

# The fascistisation of social reproduction

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Javier Milei, President of Argentina, became globally famous because of the chainsaw he hung around his head at campaign rallies, promising to make deep cuts to the state, and performing masculinist predatory capitalism. He won the election and took office in December 2023, just when Argentina was supposed to celebrate forty years of recovery of democracy. Milei's government is the radicalisation of Mauricio Macri's neo-liberal government (2015-2019), which reached power following three terms of progressive governments led by Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2003-2015). During Macri's government, a political and economic counter-offensive took shape, such that the height of feminist mobilisations for abortion rights coincided with the IMF's return to the country. Macri's electoral force was definitive in Milei's victory and the assembling of his government (Milei won without a political party and without a parliamentary majority). Macri's victory was the first time since the military dictatorship (1976-1983) that a president took office with an explicitly right-wing programme, and with a right organised as a political party, overcoming the schema of a 'military party'.

We must also consider the sequence that followed Macri's electoral defeat at the hands of a moderate progressive (Alberto Fernández, 2019-2023), spanning the first two years of the pandemic and the inflationary crisis of the second half of his term. Milei's government thus came to power in the midst of an economic crisis growing at the rate of a 200% annual increase in inflation. The political and subjective impact of hyper-inflation cannot be underestimated. This is one characteristic that is not present on such a scale in other countries in which the far right is on the rise. Material limits on expectations of how to live, consume and work are what is at stake in this unfolding of hyper-inflation. The economic frustration

that Milei tapped into and addressed with his promises of stabilisation won him the election, but this does not form a stable base of legitimacy to the extent that the affectation of austerity advances.

In what follows I analyse the emergence of Milei's ultra-right government in terms of three ideas: 1) as a reactionary response to a sequence of struggles led by feminism and its way of politicising social reproduction; 2) as the effect of a subjectivity trained in an economic crisis that is financially 'resolved' with debt in order to live; and 3) as the symptom of a crisis of representation of the democratic political system expressed as the right-wing's attempt to capture radicalness. Finally, I suggest the notion of 'fascistisation of social reproduction' as a way to connect these ideas.

## Human capital against social reproduction

The Ministry of Human Capital provides a synthetic image of the government of Javier Milei – the self-proclaimed first 'anarcho-capitalist' government in Argentina and the world. This new state institution absorbs the ministries of Labour, Education, Social Development, Health and Culture. It is headed by a graduate of Family Sciences from Opus Dei university, Sandra Pettovello, who presents herself as an 'expert in mindfulness, life crises and grief, relationships and couples'.<sup>1</sup> This sounds like one of Melinda Cooper's case studies for the marriage between neoliberalism and conservatism: an 'evolution' of the libertarian and paleo-conservative alliance that attempts to create compatibility between extreme market freedom, state deregulation and hierarchies of class, gender and race to guarantee the private sphere as a radically non-free sphere.<sup>2</sup> Among other cuts to public services, the new Minister has cut public support for *comedores populares*, community-run soup kitchens

where ten million impoverished people obtain food today. The majority of these *comedores* arose directly from social struggles and movements of previous decades, and are especially maintained by women's community work.

The Minister has also persecuted those who receive social welfare benefits, with deliberately cruel attacks aimed at mothers who take their children to protests, and at these spaces' form of political organisation. Historically they have been closely tied to social movements, often directly established and managed by movements themselves, rather than charities or NGOS. These tasks of social reproduction, which have become social and communitarian because of the crisis, have to do with a politicisation of the subsidies coming from the state by social movements, whose history goes back to the 2001 Argentinian economic crisis. The political genealogy of the valorisation of reproductive labour, particularly in popular economies whose leadership is clearly feminised, is a key element in understanding ways of self-management (hundreds of worker-managed factories, self-managed food production and health care, and community organisation of security and neighbourhood infrastructure) in critical conditions (mass unemployment, impoverishment, inflation).<sup>3</sup> The feminist radicalisation of such infrastructures was due to the effect produced in them by the feminist massification in the streets over the last ten years, which enabled the challenging of gender mandates and affirming of feminist and queer leaderships in those territories and experiences.

The Minister has made an absolute shift: now privileging religious institutions and retrograde organisations, one of which is known for its president's statement that 'A woman must make an effort to offer man both her physical and her moral virginity'.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Human Capital thus functions to discipline and criminalise forms of politicised social reproduction in Argentina that had successfully disputed resources from the state through popular and feminist struggles during a crisis of formal waged work going back decades. This new Ministry condenses Milei's plan, who campaigned shouting 'Afuera!' ['Out!'], promising to do away with ministries, public budgets and social rights. This image (which became a viral video) fits perfectly with what Judith Butler calls a 'fascist passion for stripping rights'.<sup>5</sup> In this text I want to ask who this excites and why.

