



BRILL

NOTEBOOKS: THE JOURNAL FOR STUDIES ON POWER

1 (2021) 96–119

NOTEBOOKS

*The Journal for  
Studies on Power*

brill.com/powr

# Strategies Against the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Crisis of Hegemony

*Javier Balsa*

IESAC, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Bernal, Argentina; CONICET,

Buenos Aires, Argentina

*jjbalsa@unq.edu.ar*

## Abstract

This article tries to explain why, if those countries that applied an elimination strategy in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced fewer deaths and relatively fewer negative impacts on their economies, the ruling bourgeoisie of other countries did not promote similar measures. Additionally, it attempts to explain why people have not widely demanded that policies be implemented to eliminate the circulation of the virus. The article suggests that, in order to better understand these behaviours, it is necessary to frame them in the context of the profound crisis of hegemony in which most of Europe and America was already plunged before the arrival of the COVID-19 virus.

## Keywords

COVID-19 – strategies – hegemony – crisis – authoritarianism – anti-scientism

Societies have had to choose between various possible strategies to cope with the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the lack of pharmaceutical solutions. We can differentiate between three main types of strategy: (1) those denying the severity of the pandemic, letting the virus circulate freely and betting on achieving a certain ‘herd immunity’; (2) those restricting mobility and activities, in order to minimise or suppress the circulation of the virus and flatten the peak of infections so that health systems should not collapse, and (3) those that drastically prohibit mobility for a relatively short period of time to completely

stop community transmission, detect chains of infections, and eliminate the virus, a strategy that has been described as an 'elimination' strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The countries that bet on 'herd immunity' failed for two main reasons: because not all those infected achieve immunity (and also this type of immunity is reduced due to mutations of the virus, which are more frequent in populations with a high number of infections, as can be observed in Manaus, Brazil) and because societies would not tolerate the likelihood that many people would die and that, due to the saturation of the health system, some patients would receive no or little care. So governments that initially supported this strategy (generally unclearly), such as the United Kingdom, Sweden and Italy, subsequently turned towards the strategy of reducing circulation or, at least, attempting to 'flatten the curve'. In cases where national governments maintained elements of this denialist strategy for a long time (as in the United States and Brazil), many of the federal states applied more restrictive policies. The result of more open policies showed the failure of this strategy because, not only did the health systems collapse at times, but they were also the countries with the highest number of deaths per million inhabitants up to 15 March 2021: United Kingdom (1,853), United States (1,620) and Brazil (1,313, albeit with the well-founded suspicion of a significant underreporting).<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, while policies aiming to suppress the circulation of the virus managed to avoid the collapse of health systems, they were only able to delay the waves of infections and high mortality rates. Thus, for example, in two countries that applied widespread restrictive policies during much of 2020, such as Germany and Argentina, the result was that by the beginning of August 2020, 109 and 79 people per million had died respectively; however, when restrictions were removed these figures increased: by mid-March 2021, the numbers were 879 and 1,191 respectively.

Only strategies aiming for total elimination of the circulation of the virus were successful, resulting in a very small number of deaths. Thus, by mid-March 2021, the countries that had resorted to this strategy had a very

---

1 Baker and colleagues differentiate five strategies: exclusion, elimination, suppression, mitigation and without substantive strategies: see M. Baker, N. Wilson and T. Blakely, 'Elimination Could Be the Optimal Response Strategy for COVID-19 and Other Emerging Pandemic Diseases', *BJM* 371(2020), 1–4. Our denying strategy is a combination of mitigation strategy and without substantive strategy, and our minimise or suppress strategy is a combination of mitigation and suppression strategies.

2 We take this date, because then have started the impact of the vaccination campaigns that, at least in countries that managed to obtain a large number of doses early, rapidly reduced mortality from COVID-19 (by the middle of March the first dose of vaccination that had been given to 30% of the British and 20% of US inhabitants was beginning to come into effect).

low death rate per million inhabitants: 0.4 in Vietnam, 3.4 in China, 5.4 in New Zealand, 33 in South Korea and 35 in Australia. In addition, such rapid control also made it possible to re-authorise the opening of almost all activities, so that their economies were the least affected by the pandemic. Thus, in 2020 the gross domestic product of China and Vietnam grew by just over 2%, and that of South Korea, New Zealand and Australia fell by only around 1%. On the other hand, the countries that implemented the other two strategies showed significant setbacks: the GDP of the United Kingdom and Argentina fell by 10%, that of Germany and Brazil by 6%, and the United States by 4%.

A recent study focusing on 33 OECD countries shows that countries that opted for rapid action to eliminate the virus (Australia, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) also protected their economies more effectively and minimised restrictions on civil liberties (because the periods of restriction were of shorter duration) than those countries that strove for mitigation. Additionally, this study points out that elimination has been framed as a civic solidarity approach that will restore civil liberties the soonest, a focus frequently neglected in the political debate.<sup>3</sup>

The question that arises is why most countries have not opted for these very successful strategies to eliminate the circulation of the virus. Clearly, the choice of strategy is made through consideration of a wide array of factors. Many have highlighted the profile of the governmental leaders (particularly those characterised by non-rational and denialist discourses, such as Trump or Bolsonaro). Others have emphasised the cultural characteristics of societies that are resistant to accepting restrictive measures or unwilling to give up their 'normal' ways of living. It is also recognised that, at times of crisis, both rulers and ruled tend to be relatively receptive to proposals that on other occasions they would not easily accept.

The bourgeoisie, as the ruling class, has a clear responsibility for the strategy that its nation adopts. If the bourgeoisie had encouraged drastic quarantining, it would have surely achieved the support of the majority of society. It could have called on its organic intellectual community and its effective control of the mass media. It would have been relatively easy for them to consistently show the successful examples of countries that implemented virus elimination strategies. However, the vast majority of the bourgeoisie did not behave in this way. Therefore, these examples of countries with elimination strategies are almost unknown to most of the public, at least in Europe and America.

---

3 M. Oliu-Barton, B. Pradelski, P. Aghion, P. Artus, I. Kickbusch, J. Lazarus, D. Sridhar and S. Vanderslott, 'SARS-Cov-2 Elimination, Not Mitigation, Creates Best Outcomes for Health, the Economy, and Civil Liberties', *The Lancet* (2021) 1–3. DOI 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00978-8.

This is due to the fact that most of the bourgeoisie opted to boycott care measures, demanding an end to restrictions and, in some cases, encouraging the desire among a broad sector of the population to 'return to normalcy'. This attitude favoured the expansion of huge second waves of infections with the consequent escalations in the number of deaths. All of which has resulted in new measures to restrict movement and economic activity. The return to 'normality' is only planned through mass vaccination which, in most countries has been delayed due to capitalist logic itself that has not released patents for vaccines, owing to their hoarding in some central countries and as a result of the effect of their own irrational preaching (which encouraged an 'anti-vaccination' discourse) which means that many citizens today do not want to be vaccinated.

