Inequality in Argentina: The Interplay of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Socioeconomic Conditions

Marchiondelli, Valeria

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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"Inequality in Argentina: The Interplay of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Socioeconomic Conditions"

Valeria Marchiondelli

s2649497

s2649497@vuw.leidenuniv.nl

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INTRODUCTION

Argentina has undergone significant socio-economic transformations in the last decades, yet despite the significant social progress the country has gone through since the mid-1980s, the issue of inequality remains persistent and a stable piece of discussion in electoral periods. This thesis delves into the intricacies of inequality in the Argentinian society, investigating the cultural, historical and economic factors that generate and sustain these disparities. By looking into how extensively inequality affects certain sections of the population, namely gendered and racialised people, this study aims to provide a novel perspective on the systemic issues faced by people of colour (POC) and women of colour in Argentina (WOC). The thesis will include a description of the foundational myths of the country regarding race and gender, which with its mixed claims of being a white-only and ethnic crossroad nation present an almost unique case in Latin America.

Nonetheless, the body of the research will focus on the contemporary challenges faced by these social groups in present-day Argentina. By undertaking a thorough investigation of the discourses that created and sustained the current state of affairs, this thesis seeks to explicate Argentina's extremely complex structures of inequality and economic policy. This will be de facto achieved by solving the work's central research question: "How did race, class and gender influence the conditions for inequality's reproduction in Argentina?".

The ultimate aspiration of the research is to present a clear analysis and argumentation that adds to the framework dedicated to addressing and mitigating social inequality. This approach is fuelled by the conviction that it is impossible to find novel and efficient policies targeting social issues without developing an understanding of the ideologies that enabled their existence in the first place. The second underlying conviction of this thesis is that tackling inequality levels in Argentina would benefit the overall development and progress of the country.

For the sake of transparency and to ensure the minimisation of unchecked biases in this work, it is important to state that the catalyst for this research stems equally from my commitment to social equality and women's rights and from my connection to Argentinian society.

Personal vocations aside, the in-depth exploration of this issue could bring significant advancements, which can be grouped into four macro-categories: academic, political, economic and social. Firstly, reflecting on the intersection of race, gender and class in contemporary society can lead to (specialistic) theoretical advancements in the area, especially if and when providing new empirical insights. Moreover, it contributes to the historical contextualisation of social issues from a

non-Eurocentric perspective, given this thesis delves into the particular case of racialisation and gender discrimination in Argentina. From a political standpoint, establishing a clear portrayal of the problem can contribute to better policymaking. This can be channelled both through policies dedicated to macroeconomy and/or inequality in particular and through a more conscious approach to how inequality can have detrimental effects on democracy and governance. Lastly, research can raise awareness of the real conditions faced by marginalised groups and thus help tailor the initiatives that seek to address these challenges.

Furthermore, understanding how inequality plays out multidimensionally can lead to more effective gender-sensitive economic measures that go beyond the simple motherhood-based subsidisation popular in Argentina. In fact, looking at inequality from a purely monetary point of view oftentimes paradoxically worsens the unequal conditions faced by women, as it deviates attention from the disparities connected to the state's institutions such as education, or healthcare. Finally, it goes without saying that by elaborating a method to reduce inequality, the tensions that often arise from social discrimination would decrease as well. Equally beneficial to society and governance would be the increase in public understanding of how inequality and social unrest are intertwined.

Not studying this topic would result in significant losses, from retaining an incomplete understanding of inequality and its intersection with gender and race in non-Western countries to the stagnation of theories regarding (gendered) inequality and social justice. Disregarding the effects of inequality on a country also entails the weakened representation of marginalised people, the implementation of likely ineffective policies and thus heightened social unrest. Naturally, ineffective policymaking results in inefficient social spending and potentially more economic instability. Not to mention that many scholars have warned against the dangers of inequality to economic growth. All of these points would provide a solid basis to justify the research on this topic, and yet the moral imperative of studying and attempting to "solve" inequality has not been mentioned.

These are exceptionally big premises for a master's degree thesis. To refrain from self-delusion, and to ground this work in the real world, it must be stated that this piece in particular will not achieve any of that. It will not be an earth-shattering, world-changing, revolutionary research. Not necessarily because of its merits, but because of the general conditions that surround the realisation of this thesis. It is just a drop in the ocean, the first micro-step in what will be a lifelong struggle to support women's rights. And yet, first steps and drops are crucial to the fight against injustices.

The body of research will be structured as follows: firstly, a literature review outlining different schools of thought on inequality will be provided. Secondly, the methodology employed will be explained with an evaluation of its limitations and advantages. Then, the analysis will follow, branched in two chapters: one focusing on race and class, the other framing the role of gender in the making of inequality.

Theoretical framework

This thesis was profoundly influenced by several works, and in particular by the publications of Feminist scholars such as Maria Lugones, Chandra Mohanty, Silvia Federici and more. As aforementioned, this research seeks to understand the gendered and racialised dimensions of inequality in the Argentine context and how social categorisations reinforce unequal conditions. To do this, it is vital to establish a robust theoretical framework that draws upon economic, historical, political and gender/social investigations.

Central is Lugones' (2010) theorisation of decolonial feminism, revolutionary in its conceptualisation of social categorisations as complementary, relational discourses. In her words, "Modernity organises the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous, separable categories" which is an inherently inept methodology to understand non-universal conditions such as racialisation, class, gender and sexuality/sexualisation which prescind the realm of modernity and are the result of centuries-long historical dominations. To fully represent the extent of discrimination in patriarchal-capitalist societies, it is necessary to move past the "categorial logic" that originated from patriarchy and capitalism (Ibid). This is the reason that led to the exclusion of the intersectional feminist approach: women's lives are inherently integrated within the popular oppressive discourses that define their existence, sectorising the analysis of their reality would lead only to partial understanding dependent on the discursive variable picked by the observer (i.e. gender, class, race, etc). Moreover, adopting an intersectional perspective would entail the admission of a "condition zero" of womanhood, a framework in which any woman who departs from the white, cisgender and middle-class departure point is a degeneration of "the norm". In light of this, Mohanty's book "Feminism Without Borders" establishes a much more inclusive framework which acknowledges the plurality of womanhood and is attentive to the cases of WOC and women in the developing world without suggesting a hierarchy of social categorisations.

Moreover, Mohanty argues that "our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them", meaning that feminist politics should make

use of these diverse sources of knowledge to make an impact in all aspects of society that affect women - including economy and social justice (2003). This explicates the core mission of this thesis, which attempts to put Mohanty's ideals at work in the specific Argentinian context. Finally, Federici (2004) as well as social reproduction theory have a prominent role in my research. That is explained by these theories' attention to how the above-mentioned power structures enunciated by Lugones and Mohanty were perpetrated in society over centuries. The household is seen as the core of capitalism's nurturing in social reproduction theory, where everything that happens in the domestic realm (education, culturisation, housework, etc) serves to reproduce the conditions of market production and capital accumulation (Munro 2019). Federici then regards women as the primary enactors of housework and thus disciplining and, in some way, puts social reproduction at the centre of women's oppression (2004). That is, women have been forcibly domesticated because the market needs a group of free labourers who dedicate their time to sustain the preconditions of market functioning (Ibid). Indeed, the topic of housework and motherhood in particular has been widely discussed in academia to determine whether it constitutes a substantial factor in gendered inequality. Frequently raised questions regard the extent to which "real" work is liberating for women and/or if motherhood plays a real role in women's segregation to the household, less remunerative roles, etc. While answers may vary depending on the context taken into consideration, I believe Federici's research holds several insights pertinent to Argentina.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inequality has been the characteristic feature of the majority of human-organised societies since the dawn of time. Impoverished populations dependent on precarious livelihoods are easy to coerce into letting go of consent and authority. In this sense, historically, economic power was the key to gaining legislative and political power as well. Or, at best, the functioning of a society based on capital accumulation rendered legislative, political and economic power complementary and corroborating forces. Consequently, for centuries the existence of inequality has been "commonsensified" in cultures and popular knowledge. The multifaceted dimensions of inequality have inevitably led scholars and policymakers to produce lengthy discussions and analyses on the topic. Especially in contemporary years, the 2008 global crisis has sparked a renewed interest in inequality and its effects on the economy.