Meanwhile, in July, Milei created a new Ministry of

Deregulation and Transformation of the State, whose Minister was involved in the financial crisis of 2001, supporting the banks, and in taking out the IMF loan during Mauricio Macri's government. This is yet another scene that demonstrates the reverberation of a 'neoliberalism in ruins', to use Wendy Brown's formulation that continues finding new meanings today;<sup>6</sup> but deploying its 'original violence' in a new moment. Speaking about the political situation in Argentina today means situating ourselves in the middle of an experiment that is, at the same time, both directly global and strongly local. However, both elements can become trivial: Milei becomes just another representative of the far-right constellations that are sprouting forth like mushrooms in the face of social discontent, and his particularities are understood as eccentricities, colourful data points, linked to a specific conjuncture in a 'Third World' country. I want to push beyond this schema to ask what is novel about the global nature of his wager, and how the local element of its roots are not limited to national specificities.

## Plunder neoliberalism

Milei's electoral victory must be understood as catalysing rejection of the precarity that existed prior to, and was made worse by, the pandemic. To put it directly: popular frustration with precarity helped bring Milei to power, making visible a growing and polymorphous precariousness that seems to be marginalised again and again when political discourses focus on rights and inclusion policies. But his victory must also be understood as a challenge and reaction to the massiveness of grassroots feminist struggles in Argentina, which proposed responding to this precarity through non-individualistic and non-authoritarian formulas at the same time as they achieved political victories, such as legal, safe and free abortion.

I conceptualise Milei's government in terms of the practical rehearsal of a new type of neoliberalism that I call 'plunder neoliberalism'. By 'plunder neoliberalism' I am referring to the combination of (1) an extractivist acceleration of neoliberalism, which speeds up the territorial partition of the country by provinces according to their possession of resources (especially lithium) and, on the other hand, (2) governing by finance, which wages war on the population in its everyday life by infiltrating

social reproduction with financial apparatuses such as debt (which was expanded in unimaginable ways during the pandemic through ‘financial inclusion’ policies), and now reaches limit-moments in the face of the acceleration of impoverishment through hyper-inflation.

Talking about ‘plunder neoliberalism’ is a way of theorising the strategic war against social reproduction as a contemporary form of counter-insurgency. We are now facing a different level of austerity politics – a level of extractivism, dispossession and plunder that can only take place in combination with the extreme criminalisation of social conflict and logics of war. In this sense, I want to propose understanding the terrain of social reproduction as one in which a ‘fascism from below’, as Zeynep Gambetti has argued, has taken root.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Argentina, I am referring to a particularly rapid and aggressive process through impoverishment due to inflation and in which a counter-revolution to feminist politicisation is deployed. In turn, I attempt to connect this process with what I earlier theorised as ‘neoliberalism from below’ to problematise a moment of neoliberalism in Latin America at a time when post-neoliberalism was being spoken of in regard to the rise of progressive governments.<sup>8</sup>

In that connection between neoliberalism and fascism from below, which is also a form of *mutation*,<sup>9</sup> I want to analyse the dispute over what is perceived as a crisis of social reproduction in order to develop the notion of the ‘fascistisation of social reproduction’, a notion that originally arose in conversation with Silvia Federici.<sup>10</sup> I want to specifically focus on the current moment as a renewal of counterinsurgency tactics related to an ‘economy of obedience’. Here we can see that there is also a dispute over the diagnosis of different forms of violence, just when the massiveness of feminism managed to denaturalise violence in everyday life in ways ‘that concretely changed the lives of our comrades’, as a neighbourhood activist said in an assembly a few months ago. At the same time, this is a dispute over the militarisation of social conflict (by state and para-state forms) and the mobilisation of reactionary subjectivation (which the ultra right is taking advantage of today).

The government’s whole package of laws and decrees points to a logic of a predatory capitalism, symbolised by the chainsaw Milei waves around his head at rallies as he promises to make cuts to the state. The velocity of this shock places us in the landscape of a *capitalist revolution*

that uses social media to eliminate political mediations. It is for that reason that feminisms – involved with concrete struggles ranging from wages to pensions, from the Trans Employment Quota<sup>11</sup> to housing struggles – cause so much discomfort for those right-wingers who continue singling out feminist movements and thinking as a public enemy. Feminisms, in opposition, propose a formula of reclaiming and caring for the commons that questions privileges while simultaneously claiming rights, and continue to put the focus on social transformation at the same time as making specific demands.