The question that guides this article is why, if those countries that applied an elimination strategy in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced fewer deaths and relatively fewer negative impacts on their economies, the ruling bourgeoisie of other countries did not promote similar measures. Additionally, the article attempts to explain why people have not generally demanded that policies be implemented to eliminate the circulation of the virus.

Our hypothesis is that, in order to better understand these behaviours, it is necessary to frame them in the context of the profound crisis of hegemony in which most of Europe and America were already plunged before the arrival of the COVID-19 virus. For this reason, the first section is dedicated to analysing the type of hegemonic crisis in which we find ourselves, and the second section addresses some hypotheses about behaviours against the pandemic.

## 1 A Deep Crisis of Hegemony

From 2008 onwards, it became evident that there was a crisis of hegemony in most countries with representative-democratic regimes (at the same time, in many other states domination was consolidated in pseudo-democratic forms in which there is a recognised predominance of coercion over consensus).<sup>4</sup> This crisis evolved into high political instability, the emergence of new types of authoritarianism (combined with irrationalism and fanaticism) and the presence of significant tensions between ideological-political perspectives. This situation contrasts with the quasi-post-political consensus that existed at the end of the 20th century, during the golden age of neoliberal hegemony. It is

---

4 Germany is perhaps the most well-known exception to the political crisis of hegemony in the neoliberal project.

increasingly common to find references ‘a crisis of representation’. At the same time, political-ideological divisions have generated incompatible perceptions of reality, giving rise to the widespread circulation of fake news. Divergences in understanding no longer relate only to the way facts are appraised but also to what actually happens. The factual bases of common sense have been eroded in such a way that completely fanciful descriptions of reality are no longer implausible and are replicated by millions of users of social networks.<sup>5</sup>

However, these phenomena are not clearly integrated into an overall characterisation that explains the foundations of the current crisis of generalised hegemony. In other words, it is difficult for us to understand what kind of crisis we have in front of us. I think the main feature of this crisis is the existence of a profound crisis of societal projects, that is, the lack of truly hegemonic projects as models around which their representatives propose themselves as conductors to direct society (and not just to master it). If a hegemonic type of domination has been the typical political form in developed capitalist countries since 1870, its continuity does not seem to be assured since not only do the subaltern sectors not put forward alternative hegemonic projects, but the ruling class does not propose them either.

### 1.1 *The Failure of Neoliberalism as a Hegemonic Project*<sup>6</sup>

In the 1990s, there was a moment of strong neoliberal hegemony. It was so powerful that the international bourgeoisie (with its US military command) and the majority of the local bourgeoisies bet on the expansion of the political forms of representative democracy in most of the countries of the world (except for the strategic region of the Persian Gulf, where they continued to support extremely strong patriarchal monarchies and extreme elitism). They felt so sure of their capacity for ideological-political dominance that they encouraged themselves to build it within the democratic terrain in regions of the planet where they had hardly ever achieved it before. Thus, in countries where, in the 1970s or early 1980s, the ruling classes had had to give in to demands for democratisation (as in most Latin American or southern European countries),

5 This phenomenon is also driven by the fragmentation of public opinion into ‘information bubbles’ powered by the algorithms of digital social networks. Cf. E. Calvo and N. Aruguete, *Fake News, trolls y otros encantos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno editores, 2020). The extreme fragmentation of public opinion could end up completely dissolving this common arena and so force us to completely rethink our theorising about modern political dynamics and the theory of hegemony in particular.

6 A previous version of this section was published in Spanish in J. Balsa, ‘Crisis? What Crisis? Los tipos de crisis en Gramsci y la interpretación de la crisis de hegemonía actual’, *Materialismo Storico*, 1X-2 (2020) 326–372.

instead of betting on the return to dictatorships, they put their efforts into consolidating neoliberal political coalitions. In the vast majority of cases they succeeded in this objective, with new political forces, or with the conversion to neoliberalism of traditional structures. The alternatives revolved around more reactionary or more 'progressive' forces, but all of them won by neoliberalism. To consolidate these processes, teams of organic intellectuals collaborated in organising and promoting the involvement of the bourgeoisie in supporting this construction of neoliberal hegemony.<sup>7</sup>

However, neoliberalism has entered a crisis. With the turn of the century, this project lost hegemonic capacity in most of the countries of South America. After vicissitudes and rebellions (some of significant intensity), governments of the centre-left or left were installed through democratic means. They took less or greater distance from neoliberalism, in almost all the nations of the continent: Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Chile, Honduras, Paraguay and El Salvador.

Then the 2008 crisis called into question the neoliberal consensus in the more developed capitalist countries. It was evident that this project had failed in its attempt to promote a new cycle of economic growth (even in clearly reversing the downward trend in the rate of profit): growth levels in developed countries, which had been around 10% per year in the 1960s and 1970s, were around 2% in the first two decades of the 21st century, at least when they did not suffer sharp falls as in 2008 and 2009. The paradox is that, as Colin Crouch has titled his book, *the strange non-death of neoliberalism* has not yet taken place, largely because of the enormous political power of business, 'a widely accepted but highly undemocratic feature of our de facto constitutions'.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.2 *The Character of the Crisis of Neoliberal Hegemony*

Today we are faced with the difficulty of how to conceptualise this crisis of neoliberalism. It has a series of elements that clearly fit within the characteristics of what Gramsci describes as 'organic crises' since there are two types

---

7 For the Brazilian case, we have the detailed analysis of this process carried out by F.H.C. Casimiro, *A nova direita. Aparelhos de ação política e ideológica no Brasil contemporâneo* (São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2018). For an analysis of how a whole series of intergovernmental institutions operates, constructing the class consciousness of the transnational bourgeoisie (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization or the World Trade Organization, and the G20 and the G7), but, above all, a set of non-governmental groups (such as the Trilateral Commission, the Group of 30, the Systemic Risk Council, the World Economic Forum, or the Bilderberg group), see P. Phillips, *Megacapitalistas. La elite que domina el dinero y el mundo* (Buenos Aires: Roca editorial, 2019), 149–99.

8 C. Crouch, *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 137.

of strong tensions between the structural and the superstructural levels.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the tension that derives from a dynamic of accumulation that has become internationalised not only in the commercial sphere, but also in the financial and productive-industrial one. This process generated fiscal competition among nations (to attract investment) that functioned as a kind of ‘automatic trigger’ that produced a fading of the political-regulatory capacity of nation states and, at the same time, forced the implementation of increasingly neoliberal policies.<sup>10</sup> However, the political dynamics of the election of rulers continued to be in the hands of the popular vote and within the limits of these nation states. Then, when the neoliberal project loses all economic dynamism, the contradiction between the cosmopolitanism of economic life and the exasperated nationalism of state life (which Gramsci wrote about) becomes more acute.<sup>11</sup> Just as this contradiction, at another time, led to the First World War, today we are witnessing the resurgence of nationalisms, ‘trade wars’, military tensions and even direct military interventions or threats. The lack of institutional instances to resolve these international problems only increases the seriousness of this situation.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the tensions between structure and superstructure characteristic of organic crises are also observed at the level of the inadequacies between typical forms of subjectivity and accumulation dynamics. Neoliberal capitalism requires highly flexible business structures, based on the well-known expansion of outsourcing that allows large companies to abandon responsibility for working conditions, which are increasingly characterised by extreme precariousness. For this reason, it seeks the annulment of labour as a class, with a clear offensive against the power of the labour-subject, to turn it into an individual who provides a service.<sup>13</sup> A whole series of media-discursive operations has been deployed to construct subjectivities that celebrate ‘independence’, ‘risk’, ‘flexibility’ and that perceive precariousness in terms of ‘entrepreneurship’. However, the vast majority of workers reject these working conditions and their related ways of life. In general, without clear alternative