There are three major "academic teams" discussing the topic of inequality: scholars that see inequality as a mostly neutral phenomenon - unfair, but not detrimental to society or the economy. Then, more critical academics who blame globalisation and "neoliberalism" for the uptick in intra-country poverty and inequality. Lastly, a nicher group tries to re-historicise the foundations of the world economy and argues that inequality is an unshakeable aspect of capitalism. Of this last group, most production comes from decolonial feminist academics who focus on how the establishment of social classifiers (like race, class and gender) simplified capital accumulation by constructing cosmologies which justify exploitation, segregation and dehumanisation.

Inequality as a self-resolving issue

There are three general undertones within this stream of political economy: inequality is not something we should worry about because growth is fixing it anyway, inequality is fine as long as both rich and poor are increasing their capital and finally, inequality is not detrimental to the economy (Norberg 2008; Contreras 2010; McCloskey 2010; Giles 2015). According to scholars who fall under this banner, inequality is an overblown issue highlighted by those who fail to consider that the world is experiencing a period of unprecedented wealth. In an article published by The New York Times, McCloskey (2016) says that economic performance cannot rely on inequality as an indicator, so long as "the average Frenchwoman has enough to eat". In that piece, McCloskey summarises her book "Bourgeois Virtue: an Ethics for an Age of Commerce", an analysis of how

the bourgeois class has brought about positive change for the whole world thanks to free trade and liberty (McCloskey 2010). Ultimately, her argument relies on the conviction that the world economy was innovated by the West's ideological changes led by the rise of the middle class. It is the latter that, through the pursuit of advancement in technology and the call for the elimination of trade barriers, have driven the economic growth of European countries (Ibid). According to this theory, the fault for other countries' lag in development is the lack of innovation. As such, whatever rate of inequality might exist in a country, the past has shown us that free trade will eventually lift everyone out of poverty - no matter the disparities in (previous accumulation of) wealth, even less that of income (Ibid). Norberg (2008) advances similar arguments. In the first chapter of his book, he disputes the notion that globalisation has made the rich richer and the poor poorer, defining it a half-truth. He mentions that while *some* rich people have increased their capital, so did the poor in many parts of the world, like India and several Asian countries (Ibid). The merit is once again attributed to the development spurred by the advent of "greater individual liberty", which opened the way to the international exchange of investments, ideas and resources - "allowing the developing world to benefit from the knowledge, wealth, and inventions of other countries" (Ibid). Thanks to globalisation, nations have managed to exchange more effective methods of production securing the food supply, advancing healthcare provision, and of no less importance is the ability of subjects to pursue whatever occupation they desire independently (Ibid). In essence, poverty and absolute poverty are about to become a thing of the past. All indicators (life expectancy, hunger, infant mortality, etc.) demonstrate that capitalism and globalisation are performing well.

As McCloskey (2010) states, what brings us to presume that nowadays things are turning for the worst is simply a bias (the "negativity bias") which influences people to regard the past as an easier time. On the other hand, all data seem to show otherwise, including for developing countries - Latin America, for example, has seen an increase in wealth of 60% since 1965 (Norberg 2008). Other scholars who focus on the economics of the area have come to similar conclusions.

Contreras (2010) analyses the evolution of poverty and inequality in Chile between 1990-1996. Chile's case is interesting for two reasons: firstly, the period taken into question has represented a time of significant growth for the country. Secondly, Chile is part of Latin America's Cono Sur, a sub-region which includes Argentina and Uruguay and has always been regarded as a conglomerate of the best-performing nations in the area. Hence, it could be assumed that analyses of Chile's performance could provide insights that would then contribute to forming an economic strategy for its neighbouring countries, if not for the whole of Latin America. Contreras' main findings hold that

during this period of quick growth, Chile's poverty levels decreased by over 85% (Ibid). He argues that a "sustained level of high inequality is not necessarily associated with a lower welfare level" (Ibid). Actually, in the examined case he registers a "continuous decrease in poverty, while inequality remains the same" (Ibid). This has left all members of society - both poor and rich- better off (Ibid).

Some scholars have tried to produce research that would disprove the negative effects of inequality on the economy or society. Nonetheless, others have also admitted that several applied econometrics investigations were unable to determine a solid pattern of causality between inequality and economic growth.

Perhaps even more extreme is the stance of those scholars who have written pieces that state inequality should not be minded by economists at all. For example, Giles (2015) states that while being unjust, inequality cannot be said to be impacting negatively economic growth in the absence of evidence. "With the results almost entirely based on cross-country correlations, they also have troubling inconsistencies" (Ibid). He then goes on to cite how the IMF's research found that the rich's higher share of income harms the economy, while the OECD says only the gap between the middle class and the working class counts (Ibid).

Despite presenting quite pervasive claims, there are several aspects of inequality's influences on society (and hence, on the economy) that these scholars are not taking into consideration, starting from the idea of "relative poverty" versus "absolute poverty" as standards for the measuring of growth and development. The poverty lines set by the World Bank have been widely contested for being too low and for oftentimes not taking into consideration the different economic contexts in which said standards should apply (i.e. housing costs, food, education, etc). Before September 2022, the international poverty line was set at 1.90 dollars per day (World Bank). It was then updated to 2.15$ per day for low-income countries, 3.65$ for lower-middle-income countries and 6.85$ for upper-middle-income countries (Ibid). Relative poverty instead refers to people who earn less than 50% of the median disposable income in their country (OECDiLibrary). The distinction between these concepts is in itself ambiguous, if not for the fact that in popular discourses "absolute poverty" is used to refer to developing economies and "relative poverty" to middle-income or rich economies. Although 2.15 dollars a day is extremely low if it is supposed to represent the threshold between starving and thriving in one's environment, it is also statistically proven that in the period between 1982 and 2005 ordinary/relative poverty increased by 40% (Roccu 2016). This contradicts the idea that the last century has overseen a period of unprecedented growth for the world.

Moreover, if the threshold of absolute poverty were raised to 2.50 dollars a day, we could see that the number of people in this condition would rise by 13% as well (Chen and Ravallion 2010). As these poverty measurements vastly underplay the role of living costs, this also sparks a reflection on the utility of differentiating between developing and developed countries when measuring poverty. Furthermore, a substantial argument of this school of thought is that liberty in trade was an important driver of growth and thus acted as a capital equaliser. However, this narrative seems to overlook the fact that for a long part of the twentieth century states still took an active role in regulating the domestic policies regarding the national economy.

Finally, the idea that inequality does not affect the economy seems a bit disingenuous, especially when considering how interconnected politics and economics are. High levels of inequality tend to exacerbate feelings of anger and despair in the population, which in turn results in the formation of populist, far-right and even anti-democratic movements (Roccu 2016). This is especially true in the case of Argentina and Latin America, where poverty reduction has been at the centre of political discussions for decades. As government strategies prove unsuccessful, swings from left-wing to right-wing governments become normalised and frequent. The inconsistencies in policies from succeeding governments tend to have negative impacts on the economy, while politicians try to point fingers and place the blame on their respective adversaries.

Neoliberalism as the primary cause of increased inequality

Another school of thought which has gained traction over the last years holds that the spread of neoliberalism in policymaking worldwide has resulted in higher levels of inequality and poverty. Neoliberalism is a rather vague concept, which has been defined in many different ways. Generally agreed to be a new phase of capitalism, underpinned by unprecedented levels of marketisation and financialisation, it has been deemed a strategy for doing politics as well as an ideology. Among those who believe neoliberalism to be a purely detrimental project, lacking supporting evidence or "sound economics", there are Rodrick and Suresh (2019). They have defined neoliberalism as a "market fetishism" that encourages economists to ignore troublesome pieces of information on the economy and the contexts in which policies are implemented (Ibid). Cammack (2022) explains how the World Bank and the OECD helped to build and diffuse neoliberalism by implementing an (international) institutional base and also through an "ideological perspective of "liberal internationalism". By developing "capital relations" of competition and embedding market-oriented behaviour with developing countries, institutions manage to ensure the primacy of capital

accumulation and growth over labour (Ibid). Milanovic (2016) advances a similar argument, stating that the world's elites can sustain the popularity of an ideology (which he calls "democratic capitalism") that is increasingly contradictory to the majority's lived experiences.

