What Happened at Curuguaty? The Coup and the Limits of Hegemonic Thought

Ticio Escobar


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WHAT HAPPENED AT CURUGUATY? THE COUP AND THE LIMITS OF HEGEMONIC THOUGHT

The Paraguayan parliamentary coup against Fernando Lugo in 2012 fired the opening shot (following the CIA-induced removal of Honduras’s Manuel Zelaya in 2009) in the series of reversals of ‘pink tide’ politics throughout much of Latin America, most notably Brazil. But the Paraguayan case, argues art critic and former Minister of Culture Ticio Escobar, also has several particularities, such as the incapacity of Left and Right alike to construct enduring hegemonies after the collapse of the Stroessner dictatorship in 1989, as well as the increasingly potent shadow cast over the national political landscape by narco-capital. The still-unresolved massacre of peasant protesters at Curuguaty, which sparked Lugo’s overthrow only a week later, functions as an almost Brechtian theatricalization of these force-fields that have dominated Paraguay ever since the Triple Alliance War (1865–1870).

Keywords: Hegemony; representation; Paraguay; Fernando Lugo; postdictatorship

For today’s session, I had jotted down a series of bullet points, in accordance with the aim of this seminar, which is to raise certain questions to be discussed together afterwards. But last night, over a dinner with all the other speakers, some of the topics related to the agenda of this workshop were discussed in such an interesting fashion that I decided to incorporate them in this talk.

In the first instance, as a foundational fact or event, if you will, there was the coup d’état in 2012, which ousted Fernando Lugo, the President of Paraguay. Behind the coup lies the tragedy of Curuguaty, which took place a week before: the massacre of eleven peasants and six policemen in an alleged confrontation which laid the groundwork for the coup. This confusing act of violence, which provoked a strong reaction both at home and abroad, was never cleared up; a little more than a year after the crime had taken place, the only people to be investigated, put on trial, sentenced and then imprisoned, were peasants. Intense mobilization by citizens and international pressure could not prevent the incarceration of this group of people, sentenced without any evidence and at an illegal trial; they still languish in jail today.
So, the first question I was thinking about as a result of our discussions yesterday was how this fact, this event—in the sense in which Javier Trimboli refers to this notion, as a kind of occurrence whose greatest radicality is found in its cultural substratum—how this event enables the expression of certain extreme movements like the ones that emerged after what took place at Curuguaty. The tragedy of Curuguaty lies behind the coup: it happened the week before. But it also lies behind the coup in the sense that it is a murky event that raises questions that are impossible to understand rationally. The background of the coup is the foundational fact of Paraguay’s unequal distribution of land in the aftermath of the War of the Triple Alliance (1865–1870). That was when the ground was laid for an asymmetry that became structural and impossible to correct, because such a thing would have required radical public policies aimed at redistribution of land. Even Lugo was unable to do this, however progressive his government; he had neither the time nor the power required to, perhaps not solve, then at least fundamentally address the chronic inequality of land ownership in Paraguay. In addition, the deep inequality has been exacerbated by the abuse of agrochemicals and GM crops, by the pillaging of the land belonging to the indigenous population, by monoculture and, more generally, by the continuation of extractivist policies that the progressive governments of the region have not been able to eradicate. And lastly, the disaster was made worse by the irruption of criminal interests, which constitute a parallel narco-power, hamstringing the constitution of a sustainable hegemony at the level of the State and consequently raising serious questions when it comes to imagining the tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony.

The obscure and complex questions that were posed by the killing of the peasants were condensed into a single question, which was turned into a political slogan: ‘What happened at Curuguaty?’ This troubling question entails not only a demand for procedural justice and for the freedom of those imprisoned in this particular case. In fact, it challenges an entire system of arbitrariness and inequality, the root of the peasants’ misery and the violation of their fundamental rights. The question creates a space of continual deferment, of suspense; it opens up an abyss in which thousands of questions are echoed. There are too many possible questions and not a single definitive answer. Curuguaty, then, constitutes an event, that is to say, a brutal disruption that opens up a rift in time by changing or altering things and generating situations that cannot be contained by a single action, answer or measure. The event opens up wounds and creates fissures in which affliction persists and questions resonate. But it also opens up a productive space where things can be questioned, interrogated and disputed once again; it points at a moment that demands new meaning.

The unanswered questions oblige us to maintain a questioning attitude, to be vigilant and on the alert for something whose darkness continues to threaten us. What happened at Curuguaty? What is still happening at Curuguaty? Too much happened at Curuguaty; too many things took place and are still taking place that cannot be addressed with one question or told with one story: the pillaging of the land, the well-organized crime, the tremendous exclusion of the peasants, the widely feared re-emergence of their movement, and the corrupt legal system that only ever serves the powerful. Against the backdrop of all these facts it is important to consider the vestiges or resurgence of the fraudulent Stronista (pro-Stroessner)
oligarchy, which never entirely disappeared but instead readjusted itself to the new political landscape and strengthened its corruption by joining forces with the narco-powers that arrived on the Latin American scene a few decades ago and which, in Paraguay, are beginning to gather a force that is alarming in its proportions and projections.

So, there are many factors that come into play in the coup d'état that ousted Lugo. There are also many unknowns that continue to obscure and shroud the conspiracy of those that were behind the coup. It remains unknown whether the tragedy of Curuguaty was an accident, which the plotters astutely exploited to plead for a sham impeachment, or if it was a crime, shrewdly calculated by some forces on the Right in order to carry out a plot that had already largely been cooked up. This has become the crux of the question of what actually happened at Curuguaty. By all appearances, the crime will never be solved, but institutional democracy in Paraguay is teetering on the brink and innocent peasants are still behind bars without the slightest evidence of involvement in the Curuguaty case (not a single policeman was even investigated).

The impeachment of Lugo occurred, as I mentioned before, exactly one week after the Curuguaty incident. It was, in fact, a coup d'état badly disguised as an impeachment: the possibility of a presidential dismissal did not even appear in any rules or regulations, which were rewritten ad hoc and in record-breaking time. The president was given 24 hours to prepare his defence and the procedure was carried out at break-neck speed, referring to legal notions without any proof, using a disjointed discourse and refusing to listen to the defence. The same contempt for legal procedure was later evident in the Curuguaty case. The trial started by obviating the definition of the crime (which was not even classed as a homicide, even though 17 people were murdered), and continued without proving any of the accusations. As a result, the peasants were accused of crimes without justified grounds or evidence. The public prosecutor, a sinister character by the name of Rachid, skipped over all elementary legal regulations, rode roughshod over legal principles and ignored the fundamentals of the rule of law, which of late, since the transition to democracy, had been upheld, perhaps not scrupulously, then at least carefully. And in this case there was a clear disregard for the formalities of the law. The law was loosely invoked, but without at any point fulfilling its principles and formalities.