9 For more details on the Gramscian concept of ‘organic crisis’, see Balsa, ‘Crisis’, 327–341.

10 T. Piketty, *Capital e ideología* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2019).

11 A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi editore, 1975), 1755–9 (Q15§5).

12 A. Piva, ‘Una lectura política de la internacionalización del capital. Algunas hipótesis sobre la actual fase de la internacionalización del capital y el Estado nacional de competencia’, in *La dimensión inevitable: estudios sobre la internacionalización del Estado y el capital desde Argentina*, ed. V. Ciolli, F. Nasplesa and R. García Bernado (Bernal: UNQ, 2020), 13–41.

13 Pérez Rey, J. and A. Guamán. ‘Derecho del trabajo del enemigo: aproximaciones histórico-comparadas al discurso laboral neofascista’, in *Neofascismo. La bestia neoliberal*, ed. A. Guamán, E. Aragonés and S. Martín (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2019), 137–70.

models, they elaborate a critical vision from their 'good sense' or from corporate defences that often take up the discourse and traditions (unionist or political) of the 1940s to 1970s (although, in some countries, there have been novel combative identity processes, such as the French 'yellow vests movement').

Although these two types of tension could lead us to think that we are facing an organic crisis, I consider that the lack of an alternative hegemonic project leads us to put this conceptualisation aside. As Fabio Frosini and Michele Filippini pointed out and as I have observed in another work, the crisis of hegemony does not become 'organic' unless some social sector proposes another social order and its representatives appear as capable of leading society in that direction.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that these alternative hegemonic projects are conspicuous by their absence. On the one hand, there is the deep crisis of the socialist project. The left has not been able to recover from the defeat that the collapse of the Soviet experience meant. Neither Trotskyism, nor Eurocommunism (and its offshoots), nor the 'new' leftists managed to recreate in the masses the illusion that a transition to socialism that avoids the problems of authoritarianism and economic stagnation is possible. So the socialist project today does not have the capacity to even consider engaging with current struggles for hegemony, and all political projects with any degree of popular support are different variants of capitalism.

On the other hand, and partly as a result of this crisis of the socialist project, in the last thirty years there has been an acknowledged fading away of the social democratic project.<sup>15</sup> Like any class conciliation project, it requires the commitment of the fundamental classes to moderate their interests in order to take into account at least some of the interests of the other fundamental class. However, almost all the bourgeoisie have come to deny this commitment. Without the fear that the working class, and other allied classes, would promote a communist revolution, they stopped, as Gramsci would say, tempering their 'narrow economic-corporate interests'.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, they embraced the neoliberal creed and went on to openly boycott any social democratic project.

14 F. Frosini, '¿Qué es la 'crisis de hegemonía'? Apuntes sobre historia, revolución y visibilidad en Gramsci', *Las torres de Lucca*, 11 (2017), 45–71; M. Filippini, 'Antonio Gramsci e la scienza politica della crisi', in *Domande dal presente. Studi su Gramsci*, ed. L. Durante and G. Liguori (Rome: Carocci, 2012), 53–65; and Balsa, 'Crisis', 330–334.

15 We include within the social democratic project different political strategies (regardless of their denomination) that, in the mid-twentieth century, were based on class conciliation in order to reduce inequalities within capitalist models of society, such as Piketty encompasses them. Cf. Piketty, *Capital*, 580–690.

16 Gramsci, *Quaderni*, 1584 (Q13§17).



This situation has left this political force as a societal project without a real base; it has reduced it to a progressive discursiveness about non-economic issues and lost much of the electoral support that it enjoyed decades ago.

So, if there are no alternative hegemonic projects and, therefore, there is no organic crisis, it is worth wondering if neoliberalism could continue to be a hegemonic project. To achieve this, it would have to 'close' (or rather soften) the two tensions between structure and superstructure that we have described and, at the same time, relaunch a cycle of world economic growth. In relation to this last requirement, capitalism has surprised us time and again by generating growth cycles when the majority of left-wing intellectuals did not expect them, demonstrating its vitality and the timeliness of the Gramscian claim that the development of capitalism 'has been a "continuous crisis"'.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, regarding the structure/superstructure tension of a geopolitical nature, it cannot be ruled out that a certain world 'economic peace' will be reached. Obviously, this would have to meet a number of conditions, but there are so many intersecting economic interests and there is so much to lose if tensions lead to an open trade war (even more so if it escalates to military conflicts) that it is likely that the most rational actors will prevail and build some kind of 'economic peace'.

It is at the level of the composition of class interests and the trust in a certain degree of social integration where there is the greatest problem for recreating a neoliberal hegemony. The two main obstacles to this model are its inability to embrace the majority of the bourgeoisie and its incapacity to integrate social majorities.

The process of economic concentration means that only the top echelons of the bourgeoisie has managed to consolidate high rates of profit. Thus, in the United States, non-financial companies located within the highest decile had, in 2014, returns on capital investments that were five times higher than the median for all companies, when a quarter of a century earlier they were only two times higher.<sup>18</sup> In general, these extraordinary gains are based on different types of monopolistic or quasi-monopoly rents, although the digital sector stands out in the deployment of practices that have annihilated almost all possible competition.<sup>19</sup>

17 Gramsci, *Quaderni*, 1756–7 (Q15§5).

18 Council of Economic Advisers. *Issue Brief: Benefits of Competition and Indicators of Market Power*, (2016), 5, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20160414\\_cea\\_competition\\_issue\\_brief.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20160414_cea_competition_issue_brief.pdf).

19 Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and Administrative Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Investigation of Competition in Digital Markets. Majority Staff Report and Recommendations* (Washington: U.S. House of Representatives, 2020).

All this generates a process of hyper-concentration that seems to have no limits and which promises to reduce the relevant business world to a handful of mega-companies.<sup>20</sup> Faced with this, those elements of the bourgeoisie, who do not belong to mega-companies, and their political and ideological representatives fail to establish a 'sense of separation', of 'split', in relation to the economic model led by these mega-companies.<sup>21</sup> This failure is linked to two factors. In the first place, the mega-companies form the most dynamic sector of the economy and, therefore, opposing their expansion is presented as an 'opposition to progress'. And, secondly, the rest of the bourgeoisie is caught in the trap of neoliberal ideology itself, which makes a concentrated economic system with a monopoly character appear as 'the market', which, in practice, is something very different from the market, at least in its classic description.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, this ideology, by demonising regulatory state intervention of such 'markets', prevents the rest of the bourgeoisie from appealing to policies that slow down the concentration process and are the basis of some capitalist accumulation model differentiated from the neoliberal one.