The neoliberal ideological project was based on two main economic resolutions: capital account liberation and fiscal consolidation (Ostry et al 2016). These, nonetheless, did not produce as much growth as promised and instead harmed growth's sustainability by significantly increasing inequality levels within countries (Ibid). Most notably, some scholars have even stated that inequality itself is the result of policy choices. Piketty and Saez (2014) have stated that marketisation led to the concentration of capital in the hands of a few people, whose ideology prevents them from promoting policies that would counteract inequality's increase. In his book, Piketty (2013) goes into detail to describe how inequality is sustained and expanded in today's society. He outlines how an unregulated market economy can both lead to a decrease or an increase in inequality, the former thanks to the exchange of technology and know-how, the latter when capital revenues exceed growth and productivity or when (inherited) capital's value increases faster that growth and productivity (Ibid). In the current state of the economy, what Piketty calls "diverging factors" (namely, those that heighten inequality levels) are predominant, which in turn demonstrates that inequality is a policy choice and not an integral part of the market economy's functioning (Ibid). Piketty's theory seems to be corroborated by the fact that since the 1970s, the beginning of the "marketisation era", while the gap between developing countries appeared to be shrinking, intra-country inequality began to expand (London 2018; Roccu 2016). Basically, inequality between different countries was diminishing, but inequality within a country's society was rising - meaning that huge chunks of the population were becoming poorer.

Still, this idea that the market will benefit everyone sooner or later is so pervasive in the everyday culture of globalised countries that it is impossible to draft real solutions to tangible societal problems when they are caused by the economy's "side effects" - as it was hinted by Rodrick and Suresh before. Lopreite (2013) outlines how this took place in Argentina, where gender-sensitive plans (i.e. "Plan Jefas") did not involve the creation of an official labour and education environment for women, but rather focused on securing employment for men and providing mothers with an allowance. This case in particular shows how inequality is perceived by governments and institutions as a merely monetary problem. Under this paradigm, cash flows are expected to be enough to reduce inequality in rural areas and marginalised communities, exempting state actors

from getting involved in structural projects of infrastructure building, institutional consolidation and civil society participation.

Nonetheless, not all scholars believe neoliberalism to be sustained by a powerful ideological hold on politicians and economists which, in some way, would explain their shortcomings concerning poverty alleviation to be the result of sincere ingenuity. Indeed, despite having significant cultural and social impacts, neoliberalism's applications in the world are too diverse to be huddled in a coherent global ideology (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017). Still, there is a precise framework of actions that states who wanted to partake in the international market embraced, which can be summarised in the quasi-total retreat of state interference in the national economy ("marketisation"), a strong promotion of free trade and financialisation (London 2018; Fine and Saad-Filho 2017). Financialisation represents a new phase in capitalism's evolution after the post-war boom "defined as the intensive and extensive accumulation of interest-bearing capital" and the extended influence of finance in economic and social life (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017). Most importantly, however, financialisation implies the power of a state "to impose […] the internationalisation of production and finance in each territory, often under the perverse ideological veil of promoting non-interventionism" (Ibid). What emerges from the work of Fine and Saad-Filho is that while neoliberalism may vary in the policies and standards undertaken by different states, the justification for these practices is not to be found in their economic soundness, but by the propagandisation and "commonsensification" of the state's executive groups' interests. This argumentation finds wide support among a wide faction of academics, of which Polanyi and Harvey are the most well-known. As explained by Kuttner (2014) in his analysis of Polanyi's work, unregulated markets were a mere illusion, as the interests of the elites shaped the real economic conditions. Decades later, defending Polanyi's thesis against the test of time, Harvey (2007) puts forward a similar argument. In his view, neoliberalism can be considered either a utopia or a political project designed to restore the conditions for capital accumulation and the power of economic elites (Ibid). Neoliberalism has little to do with conveying freedom and multilateralism through the power of the market, instead, it has everything to do with power consolidation. Whether it is possible for a developing state to climb up the ladder with these preconditions is a big question for debate. The "Asian Miracle" is often put forward as a confirmation that economic prosperity is a realistic achievement. However, the Asian Miracle was led by a precise policymaking framework (export-oriented economy with import substitution, plus performance-based subsidisation of the private sector) which is today frowned upon by the international community (Thurbon and Weiss 2016). These are the premises that

pushed Chang (2002) to doubt the authenticity of Western countries' attempts to promote development in the Global South, arguing that international institutions are now preventing developing nations from adopting the very same methods used by Global North nations. Elaborating on these claims, others have argued that the global developments guided by neoliberalism increased the precarity of the populations in Global South countries and thus facilitated the hyper-accumulation in the Global North (Valencia 2018). Precarity then aggravated poverty conditions and insecurity, eventually pushing people into the illicit economy (Ibid).

Neoliberalism is an extremely multifaceted and variegated phenomenon. Scholars who agree neoliberalism is a defining aspect of today's political-economic era have coined a rich corpus of diverse definitions for it. The question remains on whether neoliberalism is not simply a "buzzword", as many critics stated, that can be picked out of a hat whenever there is an issue that needs to be blamed on something. Differences aside, however, a *fil rouge* can still be found in the great majority of definitions. The most common perception of neoliberalism frames it as a new phase, chapter or evolution of capitalism. But then, it is worth thinking if, when describing the permeation of neoliberalism in the economy, culture and society with the consequent downturns, the subject at trial is not capitalism itself. Of course, most academic production comes from the West, where the Red Scare has had lasting impacts on popular knowledge perception. This would explain how the neoliberalism loop, due to which we cannot find non-accumulative solutions to non-economic problems like inequality or climate change, came to be. Nevertheless, we need to push past this impasse if we want to produce findings and solutions that have tangible effects and are not simple palliatives.

Capitalism needs inequality to function

This perspective revolves around the notion that inequality constitutes an inherent and foundational attribute of the capitalist system. While it aligns with the previous school in its discussion of inequality's causes and effects, it differs in the fact that it conceptualises inequality as a structural part of capitalism's system and not just as a degeneration connected to the latest economic policy developments. In other words, whilst for Piketty it is possible to eradicate inequality by designing better policies, for scholars like Federici (2004) or Lugones (2008) it is impossible for capitalism to function or even exist without inequality. Disparity is regarded as the heart of capitalism's

existence, because of the discrepancy between capital accumulation and the methods employed for capital accumulation (i.e. social productivity) (Arrighi 1994). Of particular relevance to this framework are the contributions of Feminist scholars. Federici (2004) draws a link between capitalism's history, the slave trade and reproductive labour (intended as work performed for the household). She argues that unpaid labour is an essential part of capitalism's functioning, as the system of production and value exchange is dependent on a set of externalities (i.e. reproduction, disciplining, nature, etc) that enable capital accumulation's process (Ibid). Since people usually do not enjoy partaking in unpaid labour, for centuries states and empires have engaged in the use of violence in order to extort it. The European colonial time, the slave trade and the witch hunts can all be traced back to this principle and should be regarded as periods of meaning-making dedicated to normalising the means through which subjugation and exploitation were achieved (Ibid). It could be argued that social reproduction is not retributed because of its primary use-value, namely its lack of transaction value (Benston 1969). Nonetheless, housework has become increasingly marketised over the last decades (Ibid). Despite this, it is still undervalued due to its attributed "feminine" connotations and regardless of its fundamental role in sustaining the global economy (Ibid). Reproductive labour has a profound impact not only on the production of labour power, but also on the regulations and conditions of labour and the conveying of ideological control (Ibid). Indeed, Lugones (2008) has written extensively on the pivotal roles of gender, sexuality and race within capitalism - especially when examined as a form of power that affects life in its totality. She goes further by stating that capitalism is the byproduct of Western colonialism which evolved into a "modern" system of production (Ibid). Its modernity, however, is still shaped by the boundaries of colonial semiotics - hence why today capitalism prescinds pure economics (Ibid). Gender, race, and sexuality still shape people's identity, labour access, and expectations of unpaid work, alongside the chances of being subjected to specific forms of violence aimed at disciplining, dehumanisation and exploitation (Ibid). Mies (2014) described in great detail how the ruthless colonisation of the Americas by European powers created the preconditions for the transition to today's capitalist system. Under the guise of Christian civilisation efforts, colons commercialised Indigenous populations and extracted all kinds of resources through the use of force. This makes an interesting parallel with Valencia's (2018) discussion of Mexico's "gore capitalism", according to which the body itself and not its labour potential is seen as a source of value, along with violence, torture and death becoming marketable commodities. While Valencia does not historicise her analyses of violent practices, it is worth pointing out that these markets' existence was enabled by a long history