One aspect of last night’s conversation links very well to the situation I have just highlighted: the topic of legitimizing justifications of nationality, class or power in any of its manifestations. This attempt mobilizes representations and imaginaries in the field of ideology (or ideology in the field of representations and the imaginary) and it does so in the misty domains of culture, art and myths: there where the game of collective identities is played out, based on adhesions and identifications that feed into the grand narratives. These will gain validity and garner support to the extent to which they are backed up by the security their functioning inspires (even if this is sometimes purely fictitious) or by the belief, the trust and the enthusiasm certain programmes inspire in various social agents. Hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the term, is constructed along these lines.

Now, what happens is that in the cases we have been looking at – Curuguaty and the Paraguayan coup –the formalities that ensure the functioning of the
hegemony were disregarded: it was all executed in a brutal fashion, without recourse to rhetoric or any significant legal justifications. It was as if all of a sudden the ideological cover had come off, the representational mask that is used to hide the occult power play from view. Perhaps we are witnessing a moment in which the classical model of hegemony is being reformulated; this model needs a stage, smoke and mirrors, and actors with fancy dresses and masks. If we look a little further afield we can see that Trump is a good illustration for this sliding off of the ideological veil: it is a brutal model that disregards a pretence of decency, so prudently cultivated by Obama and Hillary Clinton and required by ‘political correctness’. The mask comes off and the face of horror is revealed, unmediated by representations that obfuscate the essential violence of total power.

It is appropriate to link this topic to cultural analysis. Another matter that was discussed last night over dinner was to do with the resistance of social sciences to incorporate the cultural perspective. There is a certain ‘hard’ tradition — scientific, quantitatistic; positivistic, in short — which doubts the ‘objectivity’ of the cultural perspective, considered to be excessively metaphorical and rhetorical, and based on pure conjecture if not outright fantasy. But that confounded fear of metaphor weighing down the ‘hard’ approach impedes a sufficient consideration of matters of great political relevance, such as the construction of identity, the tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony, the agreement of a social contract, and the play between consent and dissent, all of which stem from the field of culture, the stage for representation par excellence. Representation requires a primary absence: it starts from something that is not there but is given form in a character; it mobilizes fictions and abstractions symbolizing ideas; or else, it embodies subjects who delegate the power of their presence and commission their decisions. The fact that the cultural stage starts from a void (the absent thing that is being represented) provokes mistrust in a field that is based on hard data and verifications. But it cannot be denied that the social body harbours dark zones and contains nameless and inexplicable forces and desires that lack a clear object; and so, society is covered in cracks and fissures that cannot be filled. These empty spaces cannot be explained in ‘scientific’ terms: they need to be approached via aesthetics, anthropology, psychoanalysis or philosophy — all ways of thinking that, at some point in their daily chores, deal with a lack, when they have not made it their central (non-)object of study. By way of poetics or the imaginary, fundamental nooks and crannies can be glimpsed that cannot be covered up by language, nor deciphered in logico-discursive terms.

At some point during dinner last night someone mentioned Lacan. Personally I think he is one of the most difficult authors to read. But he was generous enough — or careless enough — to make things a little easier by affirming that the essence of his theoretical heritage lies in the notion of the triple register, which is not only accessible to our understanding, but can also be applied to very different cultural situations. I have had the temerity to expound this notion, albeit in simplified form and strictly within the confines of this paper and conscious of the fact that its application will be integrated in spheres that are different from its origin; but I believe that fertile ideas are malleable and generous in that they can be applied freely by whoever deems them useful. Well then, Lacan’s notion mobilizes three orders. The first includes representations and symbols, the codes — basically language. This coincides with the
cultural space in the broad sense of the word. The second is the register of the real – which should not be confused with ‘reality’ – and comprises that which cannot be symbolized: the impossible Thing, which, apart from the concept and the word themselves, could refer to the incomprehensible forces of the universe, the black holes of the unconscious, the mysterious void around which cultures constitute themselves, to the enigmatic gods, or to the indescribable trauma or extreme human experiences that transcend language. These hard and yet empty spaces of signification cannot be approached by the symbolic order, but they can be described, if not revealed, through images, which make up the third order: the imaginary. Even if images cannot fully grasp the elusive real, they can offer a fleeting glimpse and make manifest the symptoms of the perturbing lack that haunts the human condition.

Having arrived at this point, we are back at the place that interests us, namely there where the question echoes: What happened at Curuguaty?, treated now as belonging to the order of the real and considered as such as an indication of the irreparable crack that runs through the social basis. The function of the image – an essential device of culture, especially art – is to offer a glance of the nocturnal side, which begins where words end; a lightning flash that lights up the lack because it is an amphibious entity: it oscillates between what is and what is not, between absence and what is represented. The image is, therefore, a key instrument of representation, but at the same time it escapes representation: it illuminates with a sudden flare the other side, the unrepresentable.

The tension between what is and what is not, between what is hidden and what is present, permits more audacious explorations of a concept, pushed to question its own limits, to admit that there is space beyond representation and even to presuppose a void, a zone of radical impossibility that challenges the established boundaries. That beyond and that void constitute obsessions typical in art, but they also drive other areas of praxis and thinking. I refer to politics because it is a topic close to the question of Curuguaty. As a case in point, I refer to Rancière, for whom the political is constituted through a radical disagreement: a conflictive act that shakes the established order of representation; he promotes the irruption onto the scene of power of left-out actors; and he demands the redistribution of spaces beyond the stage, beyond the harmonious space of representation.¹

As soon as this emancipatory act supposes a laborious historical construction, it becomes contingent: it may occur, or it may not, it oscillates between the possible and the impossible. From this supposition, utopia is thought of once again in its etymological sense of non-place; it includes an insurmountable obstacle for its full development and hides within it an empty space, which is at the ready to resignify a variety of practices. Critics of the pragmatism of politics, understood as the ‘art of the possible’,² permit themselves the inclusion of the risk of the not-possible, that which lies beyond the calculations of instrumental logic and the Messianic certainties of an inescapable historical destiny. This risk implies the compensation of an expectation: that which has not been fulfilled provides an open space to be filled by the event; a margin for the unforeseen, which could irrupt at any time, and which promotes the emancipatory cause. A few decades ago it would have been unthinkable that among the South American presidents you could find – all at the same time – an ex-guerrilla fighter, an ex-bishop and liberation theologian, an ex-worker, an indigenous person and three women. But it happened. And so did the
unexpected return of the Right. Trump too was unthinkable, as were, until a few years ago, figures like Temer, Macri and Cartes, to cite only a few cases from the Southern Cone.