Therefore, most of the bourgeoisie do not manage to counter-claim a societal political project that stops the concentration process, and its members end up adopting a sense of resignation, stating that there is no future and taking refuge in a certain consumerist 'enjoyment of life' (and something similar happens with the bulk of the petty bourgeoisie who foresee that they will have no future with this model). But resignation does not mean support for a societal project. Without the active commitment of the bourgeoisie, or of the majority of this class, it is very difficult for neoliberalism to have an interpellation capacity towards the whole of society.

---

20 Thus, in 2011, a nucleus of 147 closely related companies were capable of controlling 40% of the total of the value of all 43,000 transnational companies. See A. Cohglan and D. Mackenzie, 'Revealed – the Capitalist Network that Runs the World', *New Scientist* (19 October 2011). And the main 737 companies controlled 80% of the total value of these companies: S. Vitali, J. B. Glattfelder and S. Battiston, 'The Network Of Global Corporate Control', *PLoS ONE*, 6.10 (2011).

21 Gramsci argues that 'good sense' generates a 'feeling of "distinction", of "detachment", of independence just instinctive' (Q11§12): Gramsci, *Quaderni...*, 1385. This feeling, which he also calls the 'feeling of splitting', Gramsci admits to having taken from Sorel (Q25§5): Gramsci, *Quaderni...*, 2288. As Gramsci had written, 'the "people" feel they have enemies and identify them only empirically in the so-called lords'. 'This "generic" hatred is still of the "semi-feudal" type, not modern, and cannot be considered as a document of class consciousness: it is only its first glimpse, it is only, precisely, the elementary negative and polemic position...' (Q3§ 46): Gramsci, *Quaderni*, 23.

22 Crouch, *The Strange*.

The second reason that hinders the reconstruction of neoliberal hegemony is its inability to integrate the majorities within its societal model: it offers almost all members of the new generations of workers hyper-precarious jobs or self-exploitation in pseudo-self-employed work that is totally subordinate to mega-company platforms (such as being a driver with your own car or delivering products on a bicycle). Thus, mega-companies have objective difficulties presenting their particular as well as general interests and, most likely, the majority will never rationally opt for this type of society.

Faced with this inability to propose a model with minimal social integration, a sector of this very high bourgeoisie (comprising their 'most lucid minds'), without suggesting a change in the accumulation model request that higher taxes should be introduced, so that the state can promote massive welfare policies.<sup>23</sup> They fear that, without these containment measures, a class war will break out. In this regard, the American millionaire Nick Hanauer (founder of Amazon), in a video that was widely disseminated (and that was censored for years by the TED organisation itself), explains that without these welfare policies, sooner or later, all 'plutocrats' (as he called himself) will end up 'hanging'.<sup>24</sup> But the deployment of welfare policies that try to stop the social outbursts would not imply the construction of a hegemony around a model of society. Furthermore, these 'progressive' billionaires are clearly a minority within the high bourgeoisie. Most of them only think about the option of shutting themselves up in their condominiums, on their private islands, travelling in helicopters, protecting themselves with their private armies and letting the rest of the world sink into misery.

In any case, the acceptance or rejection of this socially dichotomous world will depend on the ideological struggle. Nevertheless, I think that it will be difficult for the neoliberal project to once again become clearly hegemonic. It is more likely that, in the short and medium term, non-hegemonic or only partially hegemonic dominations, with a strong coercive component, will be consolidated.

---

23 Thus, for example, some eighty 'Billionaires for Humanity' have signed a letter in which they state that 'Today, we, the undersigned millionaires, ask our governments to raise taxes on people like us. Immediately. Substantially. Permanently.' Already prior to the pandemic, a group of about 200 'Patriotic Millionaires' had formed in the United States, demanding that their taxes be raised.

24 Well, according to Hanauer, no free and open society can withstand this increase in economic inequality: [https://www.ted.com/talks/nick\\_hanauer\\_beware\\_fellow\\_plutocrats\\_the\\_pitchforks\\_are\\_coming?language=es#t-3596](https://www.ted.com/talks/nick_hanauer_beware_fellow_plutocrats_the_pitchforks_are_coming?language=es#t-3596).

### 1.3 *The Possibility of Non-Hegemonic Dominations*

In the absence, either in the present or in a plausible future, of a model of a minimally integrated society, the neoliberal project can only appeal to fanatical and/or irrational support. These supports have three sources: consumerism (which has operated as the substrate of the neoliberal consensus since the 1970s); the ideology of meritocracy and individualism; and the appeal to authoritarianisms, both political and social.

Consumerism constitutes the consensual basis of neoliberalism and relies more on practices and ways of life than on ideology.<sup>25</sup> In recent decades, forms and levels of consumption have expanded (including various types of goods and services) in a way that has substantially modified the lifestyles of the majority portions of society. The glaring differences between central and peripheral societies are recognised, as are differences between the social classes. However, for a huge part of the urban inhabitants of the planet, the changes in consumption have been significant and have allowed them to access practices that, until a few decades ago, were limited to high-income or upper-middle-income sectors (e.g. food delivery, 'smart' mobile phones, and even chauffeured cars). On the other hand, the ecological and social unsustainability of this consumerism is increasingly hard to overlook. In this sense, it promotes citizens who think of themselves almost exclusively as consumers, to the extent that they almost do not think about themselves, and who only enjoy the consumption they achieve or aspire to reach.

Meritocracy and individualism are intrinsic components of the neoliberal ideology, but they pre-existed it and would be able to survive it. They are a substrate of ideas typical of the common sense of most capitalist societies. Thus, in his studies of American society in the mid-1940s, Theodor Adorno encountered a harsh economic individualism, manifested in the absence of any 'compassion for the poor'.<sup>26</sup> The most irrational thing about this meritocratic discourse is that nowadays, with the dismantling of most of the Welfare State, it is obvious that the differences in the starting points marked by the class origin of each individual increasingly determine the chances of personal success or failure.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the extreme individualism of neoliberalism

25 J. Balsa, 'Las tres lógicas de la construcción de la hegemonía', *Theomai* 14 (2006), 16–36.

26 Th. Adorno, *Estudios sobre la personalidad autoritaria*, in Th. Adorno, *Escritos sociológicos II, Obra completa*, 9 vols, vol. 1 (Madrid: Akal, 2009), 402–5.

