

## *Luz De Gas*

### Utility Price Hikes And The Contradictions Of Sustainability In Macri's Argentina

By

Alexis Dritsos and Tomás Crowder-Taraborrelli

Photos by Lucas Chillemi

**Tomás Crowder-Taraborrelli** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies at Soka University of America, California, USA. He is an associate producer of ITVS and POV, from the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States. He is on the editorial board of the journal *Latin American Perspectives* (LAP), of which he is co-editor of the film section. He is co-editor of *Film and Genocide* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) and *El documental político en Argentina, Chile, y Uruguay* (LOM Ediciones, 2015). He also co-edited two special issues for LAP: *Political Documentary Film and Video in the Southern Cone: 1950s-2000s* (2013), and *Media, Politics and Democratization in Latin America* (2018). He is currently co-director of the documentary film journal *Revista Cine Documental*.

Address: Soka University of America, 1 University Avenue, Aliso Viejo, California 92656  
[tcrowdertaraborrelli@soka.edu](mailto:tcrowdertaraborrelli@soka.edu)

**Alexis Dritsos** is a member of the National Economic Commission of the Socialist Party and was a candidate for National Deputy for the Socialist and Popular Front, in 2017. He currently works for the National Treasury Department Council of the Judiciary of the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. He publishes weekly articles on politics and economics and appears regularly on radio and TV as a pundit.

Address: Calle 13b, Nro. 556, City Bell, Provincia de Buenos Aires, CP 1896. Argentina [alexis.dritsos@gmail.com](mailto:alexis.dritsos@gmail.com)

**Lucas Chillemi** is a professional photographer living in Buenos Aires. He works as an agricultural administrator in Tres Arroyos. He is a member of the Association of Graphic Reporters of Argentina (A.R. G. R.A). He works as a freelance photographer and is the art director of Espacio Makarius.

Address: Avenida Corrientes 1584, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, C1042AAO [Lucas.chillemi@hotmail.com](mailto:Lucas.chillemi@hotmail.com)

#### Abstract

*Argentine President Mauricio Macri's price hike policies have deeply hurt the Argentine household economies. This essay seeks to understand the rationale behind the policies and to analyze the rhetoric that Macri has deployed to justify it. Macri and members of his government have made bold pronouncements in the press articulating an elitist, discriminatory view of social advancement. Faced with popular resistance from social movements, opposing political parties, and citizens, price hikes have solidified Macri's neoliberal approach and are an indispensable component of his austerity plan. In this essay, we consider ways in which price hikes have become a bold instrument of social control and political indoctrination. In particular, we are interested in Macri's deployment of price hikes and austerity measures as a counter-offensive to successful grassroots movements that emphasize economic and environmental sustainability as a principle of effective social organization.*

*La vida es un vaso de gaseosa aguada,  
como una secuencia de bromas pesadas.  
Disfruta este trago porque al terminar  
habrá que pagar y quizá pagarlo de más;  
habrá que insistir como lo hicimos tantas veces...*

*Life is a glass of watery soda  
like a sequence of heavy jokes.  
Enjoy your drink because when finished  
we will have to pay  
and maybe pay more;  
we will have to insist  
as we have done so many times (Babasónicos)*



We began writing this essay in February 2019. Argentina was suffering once again under the calamitous policies of a neoliberal government and the draconic mandates of the IMF. The road to development, according to this ideological framework, is labor flexibilization and austerity. News programs and newscasters were assessing the political fortitude of Mauricio Macri's administration. Will Macri and his party win reelection in October 2019? Or will rising utility costs, inflation, interest rates, unemployment, be enough to sway the electorate to vote for a political party of the opposition?

In 2015, right-wing candidate Macri won the presidential election by a narrow margin, aligning the country once again with the transnational neoliberal block. During the campaign, Macri promised a set of policies that would correct the problems inherited from the previous administration- *la pesada herencia*- without violating acquired rights. As expected by Macri's critics on the left, the new president rolled out a series of fiscal measures that did away with utility subsidies; chipping away at the purchasing power and well-being of middle and low-income households. Soon after, inconsistencies became visible, contrary to the optimistic forecasts promoted by the government.