Once again, the question that is the spill of this talk, What happened at Curuguaty? marks the open time-space of an expectation; it points at a position in which we must wait for what now seems impossible. But we need to be clear too that, subject to the risk of a most radical contingency, the question is potentially threatened by the fact that the tragedy of Curuguaty does not signal the end but rather the renewed beginning of a time which seemed to belong to the past. The undecidable tension between the possible and the impossible, facing an emancipatory position, disorients a way of thinking about politics that is based on pure analysis and probabilities, rooted in reasonable estimations and number crunching. That is why art plays an important role here: it permits the imagination of parallel temporal dimensions that can only be approached sideways and in an ephemeral manner, through rhetorical circumlocution and assumptions that are closer to delirium than to well-founded hypotheses or empirically verifiable data.

Some obscure areas that resist any explanation cannot be interpreted, but they can be intercepted all of a sudden by a thought arrived via the detour of fiction, fantasy or rapture. Some psychoanalysts, who assume that therapy is based largely on a state of trance, are in the process of discovering how fertile a field of knowledge and wisdom indigenous shamanism is; it is a perspective from where various visions of the unattainable can be observed, visions of all that is fortuitous and potentially possible. To have this focus does not mean a defence of an irrational or anti-scientific position, but it is instead an admission that the limits of language, verifiability and the concept do not inhibit the drive to see and to know; it means to assume that the obstacles raised by hard reality do not paralyse the desire to know causes that seem more and more remote. It means, in short, that the diversity of positions can give us renewed hope to go beyond the pessimism that is caused by the current situation in the region (in the world …), but also beyond the naïve voluntarism that puts its trust in the unfailing nature of emancipation.

To close this session I want to return to the topic of hegemony, which finds itself at the foundation of the elementary questions we are dealing with vis-à-vis the political scene in Paraguay. In conventional terms, Stroessner was the one who wielded the ultimate hegemonic power; it was a power based partly on domination and repression; the ‘hegemony of the stick’, in Gramsci’s terms, but obviously also held up by the construction of consensus and various dispositions of seduction and persuasion of the people. The successive governments of the so-called ‘transition to democracy’ were unable to hang on to hegemonic control and had to take recourse to complicated mechanisms of political engineering to articulate weak regimes that were shaken by the foundering of opportunistic and provisional alliances. Something similar happened in other countries in the region. Well then, if the State did not wield hegemonic power, then who did? It was fundamentally the real powers that in part usurped the apparatus of the State, serving their own corporate, not public, interests. Since these interests were formulated in terms of the State, opposed to its own logic, they created displacements, confusion and detours. As a result the construction of a counter-hegemonic power became very difficult. It is not easy to confront liquid and spectral powers, powers that hide their true
faces, that reconfigure constantly and cannot be confronted in terms of something public. That too is why it cannot be known with certainty what happened, and what is still happening, at Curuguaty. The powers of State are criss-crossed by subterranean rivers that feed the great corporations and which are sustained by an institutionality that is gradually becoming less and less of a public governance and turning into an instrument of corruption. The advance of the drug trade into the structures of state is alarming. This surreptitious movement generates unsolvable contradictions in the language of the public sphere. The coup against Lugo and the massacre at Curuguaty are symptomatic of this unfortunate situation.

Okay then, these were the questions I wanted to ask today and that will be the parting shot for the following debate and dialogue.

Discussion

Jens Andermann: Perhaps, to open the debate, let me simply refer to two questions you raise in your talk as well as in your work we read for this seminar. I found your paper ‘What happened in Paraguay?’ very revealing. It made me think of Foucault and his ‘Truth and Juridical Forms’, because Curuguaty is also a kind of Oedipal moment, but in the Foucaultian rather than the Freudian sense of the word, where two questions appear that in a displaced fashion, as Lacan, and Freud, would say— are also relevant to Brazil and Argentina. On the one hand, the displacement of political discourse by a legal one, where the matter of the impeachment rears its head, but also the question of the culpability of the peasants, who no longer fight for their demands but are rather seen as either guilty or not, in spite of the tremendous disregard in the legal production of truth. We don’t have to make a huge interpretative effort here to understand how age-old discourses re-emerge that portray the peasant as the threatening ‘other’: ‘bitter and violent men and women …’. And it is interesting as well to compare this, the preamble of the coup in Paraguay, with what happened in Argentina, with the incarceration of Milagro Sala, which has the exact same ingredients: an indigenous, peasant woman, who, as Macri says: ‘is in jail because I and most Argentines think she is guilty.’ And that is where the tremendous disregard appears that we see in the impeachment process in Brazil, and which we see in Trump: a power that no longer cares (unlike, say, George W. Bush), a power that openly says it is racist, authoritarian, misogynist, and so forth. Nor is it too worried about covering up the subterranean currents as far as open acts of corruption are concerned. So, what can we do …? It is a power where the idea of hegemony does not appear to function as an explanation of the construction of that power, nor is it possible to conceive of the most effective counter-hegemonic strategies in response to this liquid power, which bypasses counter-hegemonic opposition. So just in order to give form to the debate, I invite anyone to share questions and reflections.

Mónica Parra: I did not know about the case in Paraguay, the one involving indigenous people; I think it is terrible. The corrupt political system sounds very familiar to me; I am from Venezuela. But I was going to address a topic I don’t know is relevant here, namely the distribution of land. I think that people ought to be educated about this … this is what happened in Venezuela a while ago, and
many years ago in Cuba, with the ten million ton sugar harvest, when land was expropriated that is now in a worse condition than before. Is this education discussed or thought about before handing over land, as a social activity?