27 Perhaps the most obvious example of this reality is the 'perfect' relationship between the rate of access of young people to higher education in the United States (even considering short diplomas of only two years) and their parents incomes. In 2014, in the lowest income decile, only 30% accessed HE, while in the highest decile, more than 90% did so. But, in addition, the increases between both extremes showed an almost total linear relationship. See Piketty, *Capital*, 53.

presents two key dimensions for understanding the capacity for non-consensual domination. On the one hand, the idea of absolute respect for individual desires (and the economic capacity to achieve them) has been embedded, as has the belief that it should not be negotiated in pursuit of any collective goal. And, on the other hand, a deep disbelief has developed in the capacity of collectives as instances of deliberation and agreement around common objectives. This occurs from the most macro-social level of the lack of participation and deliberation in the vast majority of political forces, to micro-social levels where debate and agreements are no longer trusted to decide on common actions. In this way, a phenomenon that may seem paradoxical is produced: as Isaac Rosa has pointed out, the cult of triumphant individuality (which only thrives on the disciplined obedience of the whole) fosters authoritarian and hierarchical values when it is transferred to the level of politics.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, we are witnessing an expansion of anti-scientism and proto-fascist authoritarianism through the encouragement of social hatred, which explain the extraordinary appearance of authoritarian, anti-scientific and, at the same time, neoliberal political leaders (in clear contrast to other types of leader, those who upheld the neoliberal project in previous decades, such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Fernando Henrique Cardoso). Recourse to authoritarian elements of personality as the basis of support for fascism and authoritarianism was studied early on by Erich Fromm, for Germany, and by Theodor Adorno, for the United States.<sup>29</sup> Within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Wolfgang Streeck stated in 2013 that, if neoliberalism could no longer create the illusion of growth with social justice, it would most likely propagate a dictatorial model of a capitalist market economy immunised against all democratic corrective, keeping the opponents in a state of ideological marginalisation, political disorganisation and physical pressure.<sup>30</sup>

So, although they are unable to build hegemony in society as a whole, neoliberal forces appeal to authoritarianism, both in its political aspect (demanding the protection of the proprietary order, over and above any protection of rights and freedoms), as well as in its social aspects (linked to xenophobia, conservative values and contempt for the poor). This is how they obtain active

28 I. Rosa, 'Prólogo', in *Neofascismo*, ed. Guamán, Aragonese and Martín, 7–10.

29 E. Fromm, *Obreros y empleados en vísperas del Tercer Reich* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica-Lectura Mundi, 2012). Fromm only allowed the publication of this work in 1980, which was completed in the mid-1930s. Adorno, *Estudios*.

30 W. Streeck, *Comprando tiempo. La crisis pospuesta del capitalismo democrático* (Buenos Aires: Katz, 2016), 166.

consensus from fanatical groups more or less close to authoritarianism or, directly, to fascism, which are manifested in 'hate speech'.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, anti-intellectualism and anti-scientism are attitudes that are becoming increasingly widespread. Anti-intellectualism has been a typical attitude of the Republican right in the United States and, in Latin America, it has also been cultivated by authoritarian right groups, particularly during dictatorships. However, in recent years we have witnessed a recrudescence of these positions that are translated into strange phenomena such as criticism of vaccines, the rise of flat Earth conceptions, belief in the most ridiculous conspiracy theories or the uncritical acceptance of incredible fake news.<sup>32</sup> The authoritarian variant of neoliberalism appeals to emotions and moods that question basic elements of democratic legitimacy.<sup>33</sup> Almost all the elements with which Georg Lukács characterised irrationalism have reappeared: contempt of understanding and reason, outright glorification of intuition, an aristocratic theory of knowledge, rejection of social progress and even mythomania.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that the consolidation of neoliberalism requires, at least in most countries, the deployment of a militant base that is only provided by groups activated from authoritarian fanaticism and anti-intellectualism and anti-scientism (the non-authoritarian variant of neoliberalism fails to generate this capacity for mobilisation). However, it is very difficult for these groups to

---

31 Studies carried out in Argentina have found a strong association between authoritarian attitudes and a preference for neoliberal ideas. See E. Ipar, 'Neoliberalismo y neautoritarismo', *Política y Sociedad* 55:3 (2018), 825–49.

32 Some studies show a clear association between these anti-scientific attitudes and right-wing political identities. In the United States, there was a significant difference between Democrats' and Republicans' confidence in scientists, even before the arrival of the pandemic: 43% and 27%, respectively. See C. Funk, M. Hefferon, B. Kennedy and C. Johnson 'Trust and Mistrust in Americans' Views of Scientific Experts', *Pew Research Center* (2019), [https://www.pewresearch.org/science/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/08/PS\\_08.02.19\\_trust.in\\_scientists\\_FULLREPORT-1.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/science/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/08/PS_08.02.19_trust.in_scientists_FULLREPORT-1.pdf). Similarly, receptivity to conspiracy theories about the pandemic was twice as high among Republicans as among Democrats. See A. Mitchell, M. Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant and E. Shearer, 'Three Months In, Many Americans See Exaggeration, Conspiracy Theories and Partisanship in COVID-19 News', *Pew Research Center* (2020), <https://www.journalism.org/2020/06/29/three-months-in-many-americans-see-exaggeration-conspiracy-theories-and-partisanship-in-covid-19-news/2020>.

33 M. J. Fariñas, 'Supremacismo y fascismo', in *Neofascismo*, ed. Guamán, Aragonese and Martín, 107–18. And it is difficult for the left to locate themselves in this plane of the key disputes over sensitivity: L. Cadahia, 'Batallas de la sensibilidad: el populismo como alternativa al fascismo', in *Neofascismo*, ed. Guamán, Aragonese and Martín, 61–72.

34 G. Lukács, *El asalto a la razón. La trayectoria del irracionalismo desde Schelling hasta Hitler* (México: Grijalbo, 1983), 9.

be able to form electoral majorities that allow, in themselves, the democratic victory of neoliberalism. For this, this project needs to gain the support of other sectors drawn from consumerism and/or from the meritocratic-individualist discourse, and that, in general, have been linked to self-proclaimed identities as 'apolitical', when they do not display a determined 'anti-political' attitude. In other cases, they are closer to self-presented identities as 'republican', in clear opposition to what they qualify as 'demagogic populisms'. The true 'art' of the organic intellectuals of neoliberalism has been to prevent, in most countries, the emergence of a 'sense of separation' or 'split' between authoritarians and 'apolitical' or even between authoritarians and 'Republicans'.<sup>35</sup> Not only did intellectuals and concentrated media work to this end, there was an earlier element that facilitated this articulation: the 'anti-popular' perspective shared by these different groups. The diversity of perspectives between sympathisers of the centre-right and the extreme right, or between 'republicans' and 'nationalists', or between fanatics and the apolitical, hides deep affinities around a position clearly contrary to any policy of a 'popular' character or moderately reparative of social injustices. In the Argentine case, it translates into a renewed 'anti-Peronism', in the Brazilian case, in 'anti-Petismo' and in the United States in labelling any policy favourable to a minimum of social justice as 'socialist'.<sup>36</sup>

What is clear is that, despite presenting very different discursivities, at key conjunctures (elections, but also institutional or quasi-institutional coups) the forces from the centre to the right (above) and anti-popular subjectivities of all kinds (below) know how to unite, achieving that 'unity in action' which the left have often proclaimed but rarely concretised. In these decisive moments, this network of consumerist, meritocratic, authoritarian, anti-scientific and anti-popular attitudes is articulated around the candidate with the best possibilities of impeding the triumph of the left or centre-left.