of dehumanisation-led capital accumulation (particularly in the case of POC, women and WOC). Taking a step back in time, Federici (2004) explained how the religious framing of the witch hunts hid the real political intentions of this surge of violence against women. By limiting access through surveillance and intimidation to services such as abortions or birth control (usually provided by midwives), European states were pursuing an increase in natality rates and hence workforce productivity (Ibid). By forcing women out of their professions as midwives, contraception providers, merchants and more, states relegated women to the position of house servants (Ibid). Their social status was thus deemed to be secondary to that of men, and their value connected to their physical abilities to act as a producer and transfer of value (human capital production and passage of capital from husband to heir) (Federici 2004; Mies 2014). In the meantime, enslaved and/or colonised women were losing their bodily autonomy altogether. Based on the market's workforce demands and opportunity costs, before the eighteenth century, importing slaves into the colonies was a cheaper option (Mies 2014). Marriage and childbearing were thus outlawed for enslaved people, and soon enough colons spread stories on women of colour's savage sexuality - effectively dehumanising them to justify their subjugation (Ibid).When importing enslaved people became more costly, slave owners in the Americas established a new business order centred around slave breeding in "stud farms", where enslaved women were forced to reproduce (Ibid). These mirroring conditions of European women and women of colour were the necessary element to consolidate their respective subjugated positions to men: European women's purity bound them to be "protected" and enclosed in the household, and women of colour's beastliness naturalised their abuse through enslavement. As Mies (2014) put it, "housewifisation means the externalisation or exterritorialisation of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists. This means women's labour is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water". Benston (1969) corroborates this statement and argues that centuries of discourses and repressions have turned women into a cheap reserve of labour for times of crisis that can be turned into surplus when demand shrinks. Essentially, women are indentured labourers, who are expected to perform housework as if it were a natural inclination, or at best perform both housework and wage work. Investigations show that still today, poverty is higher and more severe among women (and keeps increasing), especially in the Global South (Naghdalyan 2007). This is because women's negotiation chances are severely curtailed by their need to provide for their children and family and the virtual non-existence of women's unions (Mies 2014). This suggests that gender inequality reinforces the general socio-economic inequality in a country by driving down the standards for real

wages or increasing male unemployment by substituting the traditional workforce with a cheaper, more desperate alternative (Ibid). Based on these premises, scholars have argued that to curtail poverty and gendered poverty, policy frameworks must go beyond financial measures and involve measures for human development like education and/or political participation (Chant 2008).

Historicising the roots of capitalism is a necessary and interesting process. However, the results of these analyses are not necessarily a truism. While providing an innovative perspective, forming a causation link between the witch hunts or colonisation and capital accumulation may disregard other contributing factors that led to these historical developments. The main issue in these theories is that they tend to rely on what Wynter (1982) defined as a "morphogenetic fantasy that ultimately reduces its analysis of the world to a single foundational cause to which other forces of domination are added or analogised". Furthermore, this perspective seems to undermine the agency of women in their struggle for liberation. In a certain way, it seems to perpetrate the same mistake it blames on the institutions, namely of having an embedded economic perspective of societal issues. This does not mean the findings of this school of thought should be discarded altogether. Rather, if the purpose is to analyse inequality, the research methodology should be intrinsically holistic to all oppression's components and avoid oversimplifying society's foundational discourses.

Conclusion

The existing literature provides an extensive foundation for understanding inequality's historical roots, characteristics and implications. The exploration of the established research demonstrated the presence of three predominant frameworks: the first one argues inequality is a decreasing phenomenon in the world and an irrelevant criterion for the measurement of economic policies' success. The second school of thought has an almost mirroring perspective on the topic. Inequality, especially within countries, is on the rise globally and the main agent behind this trajectory is the implementation of neoliberalism in nearly all aspects of state, society and the economy. Lastly, the third framework focuses on historicising the roots of inequality, which is regarded as a fundamental cog in the capitalist machine. In essence, inequality is a tool to justify the creation of oppressive discourses (of race, gender, etc) that enable the accumulation of capital.

A notable gap concerns the lack of analysis of regional instances, particularly in the Global South. Indeed, numerous studies have discussed inequality's theoretical dimensions as well as its racialised

and gendered ramifications. Nonetheless, while they provide compelling insights, there remains a need for more focused investigations into the specific influence inequality has on local policymaking and development. Namely, the present scholarly materials highlight the necessity of testing theoretical assumptions through the study of localised cases.

METHODOLOGY

This work has a predominantly mixed-method character. It employs both content and discourse analysis, thus looking at cultural artefacts such as movie shots, memes, and more as well as quotations from figures who ran for Argentina's presidency. The data was mostly collected through archival research in newspapers and interviews.

This approach was selected as it is effective in outlining how the European-descending majority in Argentina perceives POC and WOC and their role in society. Moreover, it reveals how public figures often exploit notions of race, class and gender to legitimise economic policies that are detrimental to the wider population, such as the abolition of public education. The latter in particular has not been put in place yet, however, it has played a significant part in Milei's campaign before he was elected as President in October 2023.

At the same time, to support the analysis of the qualitative material on the consequences of racial, class and gender discrimination's intertwinement with inequality, quantitative data on factors like GDP, poverty level and income disparity was also employed in the research.

This methodology provided several valuable observations for the research. Nonetheless, selecting Argentina as a case study naturally decreases the generalizability of the findings. While this is limiting to the evolution of a global framework on inequality and social discrimination, it ensures the accuracy of the analysis for localised issues. This methodology might not be particularly contributive to a global analysis of socioeconomic inequality, but it can still provide insights into culturally and economically similar countries such as Uruguay, Chile or Brazil. Moreover, the use of pre-existing primary sources aims to mitigate the potential for biased information collection through accessible networks with the analysed society, considering a personal connection to the researched community.

HISTORICISING RACE AND CLASS IN ARGENTINA

If I were to mention two of the most popular beliefs in Argentina, this would be that Argentina was once the richest country in the world and that POC Argentinians do not exist. Both statements could not be further from the truth and a thorough investigation reveals that these beliefs are intertwined and co-dependent.

This chapter's purpose is twofold: firstly, it aims at historicising the erasure of people of colour from Argentinian society. Subsequently, it will provide an overview of the political-economic events that rendered the Argentinian working class so susceptible to (sometimes extreme) neoliberal ideals, while consolidating the economic instability of the country to the present day.

Noticeably, the assumption is that the communities who have been historically discriminated against on a social basis are also those who were most impacted by economic inequality and poverty. Several pieces of research have focused on proving the intertwinement of social and economic discrimination across the globe, and thus far the consensus is that a significant correlation between the two is present worldwide. Darity and Nembhard (2000) have looked at a significant amount of countries, including Brazil, which is economically similar to Argentina. They concluded that "economic disparity correlated with race and ethnicity is […] remarkably similar across a wide range of nations […]" (Ibid).

Nonetheless, the paper also proves that in Argentinian society there is almost a unique blending of race and class, with the respective identifiers (i.e. in semantics) being used interchangeably. Thus, in times of crisis, hard-lining actors put a higher emphasis on the role of race in (negative) social behaviours to break solidarity among the public and desensitise the majority to the wrongdoings perpetrated against marginalised communities. Therefore, this thesis will not delve into the correlation of inequality and race, as arguably there is sufficient proof of its existence. Rather, it will provide an account of (pre-existing) racial and social discrimination alongside Argentina's economic defeat during the last decades. This should show that in times of heightened economic instability, race-based discrimination increases.

Erasing race through class

Certain events have the power to shake a country's collective conscience, despite the pervasive everydayness of discrimination interwoven in the same society's fabric. This can be as simple as a conversation between an Indigenous Argentinian woman and a white Argentinian TV host. The

host, inviting her to join the discussion on security in the capital's slums, starts with the question: "You are an immigrant. What are your origins?" (El Comercio 2016). When she states that she is from Salta, one of Argentina's northern provinces, he tries to deflect by replying "Oh, I thought you were from another country, a bordering one" (Ibid). In this interaction alone, the host is unconsciously exposing a tendency present in Argentina, especially in centres like the capital, Buenos Aires. Namely, white Argentinians tend to assume that any POC person is either from Peru or Bolivia. In fact, this is exactly what Norma -the Indigenous woman- argued in response to the host's veiled provocation. "The salteños, tucumanos [people from Salta and Tucuman, both provinces in the north of Argentina] are discriminated against by many who say "where are you people from?" Have you forgotten what Argentinians looked like? We were Indigenous, we were Coyas. We are Coya!" (Ibid). Many have found it remarkable how the lady's words led everyone in the studio to retreat in silence, but even more notable was how her statement (in the form of the image below, summarised) was reposted and supported on social media thousands of times.