We cannot automatically assume an immediate translation between the fascist mode of government and the motives of its voters. Instead, we must investigate the subjective pillars built by neoliberal dispossession to triumph at the ballot boxes and to interpellate youth sectors, especially men and the precarious. For a subjectivity that has already been trained over years of neoliberalism, austerity measures are a mandate to optimise and monetise one’s own resources. In other words, it is the strategisation of our own impoverishment in favour of capital. But it is also a key element for understanding the project of ‘patriarchal restoration’, to quote Butler again, that it drives.<sup>12</sup> Rights are now experienced as ‘privileges’, as they are increasingly scarce and abstract under neoliberalism, leading to the individual, rather than collective, vindication of rights.

In previous work I coined the concept ‘neoliberalism from below’ to explain how neoliberalism takes root in subjectivities that, in order to progress, are forced to battle in harsh conditions marked by the dispossession of public infrastructure and, furthermore, to do so without capital. It is in that desire for popular prosperity, the desire to live better, where the strategic composition of micro-entrepreneurial elements with formulas of self-management takes place. This assembles an ability to negotiate and dispute state, neighbourhood and community resources with overlapping relationships of kinship, work and loyalty connected to the territory. At a time when post-neoliberal horizons were up for debate, in the midst of a wave of progressive and popular governments in Latin America, I was interested in delving into neoliberal subjective dynamics that unfolded in very different contexts from those imagined by Foucault.

The neoliberal dynamic is combined in a problematic and effective way with persevering vitalism (inflected as a

desire for prosperity) that always clings to the expansion of freedoms, pleasure and affect. In my research at the time, focused on informalised and popular economies, this led me to trace how notions of freedom, calculation and obedience had changed in everyday life, projecting a new rationality and collective affectivity. I used Foucault to analyse the features of exploitation in informalised labour, not in terms of marginal and minority figures, but rather as mass dynamics. Perhaps here it is a matter of thinking Foucault against Foucault: if he argues that neoliberalism de-proletarianises the subject by making one an entrepreneur of oneself, I try to think about what kind of proletarian that is (as an entrepreneur). This perspective forces us to analyse antagonisms loaded with ambivalence, to untangle the permanent tension between immanence and strategy.

I made precise use of Foucault's work to understand governmentality in terms of the expansion of freedoms and therefore to analyse the types of productive and multiscale assemblages involved in contemporary neoliberalism as a mode of government and production of reality, which also overflows that government. I argued that, in Latin America, Foucault must be extended by rooting the critique of neoliberalism as a mode of power, domination and dispossession in the experience of the revolts that took place at the beginning of the century; while also debating the images and forms of political happiness implicated in diverse notions of freedom, which simultaneously compete and cooperate under neoliberalism. Foucault must also be extended with a second element: neoliberalism in our region is immediately violent, from its origins. Authoritarianism is not *ex post* deviation. The 'original violence' of neoliberalism shows that neoliberalism emerged in response to revolutionary struggles. It must be understood, then, as a regime of social existence and a political mandate that was installed through state and para-state massacres of popular and armed insurgencies. It was consolidated through dictatorships which implemented deep structural reforms in the subsequent decades, following the logic of 'structural adjustment' policies around the globe. Friedrich Hayek's and Milton Friedman's visits to the region in those years, and their support for Pinochet's dictatorship, are a special chapter for developing the doctrinaire component that neoliberalism had in our countries. In other words, Latin America presents a deep archive for examining the

relationship between neoliberalism and fascism.

At the time I was interested in understanding how the challenge to neoliberalism's political legitimacy was combined with the recognition of a political and productive subjectivity that assimilated self-management and social programmes achieved through struggle. In turn, that antagonism against austerity was also incorporated as a measurable value: as a capacity of management, effort and will to progress and, therefore, *indebtable*. The flows of debt for a precarious and politically organised population built a sort of irrigation delta from below that responded first to a moment of a consumer boom and later to periods of austerity under Mauricio Macri's government (2015-2019). This connection between financialisation 'from below' and the making of a political subjectivity of entrepreneurship among dispossessed sectors was also important for understanding the first series of electoral defeats of progressive governments that, although not much acknowledged at the time, is part of the more or less generalised consensus today.

However, we now find ourselves in a third moment. Previously, I analysed the financialisation of popular economies, of economies of reproduction that expanded into territories and were not only confined to homes, as a way of detecting the role that finance plays under neoliberalism to guarantee social reproduction in a private way. In turn, there were two moments of its functioning. First, in relation to a debt that was part of a consumer boom associated with a commodity boom in the country and, *at the same time*, strongly associated with social movements' anti-austerity demands. Second, debt was channeled into basic goods of food, medicine and housing payments when the country returned to the IMF (2018) at the same time as feminist politicisation was deployed on the mass level. Now we are facing a third moment in which the mandate for austerity has managed to inoculate itself in the population, to the point that Milei's phrases such as 'there is no money' have been taken up as part of popular language. Then, the question is: What is the role of that financialisation in a situation of economic war declared against social reproduction? How does the financialisation of social reproduction provide concrete situations for the acceleration of fascistisation of that terrain of struggle?