The policies of seduction, with respect to foreign capital, involved several measures that went against the interests of the majority of the population. The discourse of pragmatism, as Max Horkheimer argued in the *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) in the aftermath of the World War II, degrades all complexities to a simple "rational" plan: "In our day, the hectic desire that people have to adapt themselves to something that has the power to be, whether it is called a fact or an *ens rationale*, has led to a state of irrational rationality" (90). In many aspects, Macri's economic plan is structured on "planned obsolescence" (Foster and Clark, 2012: 9). The casting aside of sectors of production and its workforce mirrors the strategy imposed by the Dictatorship in the 1970s and by two democratically elected governments of early and late 1990s (Menem and De la Rúa) all of which led up to a tragic social genocide in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis.<sup>i</sup>

Since 2015 Argentina's economy has displayed the all too familiar signs of neoliberal malaise: inflation has risen to around 50% a year, the peso was devalued by 400%, interest rates have ballooned to 65% making it harder for small businesses (PYMES) to borrow money, and poverty has risen to 32%. Even more alarming is the loss of purchasing power, as salaries depreciated between 15% and 20% (Katz, 2019). As if this were not enough, Macri's

government has borrowed 57 billion dollars from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and has opened the economy up to imports, wrecking industries. Luciana Zorzoli (2019) writing for *Jacobin* puts it this way: “Reestablishing ties with the IMF allows Macri to both reconnect with ruling economic hubs and introduce a powerful external actor that can help discipline political and popular demands in the country (by loading the country up with debt) and push through his neoliberal program” (2). In addition, Zorzoli explains to readers that this rescue package from the IMF is the most generous package in the institution’s history. When looking at perfect storms like this, Claudio Katz reminds us in *La economía marxista hoy: seis debates teóricos* (2010) that these economic conditions are fertile ground for speculators and vulture funds (72).

Historian and political commentator Araceli Bellota, described the effects of this disciplinary regime of impoverishment as gaslighting [*te están haciendo ‘Luz de Gas’*] in reference to the 1944 film *Gaslight* (Una nueva aventura, 2019). In the film, Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer) rummages around at night in the attic, unbeknownst to Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman), his new wife. From the garret, Anton flickers the gaslight, heightening the terror that slowly drives Paula mad. Anton’s ultimate goal is to discover the hidden jewels of Paula’s murdered aunt, a former opera-star. As in the case of Paula in *Gaslight*, day after day, month after month, Argentines are slowly “gaslighted” by Macri’s price hikes, and left to wonder how their own family economies are being ransacked.

Central to Macri’s shock doctrine, perhaps its cornerstone, has been the rise of utility prices. Since the president took office, electricity has increased by 3,624%, natural gas 2,401%, water 1,025% and transportation an average of 500%. In 2015, utility costs comprised of an average minimum salary. Today, the percentage is much higher: 23.5% (UNDAV, 2018: 3). The

impact on most citizens has been so dramatic that agencies have recently reported a 45% increase in personal loans to pay for utility services (Terrile, 2019).

The streets, once again, have become a critical space in which to mobilize bodies and summon up solidarity among workers, students, and activists (especially feminists). Protests against price hikes began in 2018 in Buenos Aires and by the beginning of 2019 have spread all over the country. Popular culture has given several names for these demonstrations: *marchas de las antorchas* [torch marches] *marchas contra el tarifazo* [protests against price hikes] or *ruidazos* [banging of pots and pans]. A woman, protesting in the streets of Buenos Aires in early January, said to the daily *Página 12*: “If a man hits a woman they put him in prison. This man hits us all. No one realizes that?” [*Si un hombre golpea a una mujer lo meten preso. Este hombre nos golpea a todos. ¿Nadie se da cuenta?*] (“Un ruidazo que se amplía: 2019).



This report has three central objectives: to develop a theoretical analysis of the political and economic consequences of Macri's shock doctrine economic policies, to demonstrate how prices hikes are an intrinsic part of these doctrines, and to show how prices hikes constitute a counteroffensive to a grass roots discourse of sustainability. The following are some of the questions we will attempt to answer: Are these economic policies designed to persuade the Argentine people that price hikes are the only option to join the developed world? How are these prices hikes reasonable, or good economic policy? Or simply put, why is Macri's government doing this to the Argentine people, a question often raised by bewildered TV panelists?