Despite the short-term outrage that this caused, the veiled biases on POC remained very much alive. So much so that in 2018, the President in charge of the Argentinian republic felt secure enough to state that “While Mexicans descend from Native Americans, and Brazilians came out from the jungle, us Argentinians have come from the ships” during an official event with Pedro Sanchez, Spain’s President (BBC 2021). This, again, sparked public outrage (both inside the country and internationally) and several discussions, including a good amount of internet memes like the one below (Infobae 2021).

This is part of a wider trend of the last few years in Argentina, which is the centrality of humour and satire in (online) political activism in opposition to traditional media spaces, where neoliberal-conservative discourses are almost hegemonic (Manduca and De La Puente 2020). As the two cases above show, periodically social media discourses manage to spill over into more authoritative forums such as the national press, instigating widespread debates. This cyclicality in public spaces of diversity-denial and covert/overt racial discrimination allows for little social progress. Nonetheless, this cyclicality is the key to understanding the myths that determine Argentina’s self-perception.

The 1880s period is fundamental in the creation of the Argentinian state as people perceive it today. This generation of politicians (1880-1916), conservative in nature, implemented policies aimed at modernising the country and bringing it to the level of superpowers in Europe and the USA (Gayles

2020). Most importantly, however, it is responsible for the creation of the myth according to which Argentina, during these years, was not only the richest country in the world but also a global superpower. It might seem odd to start an analysis of Argentina's present economy with references from the 19th century. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this precise belief of Argentina as a superpower is what guided, nourished and popularised among the public the neoliberal agenda. From the 1970s military junta whose discourses framed the (still right-wing) socialist Peronist movement in the 1950s as the beginning of the economic decline, to the 1980s-1990s policies pushed by President Menem and Domingo Cavallo and even newly elected president Javier Milei in 2023, they all promise one thing: Make Argentina Great Again (Fair 2009; Smink 2023).
Two factors sustain the myth of superpower Argentina: its protagonist role in wheat exports, as well as its GDP pro capita which until the 1930s was at the same level as that of the UK (Fair 2009). The image below was widely exploited in discussions about the Argentinian economic decline, and it shows Argentina's GDP pro capita ranking first globally - except, it refers to 1985 only (Bolt et al 2018).

Ranking	País	PBI pc (1895)
1	Argentina	5786
2	EEUU	5569
3	Bélgica	5385
4	Australia	5094
5	Reino Unido	5068
6	Nueva Zelanda	5034
7	Suiza	4426
8	Países Bajos	4158
9	Alemania	4044
10	Dinamarca	3902

(Bolt et al 2018)

Still, this data is completely useless and unreliable to sustain the argument that Argentina was once a global superpower. The term "superpower" refers to a state that has disproportionate power, potentially hegemony, over all aspects of international relations: economic, military, political and cultural. It also implies that a superpower can impose its political will on smaller states, thus having a significant sphere of influence on which it can project its power and establish allegiances

(Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach 2014). It can do so diplomatically, maintaining the "international order" in forums like the United Nations (UN), or coercively through its wide disposal of military capacities and the ability to dispose of them in a large range of territory (Ibid). In dependency theory, scholars include the ability to use the economy and money-lending or debt-trapping as a form of coercively imposing the hegemonic country's political will (Ibid). Considering all of this, it is safe to state that Argentina never achieved a superpower status. It was a world exporter of wheat, but it never used the profit gained from these activities to leverage influence on the importing countries nor to invest in technological innovations (Fair 2009). Culturally, many mention the international relevance that Tango gained in the first half of the twentieth century, suggesting that through it Argentina gained a form of "soft power" comparable to that of present-day South Korea with K-pop. Nonetheless, it is disingenuous to think that such a brief trend would allow Argentina any sort of leading position on the global stage. This is highlighted by the fact that, for example, Argentina never covered a relevant role in mediating international conflicts during the time such as World War One. If we were to select a superpower today using GDP pro capita as the sole standard, it would be Luxembourg (Forbes India 2023). In the days when everyone is discussing the declining power of the US and China's chance of becoming the new world hegemon, imagining Luxembourg as an equal adversary to these other two countries is laughable. Not to mention, Argentina was ranked first for its GDP pro capita in 1895 only (Bolt et al 2018).

At this point, we should ask ourselves: what does this have to do with race or gender?

The white-washing of Argentinian society was a fundamental process to the creation of the superpower myth. Indeed, academics like Fair (2009) have argued that Argentina's GDP data in the 1880s-1930s period is in itself unreliable due to the high chance of the government's miscalculations in assessing the real demographics of the country. If this information is then crossed with the fact that the census was modified to exclude categories that signified race (i.e. "moreno", "pardo", "negro", etc), we start to get a clearer picture (Gayles 2020). The government was pitching to the international community and the population in the Capital (the most densely populated area in Argentina and also the richest) an image of the country as a rich and "European" port in Latin America. This is also highlighted by how, before gaining independence, 30% of Buenos Aires' population was composed of black people, collapsing to 1.2% in 1887 during the policies of "blanqueamiento" (Ibid). While a popular belief explains this dramatic decrease with the War of Independence, during which black soldiers were supposedly slaughtered to a higher degree because of their disadvantaged rank positioning in the army, it is way likelier that black Argentines were

wiped from the records by the whitewashing policies of the government between 1880 and 1930. The elements of black and Indigenous culture that had until that point influenced the national identity started to be consigned to the periphery of official accounts of nationalist narratives alongside their contributions to the establishment of an independent Argentinian state, and cultural practices belonging to these groups were banned (Ibid). A notable example is Maria Remedios del Valle, a black woman once the "mother of the Argentinian nation" whose role in the independence on commander Belgrano's side was completely removed from the history books (Oranaf). Even the Argentinian music that was reaching European shores started to be whitewashed, going from being referred to as a "negrada" ("blacks' stuff") to one of the main symbols of Argentinian identity. Only its etymology started being attributed to Italian, Polish and Jewish immigrants, and its black and indigenous roots were forgotten (Megenney 2003).

As black and Indigenous were more and more segregated, driven to live in the poorest areas of Argentina and Buenos Aires, the word black -"negro" in Spanish- started to go through a process of semantic widening. Firstly, it went from identifying AfroArgentines to encompassing both black and Indigenous people, and later on, anyone who appeared to be mixed or darker than European immigrants. For the time the Peronist movement gained traction, thriving on the mobilisation of the lower classes, "negro" had already been established as a label for social class ("negro" as in poor, working class) rather than race only (Karush 2012; Grimson 2017).

With the installation of the military dictatorship, the idea of Argentina as a white country was consolidated. Moreover, the military junta launched a pervasive campaign against former President Perón and the "parasitises" who supported him in the establishment of a social support system which framed the movement as the main cause of the economic decline (Smink 2023). Racial discrimination in Argentina is thus twofold: through segregation, the existence of diversity in the national identity is denied - however, the presence of poverty in the country is directly explained to be the result of race and thus of an inherent laziness of POC. This continued during Menem's mandate, which embraced and was regarded as a model case for the neoliberal measures advised by the IMF and World Bank (Nun 2008). Following the Economic Emergency and State Reform Laws launched in 1989 to counter hyperinflation, the country went through intense privatisation, which attracted a swarm of foreign investments and loans (Ibid). Together with the Convertibility Plan (that pegged the Argentinian peso and the US dollar at 1:1), this sudden influx of currency implied that Argentina's GDP reached an exceptional increase in the first few years (Ibid). When this condition began deteriorating in 1995, following a natural decrease in income after privatisation,