**Ticio Escobar:** The redistributive policies as well as the ‘conditional transfers’, as applied in Paraguay at least, had the objective of explaining the context in which these measures were taken as well as their limitations and consequences; had it been otherwise, it would not have been more than a case of mere assistentialism. As for the asymmetry in the distribution of land, this is a structural question, and as such it depends on complex processes that are played out in the public sphere, which means the regulation by the State of the interests of society and the market. The fair redistribution of land by the State requires firm national policies, naturally oriented towards the collective interest, but the current regime responds more and more to the needs of the agro-industry, which exacerbates the inequality and reduces the land of the peasants and indigenous population. Thrown off their land, many groups of indigenous people seek refuge in Asunción, where they live in miserable conditions, diametrically opposed to a world that made sense to them, to their environmentally balanced and culturally organized lands. They are forced, therefore, to reinvent cultural rules of resistance and survival, which is not always possible in such adverse conditions. In the few cases in which they have managed to recuperate their ancestral lands, it took them years, and the process of reinsertion failed: their lands were no longer the same, nor were the indigenous communities themselves, traumatically uprooted and made up in part of new generations born and raised in the margins, a parallel world to the indigenous one, a spectral world.

The problem of the inequitable distribution of land in Paraguay, historically aggravated in the wake of the War of the Triple Alliance, is made worse by the sweeping expansion of monoculture, especially of soya, and the use of toxic agrochemicals that wreak havoc on the health of the most vulnerable communities. The politics of extraction are more and more linked to drug traffic and the corrupt cessation of sovereignty by the State in the border regions. Today, only 6% of the land is worked by peasants and their families who dedicate themselves to traditional methods of farming; and that very small minority is under threat from the greed of the agro-industry, set on not only occupying all the land, but also on extinguishing all alternative cultural models. These forces form part of the new parastatal hegemony.

**Micaela Rosaenz Dias:** I am wondering on how much of a citizens’ as well as popular consensus these new discourses of power that legitimize these new hegemonies can count. In the case of Argentina this happened through the ballot box, in Brazil, through a legal process that ended with the impeachment. I don’t know what happened in the case of Paraguay, but I am wondering where social movements are in all of this, if there is not a certain legitimation of these new discourses.

**Ticio Escobar:** The matter is made more complicated because of the deficit in discourse, both on the Left and on the Right, to simplify these positions. This translates itself into an impoverishment of the public debate, which in turn goes back to the paucity of critical thought willing to engage in creative confrontation and open to the discussion of ideas and projects. I think that in the region we have
seen the discourse of the Left go to waste, which led to a reduction of elements of identification and orientation. Lamentably, the conditions of repossessing that discourse do not exist, and, consequently, nor do these elements.

Last night we spoke a lot about identity. Nowadays identity no longer interiorizes the belonging to an objective group, such as a certain class, territory, nation or community; identity is more understood as a process of construction of subjectivities based on certain identifications (around causes, ideas, myths, images, or any other elements that create adhesion, however short-lived) that are generally variable and never mutually exclusive. Identities of class, gender, nationality, territory can all be superimposed without any one being dominant, or total, or definitive.

These nuclei of identification are increasingly conditioned by the global information network and its communicational technologies. Communities and, generally, online campaigns create intense but ephemeral identities; they are liquid identities, in Bauman’s sense of the term. Citizens’ protests, mobilizations of ‘indignados’ have an ad hoc character and an immediate reach. Obviously, this ephemeral nature does not make their demands less valid, but it makes them insufficient; they constitute a moment – a moment of strength, to be sure – of actions that at some point will have to be articulated alongside other practices and inscribed in wider discourses. For example, the ‘escraches’ used to denounce corrupt politicians that in recent times have emerged in various countries in the region have proved to be very effective; these acts of condemnation are a valiant gesture in the public sphere and rapidly mobilize public opinion, but if they are not integrated into broader programmes they soon lose the interest that a mere novelty generates.

This situation is even worse if we take into account that identities based on traditional representative bodies have tended to blur: the retreat of the State and the encroaching power of true transnational powers, the representational crisis faced by political parties and the weakening of the ideological discourse, these all promote the appearance of new social identities that, in large part, substitute the traditional subjectivities. Society acquires an ever increasing presence in the social integration, but it lacks sufficiently firm forms to take up the challenge, which, at the same time, cannot and should not mean the substitution of functions that properly belong to the State and to political parties. Society and the State are withdrawing and the power of the market advances until it has achieved hegemony in the public sphere. In this murky scenario, mobilizations like the one produced by the tragedy of Curuguaty acquire a special significance.

Alejandro Kaufman: Could you give a brief idea about the role and place the figure of the victim occupies in the event you were describing (Curuguaty)? How did this figure operate, how was it being put to work? Because the victim is always a complementary figure of judicialization, whether on behalf of the Left or the Right, when there is a tragedy like this. Did this figure play a part in this event, or did it occupy a secondary position?

Ticio Escobar: The mobilizing force behind the question *What happened at Curuguaty?* managed to uncouple the dichotomy victim/perpetrator in order to achieve a political inscription that was more radical and far-reaching. On the one hand there is the movement of the peasants, who do not give up their urgent and desperate demands; on the other, there are various social organizations who focus
on the land question and on defending the imprisoned peasants, the legal aspects of the process and the political implications of the affair. They do not exactly coordinate their work, but they do work with a determination and a continuity that ensure that the case of Curuguaty is present on the public scene and is seen as a fundamental matter, always raising questions. And lastly, the topic has generated activity in the visual arts, cinema and photography and in the field of academic investigation.

Lisa Blackmore: I wanted to go back to what you were saying about the image and its essential indeterminacy, that quality of being and not being. And the frictions that may generate when it comes to formulating cultural policies. Because the way I understand the potentiality of the image is that it has the capacity to anticipate and re-order political forms. I guess what I am trying to say is: if it is this indeterminacy, this potentiality, which we have to recuperate to counteract the cultural mise en scène, as happens so often in cultural spaces, then how can cultural policies ally themselves, and take that potentiality to transform themselves into something else?