## The politics of cruelty

Milei simultaneously vindicates the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s and the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, but under the 'programmatic' form of a troll. He is proud of drawing his power directly from capital: it is the great owners who transfer their aura to him. Milei's government proposes a synthesis in a repudiation of democratic forms, drawing from a generalised feeling of their restrictive, classist and racist character. It is a clear attempt to colonise the frustration with democracy. In that register, Milei calls forth a population that has been trained in a financial subjectivation 'from below' to confront precarity, that is intimately aware of the limits of state intervention to produce equality. It is this subjectivation that advances and renders legible a certain notion of freedom and the proposal of forms of property that are paradoxically affirmed in contexts of dispossession.

One of the features of Milei's governance that stands out is the velocity of the ultra-neoliberal reforms that are already being implemented. During his campaign, he promised even greater austerity measures than those demanded by the IMF, and that is exactly what he has been doing. Milei wants to star in this capitalist revolution because it is located in a geopolitical moment in which he wagers on complicity with Elon Musk (whose erotic-entrepreneurial celebration of Milei's speech at Davos in 2024, shared on X, is not only explicitly disturbing, but also forces us to analyse and combat its efficacy), Trump and Netanyahu.

At the Davos Economic Forum, Milei – in his first time on the global stage after his election – singled out radical feminism and environmentalism as the main public enemies. Thus he positioned both movements as synonymous with social justice, the so-called 'aberration' that he aims to eradicate. It is necessary to analyse that association and, to do so, explain that the feminist struggle in our country is also a struggle against extractivism: that is, against the plundering of common goods and, especially, financial speculation over land which directly transfers onto food prices. In that sense, the feminist movement in Argentina has proposed social reproduction as a battlefield that is currently traversed by hunger and plunder.

A 'pedagogy of cruelty' is added to this shock. The Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato has elaborated on the concept to speak of gender-based violence and sexist aggression as a form of the pact of masculinity, which became visible at the beginning of the Ni Una Menos movement around 2015.<sup>13</sup> Today this term goes beyond the vocabulary of feminisms and names the type of verbal, political, economic and symbolic violence exercised by this government that is practiced daily on social media. It brings together forms of insult and mistreatment, celebrating lay-offs and memes that banalise paedophilia at the same time as comprehensive sexual education programmes are decimated.

In the book *History of Argentinian Cruelty: Julio A. Roca and the Genocide of Native Populations*, Osvaldo Bayer defines racism using the term 'cruelty' to describe the torture of the Indigenous population in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Yet, he also associates it with a social form:

Cruelty rose to the surface in a Creole Europeanized, profoundly racist, society. The thinker Juan Bautista Alberdi, one of the fathers of the National Constitution [and one of Milei's reference points], wrote 'I do not know any distinguished people of our societies with Pehuenche or Araucano surnames. Does anyone know a gentleman who is proud of being an Indian? Would any of us let our sister or daughter marry an Indian from Araucanía? I would prefer an English shoemaker a thousand times over'.

Here there is a key 'genealogy' of cruelty: directly linked to the foundational racism of the nation-state and the descriptions of extermination that Bayer historicises. But it is also, as Alberdi says in the quote, linked to blood lineages: extermination always takes place in favour of certain surnames and families in which land and racist pride are concentrated.

This foundational association between the nation-state and cruelty is what Jacques Derrida, in his keynote address to the 'General States of Psychoanalysis', emphasises as he connects cruelty with sovereignty:<sup>15</sup>

If the drive for power or the cruelty drive is irreducible, older, more ancient than the principles (the pleasure principle or the reality principle, which are basically the same, the same in *differance*, I would like to say), then no politics will be able to eradicate it. Politics can only domesticate it, differ and defer it, learn to negotiate, compromise indirectly but without illusion with it, and it is this indirection, this differing/deferring detour, this system of

differential relays and delays that will dictate Freud's at once optimistic and pessimistic politics, which are courageously disabused, resolutely sobered up.<sup>16</sup>



Photo by Michael Runyan

When I speak of the politics of cruelty to characterise Milei's government, I am referring to the way in which institutional politics deliberately, and with joy, abandons any mechanism of negotiation and postponement with respect to violence. It is in this way that cruelty appears or, better, reappears. A paradox thus emerges: the politics of cruelty would mark the end of political mediations aimed at keeping it at a distance. However, in doing so, it produces politics. The politics of cruelty wagers on governing without governing (if we understand governing as the art of mediations that dissimulate and metabolise violence). The politics of cruelty relies on direct, spectacularised violence as a mechanism that produces *desensitisation*.