Thus, in this way the possibility of non-hegemonic or only partially hegemonic forms of domination are consolidated, especially if the control of the state apparatus is articulated with the management of the concentrated media to achieve a substantial reduction in political participation of an important part of the subordinate sectors, the disinformation of the majority and the increasing imposition of authoritarian measures. For the application of coercion, in addition to recourse to the police and military forces, these authoritarian projects can count on the support of the shock forces (more or less organised) of

35 The most notable exception seems to be that of France.

36 To account for these clearly antipopular foundations of 'anti-Peronism', see A. Grimson, *¿Qué es el peronismo?* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2019). And for 'anti-petismo', see J. Souza, *A Elite do atraso, Da escravidão à Lava Jato* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Casa da Palavra, 2017).

the ultra-right fanatics and, perhaps, with the private forces of security companies. There is a high probability that, as Albert Noguera Fernández argues, neofascism could become the political-legal superstructure of an order of infra-institutionalised societies, without collective structures of solidarity and in which social cohesion is structured, from hate speech onwards.<sup>37</sup>

Probably, these processes will not have a decisive resolution. It is more likely that a series of conjunctures will define this course, especially in electoral situations that can consolidate authoritarian options (such as the Trump or Bolsonaro elections). And these authoritarian rights, even when they meet electoral defeat, stay on as the main opposition force. However, we have seen that these triumphs do not allow them to advance rapidly in the consolidation of highly authoritarian regimes, in the way that the fascisms of a hundred years ago did. It seems that they are prevented by institutional frameworks and the fact that part of the bourgeoisie (especially its higher echelons) defend these frameworks because of the guarantees they provide against the possible arbitrariness of such authoritarian leaders or the chaos to which they can lead the world (perhaps a section of the ruling class has learned something from the disastrous fascist experiences). In any case, it is very risky to trust the bourgeoisie as guarantor of the democratic order. We have seen, even after the experience of Nazism, that they supported the fiercest and longest dictatorships in Latin America and southern Europe, for example. We know that the basis for the preservation of democratic regimes stems from popular rejection of authoritarianism. Now, it is worth asking ourselves if these rejections of the authoritarian advance could build an alternative hegemonic project or if defensive attitudes are the only recourse.

#### 1.4 *Anti-Neoliberal Coalitions, Their Relative 'Jacobinism' and the Tensions within Them*

From a gaze impregnated with the Gramscian 'optimism of the will', we witness the formation of coalitions of the forces of the centre-left and left (with the exception of the Trotskyist parties), among other countries, in Argentina, Spain, Mexico and, until recently, Portugal (to some extent also in Brazil and Italy). In these experiences diverse political traditions converge: the national-popular forces, social democracy, the popular left and the various traditional left parties, with the support of union leaders, social movements and the 'feminist tide'. It seems that all these spaces have understood that only by uniting and articulating their best contributions (leaving aside their sectarianisms) can

---

37 A. Noguera Fernández, 'El desmontaje de la constitución democrática: auge y formas de los neofascismos', in *Neofascismo*, ed. Guamán, Aragoneses and Martín, 89–106.



defeat a neoliberalism that, although it is in crisis, maintains electoral capacity and dominance. In other countries, with bipartisan political traditions, we can observe that the left currents within the centrist parties have gained greater momentum (for example, the sectors represented by Bernie Sanders in the US Democratic Party, or those headed by Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labourism).

At these confluences, the centre-left sectors seem to accept the need to incorporate the air of renewal brought by the new left, with its militancy, its spirit of confrontation and the recreation of political ideals. And, from the other side, the old and new militancies of the wide range of 'the left' perceive that the best way of influencing reality or, even, accumulating forces for a relatively near future, is only possible through the triumph of these coalitions that prevent the consolidation of neoliberal power and authoritarianism, even if at the cost of moderating the policies that will be promoted once they are in charge of the state.

The greatest difficulty of these coalitions is being able to define an alternative project that is not a mere challenge to the neoliberal model. In any case, this rejection of neoliberalism, if it were clear (it should be noted that it is not always the case), makes it possible to delimit three central political-ideological axes for this possible project: first, the complaint that the 'pro-market discourse' masks the consolidation of monopolies and oligopolies that prevent the deployment of a truly competitive market; secondly, the agreement that this market logic must be limited to certain areas of the economy, while others must be democratically debated and planned by the state; and, thirdly, a certain consensus that social issues do not have to be governed by the market (such as education, health, gender equity, land use or care for the environment, to give only the most obvious examples).

However, these principles are not enough to form an alternative project. It will be essential that these coalitions build collective and democratic spaces for debate and develop a common programme. Another and crucial difficulty for these coalitions arises from their need to develop a 'Jacobin' attitude. This attitude allows the political forces to have more autonomy in relation to class representations that, in many cases, were won by resignation or bureaucratization. In other cases, various class elements were not even properly organised.<sup>38</sup>

---

38 Gramsci has highlighted that the characteristic feature of Jacobinism and 'of every great revolution' is that of 'forcing the situation (apparently) and creating irreparable fait accompli, pushing the bourgeoisie by dint of kicking in the butt, by an extremely energetic and determined group of men' (Q19§24): Gramsci, *Quaderni*, 2027. More details on this question of Jacobinism and the current left and centre-left coalitions, in Balsa, 'Crisis', 356–363.

As was seen in Latin America, Jacobinism was necessary to be able to realise some counter-neoliberal proposals, in a context of more than four decades of predominance of neoliberal ideology and an attitude of deep resignation on the part of vast sectors of society. But Jacobinism generates a series of tensions with the representations of the different classes and groups (which feel relegated by the Jacobin political leadership). At the same time, these coalitions do not cease to depend on the bourgeoisie, which has little empathy with these political forces, to maintain high reinvestment rates. Finally, in order not to lose electoral support in the broad moderate sectors of the population, these governments must temper their ways and policies. But a 'light Jacobinism' can become a true oxymoron. In any case, we consider that these tensions should not be conceptualised as insurmountable contradictions but, on the contrary, as 'creative tensions' that unfold in every emancipatory process.<sup>39</sup>

## 2 Strategies against the COVID-19 Pandemic

We already have some elements that help to answer why the bourgeoisie has not assumed a clearer and more prominent role in promoting a policy of care for the entire population; it has not promoted strategies of elimination of the circulation of the virus in order to achieve, after strict and brief confinements, a reactivation of the economy.

First of all, we must consider the advantages that the pandemic context has provided to a sector of the bourgeoisie. The virtualisation of a large part of our lives means an extraordinary economic expansion for all those companies linked to the Internet. In addition, a digitised life is also a life in which users of social networks and other virtual platforms produce, now full time, information so that they can increasingly direct and profit from our desires. We can understand that this element of the bourgeoisie had little interest in the fact that the pandemic could be quickly controlled. But this advantage is remains concentrated in a handful of mega-companies and their expansion has been at the expense of the rest of the bourgeoisie, particularly in a context of economic downturn. Therefore, the lack of support of the majority of the bourgeoisie for virus elimination strategies remains to be explained. The key may lie in the fact that the policies necessary to implement this strategy go against the elements that neoliberalism mobilises in pursuit of non-hegemonic domination. Symptomatically, where neoliberal forces still maintain a certain quota

---

39 A. García Linera, *Las tensiones creativas de la revolución* (La Paz: Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional, 2011).

of effectiveness in achieving hegemony, as, for example, in Germany, care policies have been intense.