Ticio Escobar: Yes, culture could be defined as the mise en scène of the social; it is a self-representation of society itself. Society is playing itself in many different ways; and in these movements of representation, the image plays a fundamental role: to represent is to assume an image. The many representations demanded by diversity breathe life into the social body and produce in it a way of playing, certain moves and different and sometimes opposing positions. Such representations require an important repertory of images that embody multiple memories, that anticipate plural futures, and that confront the inexplicable. Culture must foster the meaning of the entirety of society; and so, whatever it cannot explain, it invents, it dreams up: it imagines through art, myth, ideology, religion and even science. But it cannot leave any hole through which meaning can seep out.

In this context, the images allows us to suppose, conjecture and glimpse matters that the symbolic order – culture in the strict sense of the word, as language – cannot fully explain, or even name sometimes. When we talk about the image we do not merely talk about the visual. Discourse is traversed by images, tropes, figures of speech that circumlocute certain obscure points: the holes in language. Even science needs to accept its limitations, if not, it becomes an absolute desire. It could not function without images; it could not take charge of its object if it does not know its name, its reflections, its resonances, which cannot be detected by the symbolic order alone.

I now move to another point made by Lisa. As soon as they become public, cultural policies can no longer preserve the patrimony and promote spaces of creation and thought for which societies and individuals are responsible. These policies are accidental in the sense that they are merely formal: to protect, encourage, regulate, address asymmetries, sponsor and support, but they do not produce substantive content. The State does not create cultural products and does not create images, but it does guarantee a space in which society can fulfil its task of reflecting and imagining in democratic and egalitarian terms. Cultural politics therefore have an instrumental function; they can promote the public sphere and favour the interests of the majority, or affirm the hegemonic culture that serves the profitability of the market.
Yanina Welp: Before, you talked about Trump and I find it interesting to consider why someone like him gets into power. I believe there are various explanations – not justifications – which have to do, for example, with the increase of inequality in the US. There are some studies that show or identify certain groups, who are among the most machista, the most racist of all, and who live in the most remote, rural or semi-rural regions in the States; it is these people who support characters like Trump. So, here is a question I would like to ask by bringing it into the context of Latin America, especially the discourse of the Left.

There is a Swiss political scientist, Hanspeter Kriesi, who speaks about a new cleavage that articulates the electoral preferences in Western European democracies, namely the rift between the winners and losers of globalization. I believe that the case of the United States is a clear example of that. You were saying earlier that Hillary Clinton was hardly a great candidate. What did she represent? Did she represent a progressive discourse? No. So there is something very striking here. Now then, in Latin America, when you think of the winners and losers of globalization, it seems to me that it does not work in the same way as in Europe, because the context is different. It’s not a question of behind or ahead, it is just different. And there we can see something that has to do with how in countries that have identified themselves as having undergone a political revolution, the discourse of the Left has deteriorated, in some cases much more so than in others. Let us not talk about Venezuela, but let us take for example Ecuador, where it is undeniable that a number of mechanisms for redistribution that are pretty powerful have been put in place. But there has also been an erosion of criticism, of debate. For instance the environmentalist collectives that defended a non-developmentalist model have been silenced by Correa’s government. And this has resulted in the fact that now there is a second round in the elections in which we have a leader from the Right attempting to return to power.

The question is how to articulate a discourse on the Left when faced with a situation like the one you were describing to us. Because it leaves us with a sense of impotence, because when we mix hegemony and the construction of myths, where do we stand when it comes to articulating a discourse of change that succeeds in creating a project that is able to fulfil the demands made by progress as well as distribution?

Ticio Escobar: Well, the crisis of discourse does not only affect the Left, its effects are also felt on the Right. I think that Trump is symptomatic of the exhaustion of a hegemonic ideological model. It is the famous moment in which the old has not completely gone and the new has not yet completely arrived. It creates a non-time, a spectral time that is prone to paradox and ambiguity, the erosion of discourse and the decrease of debate. It is a non-time which favours intolerance, fanaticism, and Manichean positions that trouble the clarity of critical debate. Kaufman speaks of the resurfacing of violent words originally invented by the dictatorship. That is how words like exclusion, intolerance, and extermination have returned to the public scene in these uncertain times. And Ivana Bentes alerts us to the risks of a ‘mediatic adjustment in real time’ as well as the demonization of alterity and new forms of violence that are channelled through words.

I understand that this seminar has as one of its objectives to think together about these risks and to discuss the conditions under which this symbolic violence
has returned. It is fitting to reflect on what happened to the ‘golden decade’, which is what the high point of progressive governments in Latin America, which lasted not much more than ten years, has been called. The aim was for all of us to think about what might have impeded the creation of a counter-hegemonic power capable of creating alternatives to the expansion of neoliberalism. Obviously, this question does not have a sole cause or a single answer. It can therefore not be resolved in one debate, or in any number of discussions. But critical reflection is a necessary step in the exploration of possibilities and the identification of timeframes in which they can take place. I repeat the notion by Kaufman I have already mentioned before: to resign yourself to the dominant space as an inescapable option is losing the battle before it has even begun.

The cultural focus constitutes a possible approximation to this battle. There are many factors that make this focus appear questionable. In the first instance, culture supposes a transversal perspective, which makes it very hard as a topic for academic disciplines. Social sciences are ill at ease when confronted with an object that cannot be circumscribed as it should be. Its rhetorical tendency and powerful imaginary mechanisms frighten away certain forms of thought that are conditioned by a prudent respect of the inexplicable through a chain of cause and effect. Cultural ‘constructivism’ is also the cause of epistemological resistance. Culture tends to understand many phenomena as subjective constructions, as hermeneutic creations that are mere interpretations of the facts. This tendency often results in a neglect of the ‘real’ aspects and the objective facticity that conditions such facts, and in contempt for the quantitative mediation (numbers, data, statistics), which is the indispensable instrument of mediation and calculation that underpins many interpretations and connects them with their actual conditionings. Cultural theories, especially aesthetics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, tend to privilege the preoccupation with the Real (in the Lacanian sense: that which is out of reach of language) to the detriment of the consideration of the real, that is, the prosaic reality that effectively conditions cultural movements.

But the cultural sphere is the actual terrain where this dialectic confrontation takes place, the space where diverse positions are taken up, the place for the critical argumentation and continual polemics. It is fitting, then, to occupy it to discuss the deterioration of discourse, the loss of sensible and well-founded debate. It is not a matter of good manners regulating a proper debate. It is a topic that is shared with politics. The question is how can we be sure of conditions of discrepancy that guarantee the right to occupy different positions? How can we create a zone that is free from dogmatism and exempt from symbolic violence that restrict any form of disagreement?