It is worth repeating that this is not new. It is repeated, it occurs, in certain moments: the issue is to understand the logic of that repetition. When does cruelty emerge as an undisguisable element of the phenomenology of violence? In moments in which politics

is pure conquest. The ultra-right, as several analyses have already stated, capitalises on and encourages this drive of cruelty, which is also an affect of self-salvation in the face of generalised precarity and insecurity. How can we understand the spread of Milei's campaign slogan that 'there is no money' for justifying the 'sacrifice' of the waiting sustained during these months? That temporality of waiting combines austerity and personal debt, creating a speculative 'bubble' at the subjective level that, however, has limits. Cruelty become politics exhibits a joy associated with the exercise of direct violence; it practices a spectacular reiteration that seeks to desensitise and deploy a historical affiliation. Those three elements – pleasure, desensitisation, history – must be analysed at the level of the government but also in terms of its activations and implications at the social level.

This brings us to one of Milei's particular qualities as an ultra-right leader: he is not a traditional nationalist. Milei is a member of the financial sector with close connections to investment funds and a defender of the global institutionality of concentrated capital and imperial powers. Milei celebrates the holders of capital as heroes after promoting money laundering, capital flight and tax evasion. He represents an extreme right-wing in a situation of extreme 'internal colonialism'. Milei also goes beyond Bolsonaro because of the genocide in Gaza and his alignment with the United States and Israel that create another scenario for him. But this is also because Milei does not play at nationalism, as Trump does. In Milei, the direct colonial dimension of his subjugation, his power and his effectiveness emerges. His position is that of an extreme 'internal colonialism' – to quote the Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova<sup>17</sup> – where it becomes necessary to deploy an 'internal war' to assert the positions of colonial subordination. With that I want to emphasise that the process of breaking the country's territorial unity, linked to a proposal of extractive businesses and tax benefits, is directly connected to colonial subordination at the global level and crossing thresholds of internal violence. The government has already announced the targeted militarisation of 'resource' zones.

## Modalities of debt

Milei enacts a government without masses in the street: It is clear that Milei's fascism – unlike other historical

fascisms – does not have the capacity to win the street; it wagers on reaching a mass level online in social and addictive media (a characteristic already pointed out by Enzo Traverso in thinking about the virtual masses of contemporary fascism<sup>18</sup>). Milei won with the proposal to radicalise forms of financial governance – in which everyone who has to deal with precarity is forced to engage in speculation – combined with a reactionary, misogynist and patriarchal discourse.

There are two key characteristics of the novelty of the neoliberal shock that we are experiencing: the velocity and intensity of the violence that it takes on as a mode of government. This is because Milei extracts his power directly from the corporations with the most concentrated capital, in a moment of the accelerated reconfiguration of capitalism towards an extractive and war model. He does not bank on a logic of governmentality, but rather one of pure destruction. However, that destruction seems to be ‘contained’ by precarity itself. What are its limits?

Finance incorporated into the management of precarity has built a capillary network capable of providing private and extremely expensive financing to resolve the problems of everyday life that arise from austerity and inflation. In 2018, when Mauricio Macri’s government took out an unprecedented amount of debt from the IMF, that indebtedness accelerated and intensified. As Luci Cavallero and I showed in the book *A Feminist Reading of Debt*, since then the destinations and uses of debt have decisively turned to paying for food and medicine, and, during the pandemic, rent.<sup>19</sup> Finance, through (increasingly diversified) debt, has made it possible to avoid – or at least has slowed down – the situation of *scarcity* that was seen in other moments of crisis (the 2001 crisis, for example).

How did this transcendence of scarcity via consumer debt nevertheless lead to a situation where so many people have internalised the government message that we are living beyond our means? Only by understanding the moral force with which inflation is invested (a sort of punishment by the ‘forces of heaven’, according to the presidential rhetoric), is it possible to understand how its lack of control becomes the ultimate scene of sacrifice and purification. This is a key point argued by Milei’s ‘inflationary crusade’. This allows for undoing his promises to put an end to inflation and point to dollarisation as the ultimate project.

Debt articulated with an entrepreneurial drive (a condition that is completely compatible with work subsidised by the state) is what allows platform workers (from virtual market sellers to delivery workers), for example, to buy their means of production (of communication and transportation). It is a paradoxical inverted situation: workers *must be owners* of the means with which they produce. Of course, we are talking about cheap means especially used in the service sector or in spaces of informal sales or cooperatives. Even so, it is a modality that expands throughout the most impoverished sectors, that has increased due to working at home during the pandemic, and that also reaches middle-class sectors (for example, loans to teachers to buy computers and to be able to work from a home office). The acquisition of these means of production takes place through debt: once again, radical dispossession is contained under a schema of property ownership (I am going to be the ‘owner’ of what I am buying).