income inequality had already been worsening significantly (Ibid). Nonetheless, the rigidity of the measures curtailed the state's chances for countering the new disadvantages that followed the brief period of renaissance spurred by privatisation (Ibid). In the second half of the decade, a series of events in world economics (the US dollar's appreciation, the widespread financial crises in Brazil, Russia, etc) made Argentina's situation even harder: the country was losing its main trade partners and its sources of income (Feldstein 2002; Onis 2006). When the crisis finally hit Argentina in 2001, 50% of the population in CABA -the richest region in the country- was living below the poverty line (Tedesco 2002). This means that the situation in the Northern provinces and other areas (historically poorer and detached from the government's main policies) was even direr, with many people living in complete indigence (Ibid). These events set the conditions for the political debate for the next twenty years, characterised by two opposite and alternating factions: the "Macristas" and the "Kirchneristas/Peronistas". The Kirchnerist movement surged in 2003 as a moderate response to the harsh neoliberal policies of the preceding decade and stayed in power until 2015 (Muñoz and Retamozo 2012). Themes such as inclusion, equality and social justice are the elements that in post-2001 Argentina have popularised the movement, with the promise of involving the state in several public programs to "give back" to those communities who were most affected and marginalised by the previous governments (Ibid). Nonetheless, the path to stability proved to be more difficult and lengthy than what was first believed and propagandised. Debates on the reasons that led to the failure of state plans are very much alive, with many blaming it on state corruption or -once again- on "parasitic" behaviour from the public. A different perspective will be provided in the following chapter, which mentions the case of gender-sensitive subsidisation programs. It was during this time that new derogative terms such as "planeros" (referring to those who received subsidies or other forms of help from the state) became popular, and the public's attention returned to more overtly neoliberal parties. Macri, who came to the presidency in 2015, stated that "even the worst of planeros dreams of a better life for his son" (Perfil 2021). This line is explicative of the Macrist movement: suddenly, the public's opinion shifted again to believe that through the complete liberalisation of the market and curtailing state support, economic stability would be achieved again (Wainer 2018). The underlying impression was that, without corrupted officials and opportunistic poor people left to fend for themselves, the "honest workers" in the country would have managed to prosper, re-establish a middle class with nothing to envy from their European counterparts and Argentina again would rank in the top 10 of the richest countries in the world. Unsurprisingly, later on in 2019, the Peronist movement won the elections again with President Fernandez. The ping-

pong between hardcore and moderate or “inclusive” neoliberals became the new constant after the 1990s. Certainly, however, something that was kept in the political culture since the foundations of the Argentinian state is this antagonistic conception of economically marginalised communities and the erasure of race through the implementation of class differentiations. Politicians (and consequently, the public) went from using “negro” as in “black” to refer to Afro-Argentines to expanding it to encompass POC in general, to then POC and working-class people and now moved on to a different term altogether (“planeros”). Moving away from a term that is historically grounded in racial and economic discrimination gives the illusion of “political correctness” and moderation. Nonetheless, the underlying messages that are constructed around these terms remain unchanged. For example, this can be noted in the casual xenophobia during these last months’ elections for Argentina's new President, in which the topic of immigration (particularly from countries like Peru, Bolivia, and so on) was second only to that of hyperinflation. Javier Milei, who later won the elections, has been named an “anarcho-capitalist” for his extreme views which include the abolition of public education and healthcare and goes as far as considering the legalisation of the organ market (but plans to ban abortions again) (BBC 2023). His plan is to bring back the country’s glory by “ending the thieving, parasitic and useless political caste in [the] country” and to stop the mechanism through which “the foreigners come and take advantage of what is paid by the locals” (BBC 2023; LaPoliticaOnline 2023). He also spoke against the notion that the military junta in the 1970s committed genocide against Argentinian civilians, saying “We must expose the terrorists who committed attacks in the 1970s and later gained power and rewrote history” (BBC 2023). On other occasions, he defined human rights as a place for monetary speculation for the government, hinting both at initiatives aimed at promoting the remembrance of state violence in the 1970s and state programs for poverty alleviation (RioNegro 2023). Milei’s party has been branded as a fresh current for its supposed distance from both Macrist and Kirchnerist supporters, but it is yet another example of the weaponisation of macroeconomic notions to maintain the pervasive racism and social inequality in Argentina. The economic plans presented are also far from being innovative, as the proposed “dollarisation” of Argentina consists of nothing but the same-old Convertibility Plan implemented in 1991 (BBC 2023; Nun 2008). The recurrent revisionism of the 1970s history is not casual, as the military dictatorship signed a profound divide between the first “conservative” segregation in 1880-1950s and the “liberal” current that covertly supports racial discrimination through economic inequality and accumulation. Indeed, Milei regularly uses extremist rhetorics that descend from the cultural production of the military dictatorship, such as calling on public media

"*zurdos de mierda*" (literally: "shitty leftists") those who support any form of welfare program or verbally attacking a journalist for asking "what about Keynes?" (Meseguer 2023). Today, with a large section of the population too young to remember the political developments of the 1990s-2000s, it is easy for Milei to gather support for "shock therapy" against equally easy-to-construct enemies: corrupted elites, thieving minorities and "commies" (Montoya 2023). With tensions rising high due to hyperinflation, the most rewarding political-economic strategy is collecting votes by playing on ancestral race-class biases and presenting a plan so anarchically liberal that even Macrist supporters find it shocking. For the purpose of this thesis, Milei's election is proof of the cyclicality of parties centred around social justice and hardcore neoliberal parties. The latter have to render acceptable the sudden cuts in social spending (which, for many, will result in absolute poverty) to the wider public, therefore, dehumanising the communities that will be most impacted by these measures is a guarantee that the others will be desensitised to their sufferings.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a historicisation of race and class in Argentine society, outlining how the whitewashing of the population started in the 1880s was perpetrated by institutions through the superimposition of class concepts on race identifiers (i.e. the word "negro" as in black that evolved to encompass and signify primarily working-class people). It also showed how the myth of Argentina once being a superpower was first created through the segregation of POC in the outskirts of productive centres like the Capital of Buenos Aires, creating the illusion of a country with a predominantly middle-class and European population. Later, the superpower myth served as a support for political discussions on economic growth and stability throughout the 1970s up to the present day. During times of crisis (like with hyperinflation in 1989 and now, in 2023) parties that propose harsh measures to regain economic stability (i.e. social spending cuts, welfare abolition, etc) tend to obtain more consensus. In general, this can be attributed to a cyclical approach to political economy, in which politicians offer and gather consensus around quick solutions to alleviate deeper socioeconomic issues (i.e. devaluation/peg to US dollar to combat inflation, new welfare subsidies for poverty alleviation). Nonetheless, hardcore or even anarcho-liberal figures tend to rise to fame when tensions are higher as they exploit ancient discourses and biases present in Argentina's history, and can blame the unsuccess of policies (be it their own in a previous government, or their opponents' as well) on the work of an internal enemy. The peculiarity of the Argentine case is that the demonised enemy is often the target audience of the proposed policies.

For example, the demonisation of “planeros” as parasites thrives thanks to the opposition of this figure to that of the “honest worker” who could prosper if only the state allowed for true market freedom. The truth is that, oftentimes, the honest worker and the one dependent on state support coincide in the same person. Class by itself is thus not enough to guarantee the preconditions for society to gather around a party that promises economic stability at the expense of social services like education, healthcare, or even food security. However, if class is mixed with othering notions tied to race (i.e. “the lazy Indigenous" frequently resumed in the Argentine-Spanish lingo “negro”), it is easier for these parties to gain traction. In a tale as old as times, class solidarity is broken by racist ideals that suggest a clash of civilisations in which only those who are willing to sacrifice and partake in hard work are deserving of humanity and basic needs fulfilment. In this framework, a white working-class person can be desensitised and rise above their POC counterpart to live in the illusion that this disparity is the result of merit, despite being one paycheck away from facing the same deprivations.

THE ROLE OF GENDER

The previous chapter has analysed the intertwinement of race and class to explicate how they relate to the reproduction of economic inequality in Argentina. The result is the image of a country that racialised its social class system, thus hiding behind an ideology of "racelessness" while maintaining methods of racial discrimination disguised under different names. Naturally, the following question is: where does gender fit into this framework? As a post-colonial country, Argentina inherited a widespread set of beliefs regarding race and class. However, as a patriarchal society, gender also plays a significant role in determining the degree of inequality and discrimination one will likely be subjected to. This chapter aims to implement the additional lens of gender to understand how inequality is perpetrated in Argentine society. It will outline how women face economic discrimination in Argentina, and in particular how the situation of white women and WOC differs. Similar to how race was instrumentalised to break the solidarity among working-class people, this chapter will show that the emancipation and empowerment of white women were enabled by the exclusion of WOC. Namely, white women often rely on domestic labour performed by WOC. Alternatively, from the perspective of the state, WOC are relegated -like POC in general as shown above- in areas that face higher degrees of poverty and discrimination. However, they face exceptional poverty-related circumstances because of their gender that men do not (i.e. housework, weaker access to medical care, etc).