I think that in Latin America the thinking classes were not up to the challenge posed by the necessity of creating this zone. It resulted in a dispersion, a veritable disarticulation of thought, and was translated into an absence of the conditions needed for an unbiased debate. Discourse became dogmatized – the positions taken up brooked no opposition. You were (are) either for or against Kirchner, Dilma, or Lugo, without the Left having the possibility to criticize figures that were ideologically close. I believe that this lack of critique was unhealthy; it promoted the deterioration of a productive discursive space.
Jens Andermann: Maybe we should explain those previous conversations where we talked about central themes and perspectives to give some continuity to our discussions. We talked about a text by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, which he published after the fall of Perón in Argentina. Its title was ‘¿Qué es esto? – What’s this?’ and it tried to respond to a great enigma, Peronism: What the hell is this thing that we cannot explain? We wanted to take this question into our own present, but also, based on that, to point it in the other direction and think about what we did and didn’t do in the moment directly preceding this present. And then there is the question that was being posed by Yanina: What to do from now on? How do we construct new strategies after the failure, the defeat, and our understanding of the failure?

What interests me a lot – and I would like to know more about this – is a notion you quoted in one of your texts, ‘democracy without justice’. It seems to me that this is not exclusive to post-dictatorial Paraguay, where what we see is a weak transition from Stronismo to a kind of hegemonic void, as you say, where a kind of neo-Coloradismo – with all the historical weight that carries – appears to be the only thing capable of filling that void. And where even that very heterogeneous coalition that Lugo at some point managed to put together foundered almost immediately. In that void too the idea of a ‘government of the Left’ is debatable because from its inception it remains something totally fragile. Maybe you could say something, from your point of view, about the achievements, but also the –I would almost say structural– limitations this government had and that it was, by all accounts, not able to overcome.

Ticio Escobar: The felicitous phrase ‘democracy without justice’ comes from Line Bareiro, a Paraguayan political scientist, who used it precisely in the context of Curuguaty. As for the achievements of the Lugo government, they coincide more or less with those of the other progressive governments in the region: a strong development of social policies, a strengthening of the electoral bases, the promotion of social and political rights, economic growth, powerful redistribution programmes, an increase of the popular sector, etc. At the same time the public debate was enriched by the incorporation of notions and ideas that had hitherto been absent from the public sphere: the appearance of the terms ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’, even if hardly rigorously defined and risking renewed polarization, meant an increase of tolerance in the debate.

As for its shortcomings (and they were structural), the most serious, at least the one that affected all the others, was the impossible task of constructing an alternative hegemony that would render the government sustainable. As I said before, the whole transition lacked hegemonic support, which is why the post-dictatorial governments had to create an extremely complex machinery in order to insure minimal governability: by making pacts with the devil and negotiating the unnegotiable. The political support for Lugo’s government was feeble: a loose assembly of progressive movements and a section – the majority – of the Liberal Party. This party, respectable and combative during the dictatorship, came to occupy the worst position in turning conservative and opportunist. And so, lacking any firm foundation, the government of Lugo was unable to break away from a developmental model based on growth and consumption, which generates negative social and environmental consequences. As happened in the region in general, it
had to accept the rules of global capitalism and as a result continued the extractivist policies which rely on huge monocultures destined for exportation.

On the other hand, the brittle nature of the alliance that made up the government meant it was incapable of consolidating institutional sustainability enough to withstand the relentless battering that eventually ended in the coup. It is a well-known fact that the very same day that Fernando Lugo took office, Federico Franco, the Liberal vice-president with whom he was supposedly allied, began to conspire against him. Only at their twenty-third attempt, the conspirators managed to get the numbers in Parliament and they seized power in a coup that was badly disguised as an impeachment. Exactly a week previously the massacre of Curuguaty had taken place.

The Left, in the inevitably ambiguous and much too broad a sense in which we are using it, had not succeeded in making the best of the years during which Lugo was in power to construct a hegemonic power or at least to arrive at a certain counter-hegemonic density vis-à-vis the real powers, to prepare a more or less stable ground upon which the organization of progressive movements and parties would be able to discuss the political and cultural homogenization of the neoliberal system.

This whole situation has generated serious contradictions. Fernando Lugo – who is seen as an autonomous figure without links to any partisan group – has lost political prestige and electoral trust in the cities, but according to all the surveys there are large popular majorities, in particular of peasants, who still intend to vote for the ex-president, who has therefore a firmer electoral base than any other candidate in the race. This puts him in a tricky situation. The Constitution does not allow a re-election, which is why Lugo has embarked on a project – misguided in my view – which relies on an agreement with Cartes, the sinister incumbent president, in order to promote a reform of the Magna Carta and in that way make a new mandate possible. This move is clearly unconstitutional in many of its procedures and it will end up tarnishing his legitimacy and provoke public indignation. What is more, this daring manoeuvre was not the result of any kind of consultation and did not include the input of citizens’ organizations in its decision. This, lamentably, contributes to the diminishing of Lugo’s stature. In the eyes of many people, Lugo has allied himself with Cartes, who represents the worst of Paraguayan politics and represents the force of the real powers, most of them criminal, which are deeply entrenched in the State.

Jens, and before him Yanina, is wondering about the possibility of reconstructing strategies now that we are faced with the dark shadow that is being cast over the Southern Cone (as over other parts of the Continent, but let us stay close to home …). Formulating the question is in itself a first step towards finding this possibility. Thinking together, as we are doing now, defending the right to critical speech and to difference and divergence is taking up a position in the task of constructing spaces of dissent and resistance, where the homogeneous vastness of the hegemonic model can be discussed. Kaufman says that to assume that there are no spaces possible outside of the hegemony is losing the battle and accepting the terms of the system without putting up a fight. A part of the counter-cultural action lies in the establishment of a ‘counter-culture of the critical word’ which perturbs the harmonious and smooth surface created by the dominant culture.
Walter Suter: We are talking here about a common denominator of what is happening in Latin America, and in this case, in particular in Argentina and Brazil. Now then, does Paraguay not at least have something special insofar as its history still influences certain attitudes, which distinguishes it a little from the other countries in the Southern Cone? I am thinking of the trauma that in a way still lingers after the War of the Triple Alliance. And also its bilingual nature, which is very important. The indigenous population continues to speak Guarani. The language of the heart, not of the head, like Spanish. So, to what extent can this have resulted in a particular history of that ‘island surrounded by land’?