Understanding how debt extracts value from household economies, non-waged economies, from economies historically considered to be non-productive, allows for seeing financial apparatuses as true mechanisms of value extraction and the moralisation of existences unleashed by the gender mandate (that is, of a certain articulation between reproduction and production). Thus it is a matter of analysing the physiognomy of what is traditionally called the labour conflict beyond its usual coordinates (a waged, union, masculine framework) to think about how the financial system is, on the one hand, a response to a specific sequence of struggles and, on the other hand, a dynamic of containment that organises a certain experience of the current crisis.

This cycle of debt responds to the recent sequence of feminist struggles and to a financial reading about certain modes of existence. The feminist movement politicises the crisis of social reproduction in a new and radical way as a crisis that is both civilisational and a crisis of the patriarchal structure of society. It is a movement that is anti-neoliberal in concrete ways and that operates in a class-based articulation with popular economy workers and unions; it is anti-colonial, seeking articulation with those who are leading anti-extractive conflicts (from peasant movements to environmental assemblies).

Feminism has shifted the lens of productive spatialities and, as Federici argues, allows for counting the full



duration of the working day, including what takes place in kitchens and bedrooms, neighbourhoods and community spaces. It is that fabric of laborious spatiality where the work of reproducing life takes place, and in which work is carried out, that mixes self-management with scarce public resources, carrying out social tasks that complete and/or replace deficient or non-existent services, at the same time as they sustain a labour force subjected to ever more precarity. A focus on variation and difference in geographies of social reproduction allows for recognising the historical and geographical construction of the reproduction-production binary and that a dependency on waged labour outside the household has only ever been the norm in certain times and places. Centring agricultural work, work in the community or work in the 'popular economies' thus substantially alters our understanding of the geographies of both social reproduction and production.

But then the pandemic came: tensions around freedom and care intensified. It also radicalised the right-wing's critique of state 'intervention' in the media and on the street, capturing a critique of institutions of confinement, which police and punish. From our analysis at the time, I highlighted what was tied together around the category of 'essential work'. Essential work condenses a strong paradox: it names a re-naturalisation of those tasks and their association with certain bodies, now applauded for their work but not sufficiently remunerated. This produces a particular twist: it is spoken of as work but, upon classifying it as essential, it seems to cease to be so. Its value is recognised but it seems to be fundamentally symbolic and emergency-based. We see this practiced on a large scale on those tasks and many jobs connected to social reproduction: it is the same as the historical manoeuvre of naturalisation of the work of reproduction, only now out in the open and no longer in the enclosure of the household sphere. Meanwhile, at the same time, there is a 'return' to the home under the mode of expanding telework, reproductive tasks and new care responsibilities.

While one reading of essential work could be that it seeks to legitimise the gratuity and/or insufficient remuneration of certain tasks carried out in domestic territories, we can also identify the inscription of accumulated struggles there. Would it have been possible to explicitly connect essentialness with reproductive tasks without

the prior politicisation of care that feminisms have put on the agenda at the mass level in recent years? At the time of the rise of feminist politicisation, the pandemic functioned as a handbrake and, at the same time, a moment of over-exploitation. This led to greater indebtedness. But it also led to a recombination of notions of freedom and obedience: here I mean the ambivalence of more debt as a device to produce more possibilities of doing things, but this freedom always entangled and combined with the discipline of debt. Thinking about that displacement which constructs the centrality of household debt also implies understanding the forces that debt manages to command as an organiser of increasingly precarious work, including illegal economies.

A crucial dimension in relation to the study of household indebtedness is understanding its relation with, largely feminised, unpaid work. This is a methodological key that our feminist perspective on debt adds, one that was fundamental for understanding the pandemic's impact on domestic spatiality (and 'the sexual division of debt', to use Isabelle Guerin's term.<sup>20</sup>) It is also fundamental to underscore and qualify the relation between debt and labour, because it demonstrates that debt cannot be delinked from its dependence on labour and land.

## **The fascistisation of social reproduction**

A whole variation of the concept of social reproduction opens up when we comprehend it from the present. This is also due to a fundamental feature of contemporary neoliberalism: the deepening of the crisis of social reproduction that it produces is cushioned by an increase in feminised labour, unpaid and subjected to the blackmail of family and individual responsabilisation. The privatisation of public services, or the restriction of their scope, means that those tasks (health care, feeding, childcare and so on) must be supplied by women, lesbians, travestis, and trans persons as unpaid or badly paid and obligatory work. I believe it is nevertheless insufficient to speak of a crisis of social reproduction. Rather, this crisis is the beginning of a sequence: the crisis is followed by a war against social reproduction, which seeks to lay the foundations for its fascistisation. This implies, first, that we need to understand that the crisis of social reproduction produced by neoliberal policies is answered by a politicisation of social reproduction. It is this feminist politi-



cisation which is attacked in the form of a war against social reproduction. The rise of the ultra-right must be explained in relation to these dynamics and to the search for the intensification of plunder and the familiarist, racist and biologicist keys to provoke the fascistisation of social reproduction.