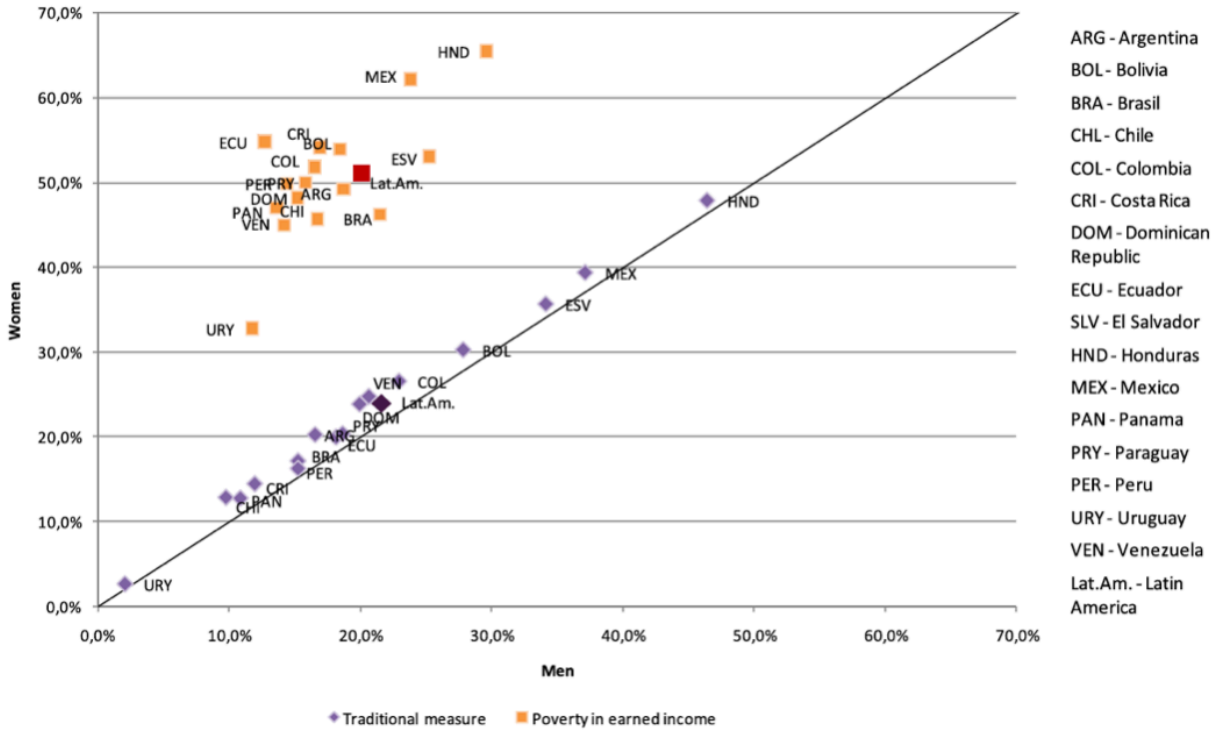
The duality of labour: liberation or oppression?

Within the context of Argentina, exploring the gendered dimension of labour reveals a complex duality in women's experiences, in which work stands at the impossible intersection of being both a tool for emancipation and a ground for further oppression. In 1989, Menem said "The only thing I can offer to my people is sacrifice, work and hope" (Yebra 2021). However, little is done to uncover what work and sacrifice entail for Argentinian women, which often differ from the traditional images of waged work and official productive spaces. These differences can be traced back to three main phenomena: when women are employed in wage work, they receive lower wages while facing more exploitative conditions. Secondly, women often take on both wage work and care work, performing the labour that is necessary for the monetary sustainment of their family as well as the nurturing, education, cleaning and sexual labour. Thirdly, work categories that are feminised (i.e. waged care work, such as housekeeping, etc) are significantly less remunerative and often unprotected (i.e. illegal employment). Nonetheless, not partaking in waged labour means that

women have to perform as indentured servants for their families, renouncing the little economic independence they might have obtained - in a country where, periodically, social programs are cancelled. Not only that but even when social programs are in place, those dedicated to women seem to be conditionally tied to their performance of reproductive labour (i.e. Plan Jefas) (Lopreite 2013). Indeed, this is not so surprising for a country that maintained aggressive natalist policies for decades.

The privatisation spur began in the 1970s under the military dictatorship, then continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, promised to involve everyone in the productive efforts needed to rebuild the country. From a female labour participation (FLP) standpoint, by 2001 women were much more integrated into the labour market (Martinoty 2022). It appears then that nearly two decades of neoliberal policies managed to deliver women's emancipation in Argentina, allowing them to improve their own social and economic conditions by involving them in the (labour) market. As Robinson once said, "The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all" (Ratcliffe 2016). However, is it true that -despite the natural complications that occur when partaking in waged work - the increase in FLP is a sign of a positive development in women's livelihood? Sadly, data points to a different conclusion.

In the aftermath of the Convertibility Plan, privatisation and finally the 2001 crisis, women's FLP did increase - however, this seems to be directly correlated to the heightened economic difficulties faced by their family unit, such as the sudden unemployment of a partner (Martinoty 2022). Their labour is thus not a resource for one's development (i.e. does not indicate an improvement of "human capital" for the country), but serves as a patch to the shortcomings of the state's services (i.e. pensions, unemployment benefits, etc) (Ibid). Indeed, the 2001 Argentinian FLP increase is part of a wider international trend in labour-related economics, which is the substantial boost in women's employment during periods of societal turmoil (Benston 1969). As countries go through times where men's labour is inaccessible (i.e. because of conflicts), insufficient (i.e. industrialisation) or too expensive (i.e. economic collapse), employers regard women as a massive pool of inexpensive labour resources (Ibid). In fact, Argentina's case is excellent in proving this theory, as the increase in FLP has gone hand in hand with the collapse of the average wage in the country (Kennedy and Aguila 2021). While it might be argued that a decrease in average wage is to be expected during a severe economic crisis, and not necessarily tied to the gender of the worker, the data available on income-based poverty proves that there is a significant discrepancy between men's and women's wages (circa 30-35% in Argentina) (Amarante 2021).



(Amarante 2021)

If we combine this information with higher unemployment among men and higher labour participation among women during the same time, it is safe to state that the deterioration of wages is likely caused - at least in part- by the higher presence of women workers. In a resolution from 2007 of the Council of Europe, it was stated that especially in the Global South, poverty is a primarily female phenomenon - with women being stuck in poverty at a higher degree, and facing harsher circumstances while in poverty (Naghdalyan 2007). This estimate, mostly built on information relating to income, would likely be even more pessimistic if non-monetary poverty dimensions were considered (such as education or healthcare) (Chant 2008). Moreover, if data on gendered inequality were to be crossed with data on ethnic or racial background, it would be found that the harshest conditions are encountered by those individuals whose identities are shaped both by gender and race, that is, women of colour.

Inherently feminised as professions, care work and housekeeping services can account in great part for the increase in FLP in 2001 (Birgin 2006). As 54% of households in the country lived below the poverty line and 24.7% below the indigence line, women were obliged to marketise what until that point was considered non-work (Birgin 2006; Federici 2004). Furthermore, 40% of domestic workers were - and continue to be - migrants to CABA and the Greater Buenos Aires province,

coming from bordering countries (i.e. Bolivia, Paraguay, …) or other Argentinian provinces (i.e. Tucumán, Corrientes, Santiago del Estero, etc.) (Ceriani et al 2009; Mazzeo 2012). Generally, the total net of migrants in Argentina is predominantly composed of WOC (Ceriani et al 2009). The process of migration is characterised by three main factors: firstly, the difficult or abusive relationship with the partner, which directly influences the decision to migrate (Ibid). Secondly, women who previously migrated to a different province/country offer fundamental social support to those who are leaving their original household (Ibid). Finally, the decision to migrate is determined by the necessity to provide support for children and family members in the original household via the sending of remittances (Ibid). Another noticeable data is that most migrant women have interrupted their education before completing high school and had children between the ages of 17-21, with the average woman emigrating at 20 years old (Ibid).

Despite self-perceiving itself as a "raceless" country, the aforementioned migration patterns have created a longstanding myth in Argentina of the "*mucama con cama adentro*" (a housekeeper living in the employer's house). This conjunction of myths suggests the actual conditions that WOC face, especially if they are migrants to affluent regions like CABA - namely, that of second-class citizens, afterthoughts for niche socio-cultural analyses.

Several movies and series, like "Cama Adentro" in 2005 or more recently "El Encargado", have discussed the figure of the mucama in opposition to that of the woman-employer (Artusi 2005). The image that is often portrayed is that of a housekeeper who becomes part of the family that employs her, a family she lives, eats with and takes care of and potentially involves her in celebrations (Artusi 2005; Ceriani et al 2009).