We will explore the following central questions: Is Macri attempting to redistribute capital from the working class to the corporate oligarchy? Is he trying to discipline workers (by spreading a fear of unemployment, distrust in unions, and divisions among people) in order to lower wages and make Argentina "more competitive" than other developing nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, or El Salvador)? Is he trying to develop a new culture of exploitation, or as Immanuel Wallerstein put it, "an ideological cover" to vindicate the natural rights of an oligarchy? (2000: 268) Or is Macri's approach a combination of all of the above? We will consider how Argentinians are opposing these *tarifazos*. Although this is not a central objective of this paper, in the conclusion we will explore a few compelling arguments to strengthen a discursive crusade to socialize public services and support a discourse of sustainability.

## **AN ECONOMIC PROGRAM OR THE DEVIL'S IDEOLOGY<sup>ii</sup>**

In "La pregunta" ['The Question,' composed in 2018], Adrián Dárgelos of Babasónicos sings: "Life is a glass of watered down soda, like a sequence of heavy jokes..." In many ways,

Macri's policies have engendered an economy that is like "a glass of watered down soda" but for most Argentines the heavy jokes are not funny but ruinous. This neoliberalism, pumped with testosterone, is as reckless and violent as older incarnations (Harvey: 2005, 7-9).

Macri's party *Cambiamos* [Let's Change] contends that progress in society should be based on a system of natural competition, in which winners are sifted away from the losers. The State, a propaganda machine with paid collaborators in media outlets and an army of trolls, broadcasts a mixture of proto-fascist slogans and platitudes. Novelist Martín Kohan recently ridiculed Macri's oratory skills at the Conference of Spanish Language. Kohan attempted to delineate the president's rhetorical juggernaut: "...where the form, under the inspiration of advisors or Jaime Durán Barba's slogans, that is, phrases made of two, three or four words, rather sweet-sounding but hollow, the type of empty, tantric, phraseology of New Age let's say, which effectively leads language to a precarious state, and also leads thinking to a precarious state" ("Un cúmulo de dificultades incalculable": 2019).

Thinking is indeed in a precarious state. One-time middle-class truisms like "the value of education," is dismissed by *Cambiamos*, whose supporters encourage the population to carve out their careers and not to count on public schools or universities for professional training and social mobility. Recent cuts to the education budget have magnified infrastructure emergencies in the Province of Buenos Aires. In August 2018, a gas explosion in a school in Moreno, La Plata, killed vice Principal Sandra Calamano and Rubén Rodríguez, a guard. School authorities had been complaining of a gas leak to public officials for years (Hayon, 2019). Macri, who expressed sadness for the avoidable deaths, had previously affirmed in March of 2017, after grim results were revealed of inequities between students in public vs. private schools, said that he felt pity for those that "had to fall into the public education system" [...*aquel que tiene que caer en*

*la educación pública*] (“ ‘Caer’ en la educación pública,” 2017). Drawing from the work of Karl Polanyi, David Harvey (2005) conjures the neoliberal model of social organization in which rights are dispensed “...to those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing” (38). As Kohan described so shrewdly, language leads thinking to a precarious state, as in the case of the deaths of a disfranchised school teacher and janitor. After three years in power, it is clear that *Cambiamos* would much rather use the authority of the State to impoverish large sections of the population by undermining decency and democratic participation: “The Macri government has also signaled that its stance towards contentious demonstrations of collective action and basic human dignity is distinct from previous governments. It has spoken, for example, about the need for unions to choose between salaries and jobs”(Casullo, 2016: 365). Jean-Luc Nancy in *Hegel: The Restlessness Of The Negative* expresses this pathetic condition of self-awareness brought about by despotism: “I recognize myself separated and finite, shut-in, reduced or reducible to the very point of my pain”(2002: 41).