In the first place, a virus elimination strategy encourages the state to assume an important role, not only in the organisation of public health but also in the reordering of society as a whole. And this is anathema to the neoliberal exaltation of individualism and meritocracy, and the belief that everything must be in the hands of '(self) regulated markets' (although we know that this means being under the control of the monopolistic or oligopolistic companies).

Second, this strategy demands patience, contrary to patterns of consumer immediacy that neoliberalism has cultivated for decades. Branko Milanovic has described it as the 'culture of impatience': consume now, even beyond the financial capabilities of households. In addition, the financialisation of the entire economy has promoted the search for quick economic success, even by applying 'tricks'. This would explain that, in Western countries, confinements were only reluctantly imposed and lifted as soon as there was an improvement and which the public interpreted as the end of the pandemic, thus favouring the arrival of a fiercer second wave.<sup>40</sup>

Third, elimination strategy also implies that people develop responsible attitudes and not that of mere claimants of rights. But, as Daniel Feierstein argues, this contradicts the subjectivity promoted by neoliberalism in recent decades, a subjectivity centred on the position of the consumer, claimant of 'their rights', in opposition to the personality of the producer-responsible. Consequently, these subjectivities have great difficulties in thinking about what should be done as a society and what measures should be implemented by the state.<sup>41</sup> Finally, in the speeches of the neoliberal leadership and also in their electoral base were proposals and demands for totally contradictory measures.

Fourth, this strategy requires the sharing and understanding of rational analyses that weigh the advantages and disadvantages of applying strict lockdowns. As we have seen, one of the keys to the current neoliberal domination is to encourage irrationalism. The closure of these sectors to rationally analyse the various measures against the pandemic has favoured the mistaken perception that nothing is useful against COVID. It is well known that scientific, rational analyses of the different possible strategies never reached centre-stage in public opinion.

40 B. Milanovic, 'Impatience: A Deep Cause of Western Failure in Handling The Pandemic?' (Dec. 2020), <http://glineq.blogspot.com/2020/12/impatience-deep-cause-of-westerns.html>.

41 D. Feierstein, *Pandemia. Un balance social y político de la crisis del Covid-19* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2021), 172.

And, fifthly, elimination strategies appeal to collective care, to a discourse of unity, calling on people to postpone personal freedoms in favour of the health of the whole, something that is totally opposed to the discourse of hate and selfishness typical of neo-fascists interpellations.

In summary, the application of a strategy to eliminate the circulation of the virus contained too many elements that contradict the current neoliberal project and the type of subjectivities that have been 'cultivated' during the last four decades and, more specifically, of the irrational fanaticisms of the neo-fascist variants of neoliberalism. For this reason, most of the right-wing political forces, mass media communicators and that part of the citizenship won over by authoritarian or even 'apolitical' positions leaned towards mitigation strategies against COVID-19, if they did not favour outright minimisation or denial of the importance of the pandemic and search the 'herd immunity' (more or less explicit). The examples of Bolsonaro and Trump illustrate these attitudes in the governments of Brazil and the United States. In those states or provinces where centre-left forces ruled, right-wing forces conspired with national executives to sabotage many of measures of care. On the other hand, right-wing forces in opposition insistently agitated for the need to open up all possible activities, irresponsibly appealing to the fatigue among certain sectors of the citizenry (for example, in Argentina and Spain).

Through such attempts to sabotage or suppress strategies for eliminating the circulation of the virus, denialists contributed to further polarise the political climate. Opposing views were built up around how the pandemic was being handled. For example, in the United States, almost all Republicans supported the way Trump managed the pandemic, while virtually no Democrats did so.<sup>42</sup> Polarisation even generated a very different perception of the dangerousness of COVID: three times as many Republicans as Democrats believed that the severity of the pandemic had been exaggerated.<sup>43</sup> Predictably, these

---

42 F. Newport, 'The Partisan Gap in Views of the Coronavirus', *Gallup* (May 2020), <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/311087/partisan-gap-views-coronavirus.aspx>. In an international study carried out between June and August 2020, this country stood out because 76% of those who supported the ruling party gave an affirmative opinion to this question, while only the 29% of those who did not support him. See M. Mordecai and A. Connaughton, 'Public Opinion about Coronavirus Is More Politically Divided in U.S. Than In Other Advanced Economies', *Pew Research Center* (2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/28/public-opinion-about-coronavirus-is-more-politically-divided-in-u-s-than-in-other-advanced-economies/>.

43 Mitchell et al., 'Three Months In'. This trend is maintained even if other factors are statistically controlled: H. L. Allcott, Boxell, J. Conway, M. Gentzkow, M. Thaler and D. Yang, 'Polarization and Public Health: Partisan Differences in Social Distancing during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *J Public Econ* 191 (November 2020).

differences and the messages of the leaders who adopted denialist positions had an impact on the observance of the restrictions that were dictated. Thus, in the areas with the highest electoral support for Trump, there was less respect for social distancing and use of face masks, as was the case in towns with the highest electoral support for Bolsonaro.<sup>44</sup> It has even been possible to measure how the speeches and attitudes of the Brazilian president generated a relaxation in social distancing in the localities where he had greatest support.<sup>45</sup> It is not surprising that such support led to an increase in cases and hospitalisations for COVID-19 in the localities where it predominated.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, we can highlight that in Argentina COVID was considered a strong threat regardless of political preferences and inscriptions and there was general support for measures to restrict movement at the beginning of the pandemic. However, already in the month of July, some differences were perceived and by the beginning of 2021 we detected noticeable discrepancies according to political identities: practically all the ruling party voters supported the way in which the pandemic had been conducted, while only a fourth of the voters for the neoliberal force that had ruled Argentina until 2019 did so.<sup>47</sup> In Spain in December 2020, although more than 80% of left and centre-left voters requested stricter measures, slightly more than half of right-wing voters also requested restrictions.<sup>48</sup>