Scene from El Encargado (2022)

This scene in the popular TV series “El Encargado” has sparked public outrage for a comment made by the character on the left, who commenting on the employing family’s behaviour says “The girl who helps in the house. You mean your slave, poor thing” (Urgente 24). The negative reaction received highlights how many people still regard WOC and domestic workers as demoted society members, for whom even the slightest remark on the treatment received reflects an overstepping of the submissive role (woman, Indigenous, servant) that society curbed for them.

Birgin (2006) explains this modality of employment has created “a new chain of female work” in which the housekeeper’s network of women (i.e. eldest daughter, neighbour,…) takes care of old, sick relatives - while the housekeeper takes care of the employer’s relatives and house in the place she immigrated to (and sends remittances back home). As such “importing care-work implies [importing] affections, emotions and sentiments as well” (Ibid). Nonetheless, the assimilation into the employing household is not a spontaneous development. It is rather the consequence of the installation of a patron-client relationship in which the employer, who has disproportionate power over the caregiver’s life, can ensure the sustenance of the caregiver’s and her family’s basic necessities - especially in times of economic collapse like 2001, or 2023 - as long as the caregiver accepts being a 24/7 source of domestic labour (Ceriani et al 2009). Pitch (2006) wrote an essay comparing her situation to that of her housekeeper and stated “Caregivers work a lot, they receive compensation for their work and they are under the authority of their employers, if not subject to their authoritarianism. This way, husbands and fathers regained some sense of tranquillity after the vindication of their spouses, partners and daughters in the sixties. It reveals, among other things, that our emancipation is still precarious, illusory and remains unresolved”. Caregivers do not only sell their physical labour, but also enable the outsourcing of the patriarchal dynamics that are expected to be set in a familial unit. The sense of solidarity between women in the household, equally expected from societal norms to perform domestic labour, ends up blurring the traditional demarcation lines between employer and employee. It follows that, once being conceived of as part of the family, the contributions to the household performed by the caregiver are seen as a natural consequence of the established para-familial relationship. Relying on these supposed emotional ties, the employing family then convince the caregiver that “you do not pay family a lot”, since what happens between family members is mostly an exchange of favours based on affection (Ceriani et al 2009). Domestic workers thus lack the protection of traditional workers. Isolated and/or escaping from their original family unit, which they still bear economic responsibility for in a state where the

policies between the 1970s and 2020s have eroded state services, domestic workers cannot have more stability than what is coercively granted by the employing family.

During the 2010s, the Argentinian government attempted to draft policies aimed at reducing gendered poverty, particularly in rural regions. However, these efforts were not optimal in ensuring the well-being and stability of women. Taking Plan Jefas as an example, it is noticeable that state benefits were organised along patriarchal structures. Namely, assistance directed at men was focused on finding employment outside the house, while benefits to women were accessible upon motherhood (Lopreite 2013). In essence, the state's attempt to reduce gender inequality led to a situation in which women could choose to have kids and be (unpaid) domestic workers, or receive no assistance at all. It follows that WOC coming from Argentina's rural regions or bordering countries have two options: stay in their hometowns, living while ducking up and down the chosen poverty line and subjected to conservative gender roles, or emigrate to affluent regions where their services are bought at the cost of a meal, a room to stay in, a few bucks to send back home and nothing more (i.e. not even the payment legally required to obtain a pension for old age) (Ceriani et al 2009). With the election of Javier Milei, women can expect to be once again disproportionately affected by the rush to privatisation, just like it happened after 2001. After all, he based a considerable part of his campaign on the abolition of state plans dedicated to gender equality and said that "in my government, there will be no cultural Marxism and I will not ask for forgiveness for having a penis. If it were for me, I would shout down the Ministry for Women" (BBC 2023).

If chances appeared dire during the pink tide of the 2010s, with its inclusive neoliberalism strategy that put women in the paradoxical position of having kids in order to gain economic independence, then we cannot expect things to get better now. Whether work is a path to liberation or oppression is highly dependent on what *kind* of woman one is allowed to be by the surrounding societal conditions. All in all, it seems work can be the way out of abusive relations, forced childbearing and potentially out of traditional gender roles. However, work can also be an emancipation loophole for fragile women - i.e., migrating WOC escaping poverty without access to education or protected forms of employment.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the decades of neoliberalism that preceded 2001 have created the preconditions for women to enter the labour market under extremely fragile protection and/or equality in comparison to their male counterparts. Women who entered the market in the aftermath

of the 2001 crisis were more likely to face exploitation, and severe income gaps and thus were more prone to experiencing poverty. The situation was aggravated by the additional responsibilities tied to unwaged domestic labour which was expected to be taken on by women alongside their participation in the "official market". In many instances, the impact of state service erosion forced women to act as a substitute for their family unit's remittances or pensions. The case of caregivers is notorious in this regard, as (mostly) WOC emigrate from rural regions to productive centres to earn a wage that is then sent back home for the sustenance of offspring, old relatives, and so on. As these professions are badly protected by state regulations, most women find themselves assimilated into new "employing" families, who have power over every aspect of their lives, buy their labour for an extremely cheap price "because family" and leave them with no security for their future (i.e. pension contributions). Some attempts at gender-sensitive inequality programs were made in the 2010s, but they proved unsuccessful in the task of empowering women who live in rural centres and would prefer not to conform to traditional gender roles (i.e. childbearing). Nonetheless, a renewed spur in hardcore neoliberal movements is putting at risk any form of gender-sensitive initiative. Considering the political-economic policies that are promised to be enacted, virtually similar to the first neoliberal period in the 1980s-1990s, the outcome for women and WOC will likely be analogous to that of 2001.

CONCLUSION

This thesis delves into the intricacies of race, class and gender in Argentina to unveil how they relate to the maintenance of (economic) inequality. Inequality is still a widely discussed topic in academia, with scholars often supporting opposite and antagonistic views. While some academics view inequality as a self-resolving issue thanks to the advancements in political and economic freedom in the 20th and 21st centuries, others have drawn a direct link between the marketisation and financialisation of the 1970s (i.e. "neoliberalism") and the increase in intra-country inequality. Nonetheless, some researchers have also framed inequality as a fundamental component of our capitalist economy's functioning. In essence, capitalism is based on the exploitation of free and/or inexpensive labour, thus making it impossible to "solve" inequality while keeping capitalist systems of production. Therefore, a consensus on how to conceive of and approach inequality has not been reached, nor from an academic or policy standpoint. As such, studying local cases can offer valuable insights into how inequality is formed and sustained, which can then spark more generalised formulas on how to tackle it.

Argentina's case in this regard is particularly peculiar, for several reasons. Firstly, the idea of Argentina's previous economic grandeur renders it arduous to fathom how its present society faces chronic economic turbulence. Secondly, the push for the adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1970s was dictated by the desire to regain this economic primacy, thus not depending completely on the influence of international actors. Finally, Argentina presents itself as a white country, an escamotage that has been employed for decades to create a narrative in which this white middle-class society would have been able to make the economy prosper again if it were not for the interference of a corrupt elite. After analysing the economic developments of the country, it is safe to state that the aforementioned premises are all foundational myths of the Argentinian nation supported by weak evidence.

Argentina was a prosperous country at the beginning of the 20th century, but it never had the conditions to become a "superpower" as it is often claimed in official debates. Even more importantly, the records of its prosperity were amplified by the disregard of POC citizens in official demographic accounts. White-washing society was the first step, which was then followed by a racialisation of social classes throughout the century, with dramatic peaks in the 1970s and a significant impact on self-perception up until the present day. According to these narratives, inequality was the direct result of ethnocultural practices of the "lazy" working classes and not a state issue. From the 1970s onward, with cyclical increases and decreases in public support

depending on economic stability, this conception of class and race enabled the establishment of neoliberal policies that promoted “hard work and sacrifice” instead of welfare and social programs. Naturally, the most impacted by these measures were women, and WOC in particular. Especially during societal economic turmoils (i.e. 2001), women were forced to take on the role of the state in the provision of social services. Therefore, WOC from rural regions in particular, increasingly entered the labour market under exploitative and unprotected conditions to provide for their families’ vital necessities.

As this thesis draws to a close, it is clear that further research could centre on field-based research to include Argentinian women and WOC personal accounts of how their lives were affected by the economic and social preconceptions in the country. Moreover, future research should focus on drafting potential measures to combat both social norms and economic barriers to economic equality, which includes the possibility of joining the labour market with adequate protection from the state’s jurisdiction.

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