The recognition of displacement was expertly articulated by *Cambiamos*, to cite one example, by the designation of Juan José Aranguren as Macri’s first Minister of Energy. Aranguren, is a former CEO of Shell, who was caught in a scandal when the press revealed that he had refused to sell his holdings after taking the oath as a public servant (echoing Trump’s Secretary of State appointee, Rex Tillerson ). He also refused to bring his deposits in fiscal paradises back to Argentina.<sup>iii</sup> Aranguren launched the price hikes assault on the population, issuing forth the cornerstone of Macri’s economic policy: the notion that the consumption of utilities is a luxury-- i.e. Argentinians had been living well beyond their means, enjoying a life-style only reserved for the wealthy and successful. Macri himself stated the same idea not one but three times in the same speech: “We must mature as a society and not live above our means”



[*Debemos madurar como sociedad y no vivir por encima de nuestras posibilidades*] (Zapata & Ricardo: 2019). As the opposition press accused Aranguren of corruption, Macri's Minister of the Interior Affairs, Rogelio Frigerio, vehemently verbalized his classism by contending that in Patagonia--one of the coldest regions in Argentina--"people were walking around in t-shirts because the heating was practically free" ("La gente andaba en remeras," 2019). Shortly after this statement, Frigerio earned harsh criticism when utility bills in the southern region rose up by 2700%. Economist Javier González Fraga, a Macri supporter, added another hateful ingredient to the *Cambiamos* rhetoric, and thus steered thinking further into a "precarious state" when he proclaimed during a radio interview: "Overconsumption was encouraged, the utility rates and the monetary exchange rate were delayed...They made an average employee believe that their salary could be used to buy a cell phone, a plasma TV, cars, motorcycles and travel abroad ("Le hicieron creer...", 2019).



It is clear that this CEOcracia [*CEO-cracy*] (Rincón, 2018: 139) that has run Argentina for the last three years has greatly punished the middle and lower class and increased the wealth of financial speculators by settling an outstanding debt with vulture funds, borrowing billions of dollars from the IMF, and issuing bonds at ruinously high-interest rates, one of the largest transfers of capital from middle sectors to a political oligarchy in recent decades. Economist Michael Hudson, in an interview with Sharmini Peries, puts it this way: “Like all IMF loans, the purpose is to subsidize capital flight out of Argentina before this austerity occurs, so that wealthy Argentinians can take their money and run before the currency collapses” (2018). One of Macri’s campaign slogans was *volveremos al mundo* [we will return to the developing world], a rallying cry which had a twofold function: to save Argentina from populism or worse, “populist left” (Ellner, 2019: 4) and to depict the Kirchner administration as reckless for giving working people the illusion they could afford a life of dignity: “Their return to power promised to signal the restoration of the old order in which business groups, traditional political parties, the church hierarchy, and media owners would regain their position of hegemony. There was also considerable evidence that if the old elites regained their power they would deliver heavy blows to pink-tide leftists as well as to the social movements that supported them” (Ellner, 2019: 5). Some politicians from the opposition have argued that Macri’s overall goal is to turn Argentina once again “*en un país agroexportador*” [into an agro-exporting country], and to forge a segregated society- on one side the holders of capital (corporate monopolies, landowners, offshore account holders) and on the other, impoverished laborers with no savings, no property, no access to health care or education.

Let's consider a few more economic figures to understand why price hikes are an intrinsic part of Macri's austerity package. In the last twelve months (until October of 2018) the *Cambiamos* government has devalued the peso by 258% making it the worst-performing currency in the world. In the last six months, the Central Bank has raised interest rates to around 60% making it one of the highest in the world. Most importantly, salaries have gone down from around u\$ 600 to u\$ 250 dollars and the poverty rate has increased to 33.6%.