- 
- 44 J. Barrios and Y. Hochber, 'Risk Perception Through the Lens of Politics in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 27008* (2020); S. Kushner Gadarian, S. W. Goodman and T. Pepinsky, 'Partisanship, Health Behavior, and Policy Attitudes in the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Plos One* (2020), and M. Milosh, M. Painter, D. Van Dijke, and A. L. Wright, 'Unmasking Partisanship: How Polarization Influences Public Responses to Collective Risk', *Becker Friedman Institute Working Paper 102* (2020).
- 45 N. Ajzenman, T. Cavalcanti and D. Da Mata, 'More than Words: Leaders' Speech and Risky Behavior During a Pandemic', *IZA Discussion Paper 14229* (2021); T. Leone, 'The Harmful Effects of Denial: When Political Polarization meets COVID-19 Social Distancing', *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* 4,3 (2021), 10–30; I. Fernandes, G. Almeida Lopes Fernandes, G. Fernandes and P. Salvador, 'Ideology, Isolation, and Death. An Analysis of the Effects of Bolsonaroism in the COVID-19 Pandemic' (July 17, 2020), SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3654538>; and R. Karim and J. Chan, 'Mayoral Party Identity and Social Distancing Behaviors in Brazil' (July 2, 2020), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3642710>.
- 46 L. A. Mariani, J. Gagete-Miranda and P. Retzl, 'Words Can Hurt: How Political Communication Can Change the Pace of an Epidemic', *Covid Economics, Vetted and Real-Time Papers* (2020).
- 47 J. Balsa, P. Román, G. de Martinelli and J. I. Spólita, '¿La pandemia está alterando el mapa electoral de 2019?', *90 Líneas* (2021), <https://90lineas.com/2021/01/29/la-pandemia-esta-alterando-el-mapa-electoral-de-2019/>.
- 48 Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. *Barómetro Diciembre 2020*, [http://www.cis.es/cis/opencv/ES/1\\_encuestas/estudios/listaMuestras.jsp?estudio=14536](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencv/ES/1_encuestas/estudios/listaMuestras.jsp?estudio=14536).

In the campaigns against the measures of care, the right appealed to each of the elements that we have already analysed as keys to maintaining some form of neoliberal domination: the desires of consumption and a return to a life marked by consumerism; a vindication of ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’ (especially of movement) above any form of responsibility; a critical attitude to science and the rational evaluation of possible strategies against the pandemic, and a discourse focused on hatred and the exacerbation of political fanaticism, at a time when social unity was necessary to guarantee collective care.

The appeal by the right to irrational attitudes also achieved some success because it was articulated with psychological mechanisms of dissociation (when one continues to act as if a reality did not exist, despite the fact that it is recognised). Thus, the number of deaths from COVID in each county did not show an association with the level of intention to vote for Trump or the votes finally cast in his favour (a phenomenon that has been called ‘The Political Coronavirus Paradox: Where the Virus Was Worst, Voters Supported Trump the Most’).<sup>49</sup> Our research showed that of those Argentines who had a close relative or a close friend in an intensive care unit (ICU) or who had died from COVID, in the face of the arrival of the second wave 28% did not agree to the introduction of new confinements (drastic or intermittent).<sup>50</sup>

These dissociations were articulated with denialist discourses. As Feierstein observes, denialism took the form of the relativisation or minimisation of the pandemic (‘the dead are not so many’), combined with a certain justification (that the elderly die, as a cost to pay in order not to disrupt even for a few weeks or months the social life of the younger population), the establishment of false equivalences with other causes of death (‘it is like a flu’ or ‘it does not cause more deaths than traffic accidents’), the oversimplification that led to non-compliance with the rules of care and the dissemination of all kinds of conspiracy theories that also led to legitimising the violation of restriction measures.

In short, these political strategies of the right gave it some successes, in terms of maintaining a solid fan base and even significant electoral support, despite its evident failure to handle the pandemic. So a more rational (and

49 Ch. Wilson, ‘The Political Coronavirus Paradox: Where the Virus Was Worst, Voters Supported Trump the Most’, *Time*, 11 November 2020; Ch. Warshaw, L. Vavreck and R. Baxter-King, ‘Fatalities from COVID-19 are Reducing Americans’ Support for Republicans at Every Level of Federal Office’, *Science Advances* 6.4 (2020); and S. McMinn and R. Stein, ‘Many Places Hard Hit by COVID-19 Leaned More Toward Trump In 2020 Than 2016’, *NPR* (6 Nov. 2020).

50 SOCPOL-UNQ, ‘Actitudes frente a la llegada de una segunda ola de contagios’ (Mar. 2021). Available at: [www.socpol.ar/informe/4](http://www.socpol.ar/informe/4).

traditional) right was losing importance and had enormous difficulties in building its own political space. The cases of Trumpism and Bolsanarism are, surely, the most obvious. Yet they were not enough to prevent the defeat of Trump and the construction of a scenario in which the triumph of Lula is predicted in the Brazilian presidential elections of 2022. Majorities seem to lean in favour of leaders and political forces that prioritise the care of life. Thus, for example, in Argentina, we have detected that even a quarter of those who, in 2019, wanted the continuity of the neoliberal government blamed those who went on 'anti-lockdowns marches', driven by right-wing opposition.<sup>51</sup> But the recent triumph of right-wing candidates in Madrid shows that people do not always sanction leaders who have failed to protect them.

Sectors opposed to the strategies of elimination and, even, of suppression of the circulation of the virus, have achieved enormous visibility in a public opinion strongly influenced by the concentrated media. These sectors, which are a minority, are presented in this public opinion as constituting a majority. And, most dangerously, they themselves end up believing that they are in the majority. 'Intense minorities' have been built that think everyone agrees (or should agree) with them and that, therefore, they behave in this sense. So strong are these beliefs that, in the United States, they led this minority to consider that only the existence of 'fraud' could explain to them that their electoral triumph had not been enshrined. Regarding disputes over care measures, they demanded that they should be suspended, no matter the seriousness of the epidemiological situation, and they behaved as if they had the majority legitimacy to do so. At the same time, these mass media manipulations have made the majority who are in favour of care policies think of themselves as minorities, as the Argentine case study has demonstrated.<sup>52</sup>

The biggest problem is that these beliefs seem to have undermined the confidence of part of the centre-left ruling groups and weakened their capacity to act in favour of more careful strategies. Yet there remains the possibility that the real majorities will finally value the role of the state and of those workers who took risks to maintain essential services and the care for life. In this the centre-left coalitions have a basis on which to build a stronger consensus. As the forces of the right slide towards increasingly authoritarian, irrational and discourses showing lack of care for life, the centre-left coalitions can capture

51 J. Balsa, G. de Martinelli, P. Romani, and J. I. Spólita, 'Covid, política y cuidados', *El Cohete a la luna* (24 January 2021), <https://www.elcoheteealaluna.com/covid-politica-y-cuidados/>.

52 J. Balsa, D. Feierstein, G. de Martinelli, P. Romani, and J. I. Spólita. '¿Qué harías si fueras Presidente y se empezaran a llenar las terapias intensivas?', *Página 12* (2021), <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/328644-que-harias-si-fueras-presidente-y-se-empezaran-a-llenar-las->

the more moderate sectors of the electorate. The key, I suggest, would be for them to do so while avoiding the 'centrist' turn that characterised social democracies in the 1990s. Instead, they should take advantage of the situation to consolidate a new common sense of solidarity and anti-individualism, for which it is necessary to promote reflections on the meanings of life that distance themselves from unsustainable consumerism and the individualism associated with it and that, instead, promote articulations between the idea of 'good living', social integration, respect for diversity, solidarity and humanism.