Ticio Escobar: As it happens, when Alejandro and I were walking to the seminar today, we were talking about the necessity of analysing the contingency and context of the situation of each and every one of our countries with regard to the world order. In the case of Paraguay, the factors you mentioned are fundamental. The War of the Triple Alliance (1865–1870) destroyed the country. The dictatorship of Stroessner (1952–1989) caused irreversible damage. Both of these moments constitute traumas that mark the collective memory in a particular way. But we should not fall into the trap of considering these tragedies purely in terms of a victimization that excuses us from the need to engage in a complex reading of them and reach efficient compromises with the construction of new historical scenes.

The other point you make concerns Guarani; this language is not just spoken by the indigenous population, but by 85% of the entire population of Paraguay: it is the country’s official language, alongside Spanish. And yes, this fact is significant. Being the language of the vast majority of its society implies that there are different conceptual configurations and sensibilities. It implies a particular way of viewing the world and of naming it. Guarani has an enormous potential for social cohesion and I believe this trait can be considered a factor of the national unity. All the others stem from it, or else they don’t have the power to sustain images and representations with which an entire population identifies itself.

But a force that is so present in a cultural configuration also has its difficulties that need to be addressed. Sometimes the language becomes a barrier, because although the vast majority of the population speaks it, there are political and academic sectors of the country that are not originally Guarani-speaking, and even though they speak the language, they have difficulties in discussing concepts, theories and propositions in it. Peasants’ movements, for their part, do not trust a political discussion that is not held in Guarani. They are able to discuss matters in Spanish, and in effect that is what they do with foreigners, but among Paraguayans, the great public questions, especially those linked to the topic of agriculture, have to be debated in Guarani for political reasons, basically as a self-affirmation of identity. Behind this obstacle there is a certain understandable ‘campesinismo’: it is difficult to overcome the historical suspicion that peasants feel towards sectors that come from a class that has always exploited them, discriminated against them and excluded them and that has never treated them fairly. Dealing with this topic requires long processes that begin with a dialogue between leaders of peasants’ groups and social movements and even political parties.

What is certain, however, is that Guarani constitutes a typical representational matrix of various cultures in Paraguay. According to the anthropologist Miguel
Chase-Sardi the cultural tradition of Guarani-speakers, which relies heavily on values of solidarity and social cohesion, can be an obstacle when it comes to constructing liberal systems of representation, like the delegation of electoral power or the construction of political leadership, which have different formats from those of the Guarani people. Historically they make decisions about public affairs by consensus, which implies a system of direct democracy, which is difficult to reconcile with the institutionality of a national societal organization. That is why, for the development of interinstitutional mediation, these systems need to be readjusted, and this needs to be done by self-governed processes, some of which have made progress, but not all. According to Chase, this cultural trait has marked the representation in the public sphere of Paraguay, conditioned by systems based on communitarian agreement. I mentioned these examples only with the aim to give some idea of the particularity of the ‘island surrounded by land’, to use an expression used by thinkers such as Rafael Barret, Josefina Plá and Augusto Roa Bastos. The isolation of Paraguay, physically and historically, is a decisive factor in the singularity of its sociocultural formation.

Javier Trímboli: A couple of things. They are mainly comments, but they can probably be useful for a discussion and conversation. First, with regard to the topic of hegemony, I find it very interesting how you formulate it, Ticio, in relation to the current hegemonic crisis in Paraguay. And also, I have the impression that there is something in this notion, at least that is my impression, that does not fully explain what is happening. I mean the notion of hegemony as developed by Gramsci in the 1930s, which seems to refer to a world that constructs a series of consensuses and also subjectivities without the fundamental and primary presence of the State. Anyway, I am going to say something, since the comparison is inevitable: in Argentina, the cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo at some point in a discussion that took place in 2011 wrote in the newspaper La Nación that she had the impression there was a new hegemony: Kirchnerism, a totally new hegemony that had conquered all the previous hegemonies. And it really had a devastating effect on all the people who worked together on Kirchnerism, because they became convinced there was a new hegemony and now it was simply a matter of administering that hegemony. Administering a hegemony, as your quote from Ranciére shows, became the problem. Not because new policies needed to be made, but a new administration and police needed to be produced on the basis of a vanquished hegemony. So it seems to me that there is something really confusing about discussing and above all contemplating the next move and wonder whether it will be counter-hegemonic or what.

On the other hand, and this can be something to add to the conversation, in one of your texts, you refer to a conversation you had with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner on the occasion of a meeting of the Forum for Emancipation, in which she indicated that there was no theory to explain what was happening. At the time, the answer was no, but there are things and ideas that are being considered. So, and that is what I would like to discuss, there is a moment in which you say that there are some people, that there are friends and comrades who distrust the State, and that it doesn’t have to be like that. Hence I am wondering how in the case of Argentina the opposite happened: we all trusted in the State. And this trust in the State very often scuppered what might have been the most interesting thing
to happen in society. Or caused us to not pay enough attention and activate the most interesting thing that could happen in our society.

And lastly, to discuss more broadly and not only in this session, there is the question of defeat. The defeat in Argentina has strong echoes of the defeat in 1976. But in which sense can they be compared? This is a discussion worth having. Moreover, in the case of Argentina there was clearly an electoral component, but it quickly went beyond and rapidly became more than merely electoral. At any rate, what I am saying is that we should discuss the fact that there are compañeros – the Colectivo Situaciones – who are autonomist, people we have often talked to and who have never felt any sympathy for the Kirchner governments. They were sympathetic to García Linera before he became vice-president of Bolivia. And at some stage they developed a theory: what the social movements are going through in the year 2003 – social movements that had been very active in the years 2001, 2002 and 2003 – is not a defeat (and they say this in order not to draw comparison with the defeat of 1976), but an impasse. So they are proposing the idea of a deadlock, a kind of standstill, a freeze, a situation that does not imply defeat, to differentiate it from and reassociate it with something that is still open-ended, unlike when you are properly defeated, which would simply mean that it is a kind of complete (tactical) withdrawal.