Macri's price hike policies are a bold instrument of social control and indoctrination. Price hikes intervene on the social consciousness by attempting to persuade the population of two basic notions: 1) the price of utilities must not be determined by the value of commodities in the domestic economy but by that of a transnational one, and 2) utilities should not be regarded as natural resources but as consumer goods (luxury ones we may add). The dollarization of prices of fuels, gas and electricity, among other consumer goods, generated great benefit for energy companies while producing a huge burden on the productive sector, commerce and families. In order to reduce the fiscal deficit, Macri's administration began a sudden reduction of subsidies to regulated pricing in general; including the cost of transport and the price of water. The immediate effect of these measures was the acceleration of inflation motivated by the disproportionate growth of costs, thus damaging the overall performance of the country's economy. This is very important to note, because as the price of utilities rise, small businesses have a harder time generating profit. As a result of this dynamic, hundreds of businesses have closed their doors in the last three years. Camilo Kahale, president of the Federación Económica de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (FEBA) [Economic Federation of the Province of Buenos Aires] reported in the financial daily, *Ámbito Financiero*, that between 2016 and August 2018, 9,500 PYMES closed their doors: "Business owner no longer think of expansion, the goal is to avoid

bankruptcy because they know that a business which closes means a new family near the poverty line” (“Cada comercio que cierra...,” 2019). Unemployment rates have also risen dramatically in different sectors of the economy condemning workers to search for jobs in the informal economy. The consequences are profound; the loss of purchasing power of consumers affects aggregate demand and subjects companies to a large drop in sales. Argentina, because of the current economic policy, has consolidated a situation of chronic stagflation while the government pursues a relentless austerity agenda and promises economic recovery.



Macri’s economic policy of austerity measures and price increases generates a “perfect storm,” a term the president himself likes to use. Every budgetary item upon which a family depends for their economic well-being has gone up: food (an increase of about 100%), transportation, utilities, health care costs, education, credit card interest rates, and household

appliances. The president utilizes terms used frequently by emissaries of neoliberalism: efficiency, personal responsibility, self-monitoring: “We must mature as a society and not live beyond our means” (Zapata and Ricardo, 2018). In the last couple of years, politicians have used the analogy of a household budget to justify the slashing of subsidies to utilities. Although this strategy has been used by other governments, it has played a critical role in the deployment of Macri’s rhetoric of “living within our means.” The correlation between federal budget allocations and household budgeting violently kicks down the safety door that used to offer families the conviction that they were capable of administering their incomes. As Michael Edelstein argues, drawing from research about communities affected by contamination, “No longer is one’s health assumed. The ability to make decisions for one’s self and family its thrown into doubt...Both home and environment are now feared” (in Willow, 2015: 771).

In April 2018, Macri sent to *El Litoral*, a newspaper of the Santa Fe province, a document entitled “Cuidemos el consumo de energía” in which he stated:

Each light that we turn off, each tap and each stove that we shut off, each water heater that we regulate so that we do not have to cool off the hot water, every time that instead of turning on the heater, we wrap ourselves up. All these small steps add up to energy savings and paying less. These habits are also part of the cultural change that we are achieving, an authentic and lasting transformation that is brought about little by little, putting one foot in front of the other. I know that for many of you it is very difficult to cope with a cost update. I know what is hard on your pocket. And I want to tell you, once again, that, if there had been an alternative to avoid this, I would have been the first to implement it.

For the average citizen, it is crucial to know that their efforts to save in utilities constitute small but significant transfers of capital to the State. This revenue could be used to finance other public services, public education to name one. Another obvious option would be to invest these savings in energy consumption to build renewable energy infrastructure. According to Robert Soutar (2015), “Oil and natural gas alone are currently responsible for well over 80% of Argentina’s total primary energy supply. The Latin American regional average is around 60%” (2). This is not the goal of *Cambiamos*. In Argentina today, every month the price of utilities increase, inflation increases (currently about 4% percent a month) and salaries depreciate. This unsolvable contradiction supports a business and political oligarchy which undermines a discourse of sustainability. As grassroots movement leaders have been arguing frequently over the last two years, it continues to be difficult to press for a sustainable model of development when most households are struggling to make ends meet.

Why would any president do this to their population? Macri’s political approach is part of a global effort to reorganize economies in the interest of international capital, and at the expense of working bodies. If one wants to understand the consequences of economic policies in Argentina, start with the pain inflicted and walk your way back to the source. As John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clarke (2012) have argued about the cost of capitalism: “workers themselves become ‘negative externalities’ ”(14). With this new deployment of power, utilities are commodities to be purchased by those that can afford them, use them and trade them. We believe this is the main reason why Macri has so adamantly defended his policy to roll back subsidies for public utility services. In the rhetoric of *Cambiamos*, energy subsidies are handouts not part of an economic plan to strengthen national industries and safeguard employment.