In the heat of the massification of feminism, in popular and feminised economies on our continent, social reproduction exceeds the limits of the household, to refer to networks and communities, to be able to be understood as the articulation of forms of doing, of obtaining incomes, of disputing recognition, organising the supply of essential services and challenging the hetero cis family framework. I refer to the proliferation of communal and neighbourhood bonds, of organisational forms and cooperatives that assemble, in changing ways, with the dynamics of struggle, but also with popular entrepreneurship and initiatives that create infrastructure or maintain certain ancestral practices in new contexts.

My thesis here is that the politicisation of the crisis of social reproduction maps the lines of conflict that inhabit a neoliberal subjectivation in contexts of dispossession *and* it rejects the conservative-familial forms of containing this privatisation. For this reason, it allows for a reading of the totality in an anti-capitalist key and provides an internationalist dimension to specific, rooted, local struggles. This seems to me to be a key point, also taking into account the fact that the struggles which highlight the question of social reproduction as antagonism with capital directly intervene in international politics today: we can think about struggles around abortion or pensions. These struggles have an impact on the global level, proving that the reproductive terrain is decisive in battles over political subjectivity that articulate neoliberalism and extreme conservatism.

Social reproduction – which includes social relations as well as public policies, forms of relations as collective equipment and habits – is organised according to the dynamics of social struggle both in its historical content and specific modalities, therefore it is a decisive battleground due to the way in which capitalist contradictions can be radicalised. Furthermore, unlike other analyses, it is impossible for social reproduction to be divided, separated from the strategic plane of the plane of subjectivities in struggle. It is also this feminist, queer, migrant and popular politicisation of social reproduction that

allows for reading a dynamic of neoliberalism that no longer only adjusts to the logics of entrepreneurship of the self and its subjective modulation in adaptive terms, but rather new tendencies of direct violence, formulating logics of war in specific territories. And it is the feminist movement that has been denouncing these new logics of war and ‘regimes of war’.<sup>21</sup>



Social reproduction has long been discussed as a way of defining interdependence in a materialist way. These two arguments are key for a feminist epistemology that looks at production *from below*. It is also *from below* that we analyse the proliferation of neoliberalism and fascism. The concrete terrain of their entrenchment is the material mutations in social reproduction. The category of *war*, already used by feminisms to account for new coordinates of violence, becomes more strategic than ever.<sup>22</sup> The war against the conditions of reproduction of the population, and the war against the conditions of reproduction of struggles, are articulated with war as the global stage, to which the ultra-right can appeal to polarise local scenarios when social protest is on the rise. Militarisation is the highest stage of financial warfare.

The dispute over what is perceived as a crisis at the level of social reproduction is important in order to de-

velop the notion of ‘fascistisation of social reproduction’.<sup>23</sup> I use this term to refer to a political form that allows for the power of capital to advance through reducing investment in social reproduction *against* its feminist, queer, migrant and popular politicisation while intensifying the impulse toward violent ways of managing reproduction through ‘financial violence’ and targeting women, the LGBTQ and migrant population as a contemporary form of war.

Inflation is an accelerator of the crisis as a strategy of the fascistisation of social reproduction. It points to women and feminists responsible for social reproduction as the opposite of ‘human capital’ and causes anti-feminism to grow as a vector of reactionary politicisation. But we can also see it concretely in the way that an ultra-neoliberal labour reform – always in the name of ‘modernisation’ – was negotiated in Argentina in the first six months of Milei’s government: to try to win its approval in Congress, two issues that they want to negotiate with unions are put forth as bargaining chips: pensions for housewives and parental leave *and* the complete deregulation of the few safeguards in place for informalised economies (such as the simplified tax scheme for informal workers, ways of demonstrating relations of dependency and so on).<sup>24</sup> Once again, rights related to the social reproduction of feminised and informalised sectors are put up as leverage to maintain the borders of ‘waged work’. That simultaneity demonstrates the revolutionary character of feminist practices located in territories subjected to dispossession and financialisation.

If Milei turns the whole country into a ‘sacrifice zone’, to use a term deployed under neo-extractivism to delimit the areas that are offered to business and that ‘pay the price’ with their contamination and environmental degradation, it is because business does not allow for any dissimulation. What was a ‘zone’ with borders, becomes a generalised project, without borders or limits. In Argentina, federalism itself is up for debate and Milei’s allies are defending the so-called ‘Desert Campaign’ – the nineteenth-century genocide of Indigenous populations to steal their land. This is not simply an anachronism in a time of the rise of finance. On the contrary, it demonstrates the capacity of neo-extractivism, when plunder becomes a political logic, to reorganise both the ‘national’ space and political temporality, producing a fold between the nineteenth and twenty-first century.

