amaru Neighborhood Association and fought for workers’ rights, on charges of fraud and criminal conspiracy. National and international human rights organizations have condemned Sala’s illegal detention, which has continued now for over a year. Anthropologists and other social scientists have been vocal in their condemnation of this process.¹

Sala’s arrest was accompanied by the destruction of the neighborhood that her organization had built and named *el cantri* (the country, which is the term in Argentina for a gated community). The Argentine press showed photos of the destruction of the neighborhood’s swimming pools, symbols of social status in Argentina. Press coverage suggested that poor people did not have the right to such pleasures. This kind of talk certainly appears frequently in Argentina, but especially with people who get “help” from the state. Wilkis (2013) has argued that while money that comes from the state is supposedly morally claimable by all, in reality, the dominating view sees only the elites as morally entitled. According to this vision, working-class people do not know how to properly save, invest, or spend their money.

The Association of University Graduates in Anthropology (el Colegio de Graduados en Antropología), along with the different institutes and departments of anthropology in Argentina, as well as individual researchers, are constantly working against the growth of repressive politics and actions in Argentina. The central concerns of the scientific community in Argentina today grow out of the major arenas of repressive policy: workplace and labor conditions, the use of public space, the lowering of the age of accountability (in crimes) from the already low sixteen, institutional violence, assaults on Indigenous peoples, and the criminalization of migrants, of protest, and of poverty. These have been topics anthropologists in Argentina have taken on—through research and public action—seeking to denaturalize what is often taken for granted.

Anthropologists are increasingly appearing in public, using mass forms of communication, and working closely with social networks to show through their data the many adverse effects of all this. For this, we have been the targets of public officials’ and government offensives. Brenda Canelo, who does research on migrants, public policies, and access to rights with CONICET (the National Scientific and Technical Research Council), was publicly debased amid the government’s repressive actions toward migrants, leading to a significant cut in government funding for scientific research in the country. This move was defended by Lino Baranao, minister of science and technology, and Alejandro Ceccatto, president of CONICET itself. Under Ceccatto’s leadership, CONICET issued a lamentable defense of the smear campaign against Canelo and other scientists who have been attacked.

I think it is important to go beyond economic arguments if we are to understand the greater complexities of the rise of right-wing movements and parties. We need to think about flesh-and-blood people and how they understand

well-being outside of purely monetary or material interests. We could learn from thinking about what this implies, specifically about a life with dignity. In Argentina, we would do well to think about the ways people have been categorized throughout Argentinian history, about center-periphery relations and a geography of whiteness, and about how binaries used in politics (such as Peronism and anti-Peronism or Kirchnerism and anti-Kirchnerism) relate to the ways people contemplate good and bad horizons for themselves, changing visions of the past and the future, and even what might be tolerable in the future. Taking all this into account will help us better understand those repressive processes around us—xenophobia and persecution of the poor, women, and social activists—and the ways in which they are a part of complex projects to craft a decent life. We as anthropologists must try to understand the complicated, lived maintenance of social hierarchies as well as the ways these are defended or contested. Such understanding might give us tools with which to denaturalize the actual discourses and practices with which we have to deal, including those of the current Argentinian government.

NOTES

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1. To understand related processes and some reflections about the case, see Manzano (2015) or the text published by Manzano on the website of the Institute of Anthropological Sciences <http://antropologia.institutos.filo.uba.ar/anuncio/la-organizaci%C3%B3n-barrial-tupac-amaru-en-perspectiva-m%C3%A1s-ac%C3%A1-de-los-males-sociales>. A look at the way class, ethnic, and power relations interrelate can be found in the text written by Dora Barrancos, historian and member of the Board of CONICET, herself a representative of the social sciences: <http://www.revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/esa-india/>.

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