One of the biggest problems for Macri's government is that it is difficult to find new ways to hide the suffering it inflicts on the population. As Max Pensky (1993) suggests in his reading of Walter Benjamin, if you take away from people the possibility of consumption, the enchantment of the system disappears (184). The many marches against price hikes make clear the obvious, that politics, as former Uruguayan president José Mujica said, cannot abandon a discussion of the most elemental problems, and cannot be an appendix of econometrics ("Latinoamérica piensa," 2018). As many times before, sectors of the Argentine population have come out into the streets to express their frustration and discontent. This might be the only way to shake off the fear that takes over when all one can think about is being able to pay bills at the end of the month.

The policy of disproportionate rate increases that the Macri government has implemented since the beginning of its mandate has generated various types of reactions among citizens, political parties, as well as different social actors. In the case of families, the significant fall in purchasing power resulting from the dollarization of tariffs and the removal of subsidies has generated a constant movement of claims and protests throughout the country. Consumer rights associations have developed claim actions on all possible fronts, including court filings, which in some cases has managed to delay increases for a short period. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the commerce sector have permanently positioned themselves (through various associations that represent them) against a policy that increases their costs in a manner incompatible with the economic sustainability of the activity they perform. In the political sphere, except for the ruling party, all the main opposition forces have repudiated the tariff increases and contemplate a substantial modification of the one used so far. Besides public demonstrations, some Argentine provinces- La Pampa, Chubut, Misiones, and cities- Bariloche-

have presented *recursos de amparo* or appeals for legal protection (“Freno al tarifazo del gas...,” 2016).



## WHAT THE FUTURE MIGHT BRING: AN INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION

Is Argentina heading for a deep recession and potentially another default of its debt? Will Macri lose the support of sectors of the population that gave him their vote and legitimacy? There is a strong possibility. As we finish writing this essay, these are important questions that remain unanswered. Is Macri’s economic plan wretchedly ineffective or the culmination of a Machiavellian policy to lower salaries, disempower working people, and spur inequality? At the national level, grassroots organizations that advocate for a sustainable model of development, greatly rooted in the strategy of empowering citizens, must make wise political choices when



electing public officials. Christian Fuchs (2017) reminds us of the deathly consequences of enabling a CEO-cracy to take control of the country's resources: "Unsustainability arises in modern society to the extent that the class interests of elites become the governing principles of social systems and society's subsystems" (456). The version of democracy endorsed in this paper is that of a governmental system that satisfies the basic necessities of its citizens. They must remain cognizant of the connections between politics, sustainability, and collectivity. We seem to be learning this lesson the world over. Middle and low income families will distrust public projects sponsored by public officials who raise utility prices, keep their savings in fiscal paradises and make their lives a living hell. To urge people to conserve and invest in more sustainable practices, governments need to be role models, not corporate plunderers. These seem like obvious points, but developed countries that carry the weight of being the biggest polluters should support grassroots organizations, not corporations, in their efforts to spread sustainable practices in the developing world. Instead, the U.S. government has supported smear campaigns against governments that subsidized public utilities (*tarifa social* or social prices) and continues to support neoliberal projects whose main political objectives often center around lowering wages to sentence the working class to a life of poverty. As Babasónicos puts it so plainly in their song "The Question," "we will have to pay/ and maybe pay more/we will have to insist/as we did so many times."

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<sup>i</sup> Documentary filmmaker Fernando “Pino” Solanas uses the term social genocide in *Memoria del saqueo* (2003), which traces the history of inequality and the transfer of resources from the Argentine people to political elites. For a

<sup>ii</sup> Sol Sánchez Maroto (2019) uses the expression “the ideology of the devil” to describe how politicians made room to “experts” in order to give their controversial decisions an aura of expediency and objectivity.

<sup>iii</sup> Aranguren is currently under investigation for taking part in a scheme in which the government raised the price of gas benefitting the very company of which he was a shareholder.