## The abyss of financialisation

The acceleration of economic violence through financial extractivism finds in the platforms its favourite means. Since the pandemic, the so-called ‘FinTech’ (financial technology) companies have consolidated and expanded as means of payment and, above all, as sources of indebtedness.<sup>25</sup> It is no longer the state with banks, but rather *fintech* which produces an experience of speculation that is immanent to survival.

These questions are key for understanding the political management of the ‘patience’ of those subjected to austerity, the momentary effectiveness over popular subjectivity of phrases such as ‘there is no money’ or ‘we have to make sacrifices’, which attempt to make the language of austerity into a language of the masses.

On the one hand, public spending austerity and plunder of public infrastructure is channelled into increasing private indebtedness. On the other hand, the psychic logic behind the acceptance of the idea that ‘the government has no money’ functions as part of a logic of sacrifice: we are guilty of hyper-inflation because it is part of public spending profligacy. The entrepreneurship subjectivity fuelled by ‘neoliberalism from below’ is interpellated as part of the ‘solution’ at the same time that it relates to the most affected population. I am interested in thinking about the logic of austerity as it imposes itself as a logic of veridiction, to use a Foucauldian term. It reveals something of the truth of scarcity that debt conceals. The contradictory logic is evident: it is that very austerity that forces us to take on more debt.

Along this line, social protest provides us with the coordinates for understanding how debt has organised its expansion as an apparatus of government. The feminist reading of debt, which connects the exploitation of reproductive labour to modes of territorial governmentality (and thus exposes the dependence on debt in respect to work and land), practices this manoeuvre: it questions the channelling of financial obligation into household debt particularly targeting women and female heads of household at a time when the feminist movement expresses its massive force in the streets *and* in homes; and it denounces a diverse range of extractive dynamics, inquiring into their connections. But later, referring to a third moment, debt to fund social reproduction seems

to be reaching a limit due to the velocity and cruelty of impoverishment.

Here a greater problem emerges that can be considered an open question, which has especially been raised by feminist movements: what are the political tools of protest and negotiation of a labour force that lies in the intersection between financial (and platform) capitalism and non-guaranteed social reproduction? In the press release for the eighth review of the Extended Facility arrangement in May 2024, the IMF says that the government met the goals 'with margins'. What is this over-achievement if not the deployment of an economic war against the population's survival? The death drive gives way to finance. Milei has said that 'if people were not making ends meet, they would be dead'. Never mind the fact that people are literally dying due to the lack of medication and the lesbophobic cruelty promoted by the government, this is the scene in which debt 'offers' solutions to avoid dying of hunger. Marcos Galperín, the most successful platform capitalist in Argentina, does business thanks to the financial mediation of scarce resources from social programmes, while forcing their beneficiaries to go into debt through his platform, to attempt small 'speculations' to pay for dollarised food. But it also absorbs and exploits unpaid financial labour that consists of surviving income poverty through small-scale financial carry operations that consume time and, more than anything, one's mental health.

I want to emphasise this third moment of indebtedness that operates in an extreme scenario: in the midst of an all-out war against the social reproduction of the majorities in order to produce its fascistisation. Here what is at stake is the limit and the abyss of the financialisation of social reproduction, its productivity at the level of political subjectivities, and, ultimately, thresholds of social violence. It is on that same terrain where the 'fascistisation' of social reproduction is both activated and becomes abysmal. The dimension of 'patriarchal restoration' that it takes on is key for understanding how it seeks to annul other reproductive forms, those supported by other relationships and experiences and politicisation. If the notion of war on the plane of social reproduction is based on the idea of an antagonism between social reproduction and capital,<sup>26</sup> the intervention of feminist politicisation has exacerbated this antagonism in recent years. We know that social reproduction is itself a ne-

cessary component of the reproduction of capital. How does feminist, queer, migrant and popular politicisation modify and subvert it?

Without a doubt, we can argue that feminist politicisation *divided* the social reproduction of capital in such a way as to make its antagonism visible, and Milei and his Ministry of Human Capital are attempting violent recomposition. Does the current war imply a project of capitalist reconstruction of social reproduction? Here I have attempted to take the notion of the fascistisation of social reproduction in that direction, where the logic of a neoliberalism of plunder seeks to attack, restore and recompose the reproduction of capital. Under this sequence, the finance/debt nexus is a fundamental element, increasingly 'demanded' in its cycles of expropriation, of plunder.

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