Ticio Escobar: I agree that perhaps the failure of certain hegemonic forms has to do with the crisis of the hegemonic model that has been used and reformulated since Gramsci. But, even if we leave to one side this notion for operative reasons, we would still have to think of how power is articulated, how it is legitimate, how it is rooted in various subjectivities and how it is sustainable in social terms. And also, how counter-power is constructed, how to resist the dominant model when it enters into conflict with different interests. First of all, the ideological cover appears to be changing direction. We have already mentioned the Curuguaty case and the impeachment of Lugo, to take the particular case of Paraguay, where they were not at all concerned about outward appearances that support the discourse of power and hide what needs to remain hidden. A disregard for the good manners supplied by the myth sensu lato or directly constructed by culture. We have also spoken about Trump, who appears to have ripped off all masks, showing the horrifying face of what had hitherto been hidden: it points at the Real, in the Lacanian sense of the word. The monstrous is that which must not be shown, what ideological trappings ought to conceal in order to maintain the hegemonic fiction. Faced with this situation we should formulate a strategy of rebellion: critical dissidence cannot take as its starting point the disappearance of the veil that hides a profound truth: the veil has come off but that does not mean the truth has been revealed, and maybe it will never show itself, because there is no hidden substance that shores up reality and shrouds the ultimate mystery.

What I am proposing is to consider ideology from a perspective that is purely cultural. Not to approach the concept as a false consciousness, a manipulative tactic or a pure mask that obfuscates calculated dominant interests, but as a particular system of representations, in a pragmatic way reminiscent of the method proposed by Clifford Geertz, that is, as a symbolic/imaginary constellation that, like myths, or religion, or art, fulfils the function of dispelling doubt and proposing notions that are capable of orienting society: to direct it towards conservation or change.
In this way, there exist certain ideological forms that seek to stabilize society, whereas others debate the established meaning. But it is not, at least this is how I understand it, about looking for immutable certainties that lie behind the smoke of illusion created by some Great Magician. Every system of representation (including scientific representation) relies on a certain fictional ingredient, since reality in its supposed total objectivity is out of reach, it can never be entirely outside viewpoints and beliefs. I suppose that the position I have taken up here is highly debatable and I put it to you in way of a stimulus for a debate that we can have today or another day.

Now I want to address the topic of the lack of trust in the State that some sectors of the Left have, and the resulting reluctance that many of them feel when it comes to participating in the state apparatus. This is what happened in Paraguay: obviously, during the never-ending dictatorship of Stroessner it was unthinkable for an opponent to be part of the government. The State was the Other/adversary that needed to be defeated (in the case of Stroessner, not at the ballot box but with the force of arms). But things changed with the post-dictatorial transition: we have supposedly entered a democratic era, and we must rebuild the ruined public sphere responsibly and collectively. Under Lugo’s government the question was much clearer: it was fundamental to be active in the attempt to make the State responsible for the great public interests; to what extent that was possible is another question: but they were trying it. I was very close to the governments of Lula, Dilma and Cristina, and the situation was in my view equivalent: at some point there is an ethical and political obligation to take part in government in order to support progressive public policies, however imperfect and defective they were; it was all we had.

But the question gets more complicated when facing governments like Franco’s, which took office immediately after the coup against Lugo, or Cartes, who is selling the country to mega corporations (among them his own companies). Last night we also talked about this in relation to the dilemma posed by Chantal Mouffe with her notion of ‘agonistics’: to be a deserter, to lose by being walked over, or to participate, even if it were from the interstices, to foster indispensable public policies (healthcare, education, the agrarian and indigenous questions, etc.). But can you really be effective in those areas under the governance of a Cartes, a Macri or a Temer? It is an open-ended question and a complicated one. Let us take it to the institutional-cultural level. No sooner had he taken office than Cartes, interested in leaving a tiny door open to the Left, offered me the ministry of Culture. I did not accept the job, nor any other, that goes without saying. But on his request I produced a short-list, from whom Mabel Causarana, who had worked with me, was selected. That is to say, a certain progressive quota was agreed upon, which was a step towards the repossession of public policies that had been destroyed under Franco. Causarana was fired when Cartes (he felt) had to opt for the support of the most obscurantist right-wing party, the Partido Colorado, but even so, some sections opposed to Cartes, like the ones linked to the defence of the national heritage, continued their work. Without them, much would have been lost in terms of public space, including important pieces of legislation that pertain to this matter. The thing is that there are actions which are of prime importance that can only be carried out from within the State. This raises contradictions and poses questions that are
difficult to answer. Up to which point is it possible to separate institutions that belong to the State from those that are governmental? Is it possible to ensure the continuity of public policies beyond the duration of a government, beyond its political character and legitimacy? This was a topic of discussion in Lugo’s government at the time when the elections of 2013 were looming, a process which was sped up by the coup. In order to ensure continuity, it is necessary for the State to have strong institutions and for the achievements favouring the public good to be enshrined in law, socially supported and upheld by various sectors of society. This last condition influences the previous question and I believe that if there is social, political, sectorial or partisan backing, it is possible to be part of a government that is formally democratic, even if they only take up secondary positions, in order to promote policies to the benefit of the public interest. There is one condition: it can only happen if a certain degree of autonomy is guaranteed as well as basic budgetary support.

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Notes


Ticio Escobar is a curator, essayist and chairman of the Paraguayan chapter of the International Association of Art Critics. He founded and directed the Museo de Arte Indígena, Centro de Artes Visuales (Asunción), and served as Secretary of Culture between 2008 and 2013 in Fernando Lugo’s government. Among his many publications, edited in Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Spain and the United States, are El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo (1986), Misión: Etnocidio (1988), Textos varios sobre cultura, transición y modernidad (1992), La belleza de los otros: arte indígena en el Paraguay (1993), El arte fuera de sí (2004), La maldición de Nemur (2007, English: The Curse of Nemur, 2007), La invención de la distancia (2013) and Imagen e intemperie: las tribulaciones del arte en los tiempos del mercado total (2015). His work has been distinguished by numerous prizes and awards, among which are the Orden de Rio Branco (Brasil), the Prince Claus of Holland Prize for cultural development, and the Premio Bartolomé de las Casas (Casa de América, Madrid) in recognition of his long-standing support for the culture of Paraguay’s aboriginal people.