



Argentina

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NI UNA MENOS – NOT ONE WOMAN LESS

How feminism could become a popular struggle

by Paula Biglieri

Ni Una Menos (literally meaning “Not one less”, standing for “not one woman less”) is the signifier that has become the name of a whole popular feminist movement. Its moment of irruption can be clearly traced back to June 3, 2015, when thousands of women took over different squares across Argentina, but in particular the National Congress square

in Buenos Aires city. The scene turned out to be shocking for many people as the call to demonstrate against femicides and all other kinds of gender-based violence, after the horrifying murder of Chiara Páez (a 14-year old pregnant teenager who was killed by her boyfriend), turned into a gigantic collective testimony of all those who had suffered gender violence. The images of so many different people carry-

ing banners with the names and pictures of their beloved women who had been killed or injured, crying out their stories, testifying the horror, provoked a reconfiguration of social antagonisms. And this reconfiguration had to do with the fact that, for the very first time, feminism was becoming part of the popular struggle in Argentina. Let us examine the argument in detail.

“FEMINISM ESTABLISHED A NEW ANTAGONISTIC FRONTIER BETWEEN ‘US, THE PEOPLE AGAINST PATRIARCHY’ AND ‘THEM, THE ONES THAT REPRODUCE GENDER INEQUALITY THAT AFFECTS THE PEOPLE’.”

If we use the theoretical tools for discourse analysis developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe¹ to study this case, the first aspect that we detect is that originally the signifier “Not one woman less” was inscribed in the social – discursive – space as a *particular* demand. That is, it was a type of political demand that – satisfied or not – remains isolated without establishing by contiguity any solidarity link with other demands. In other words, it does not participate in any equivalential articulation of demands.² “Not one woman less” as such was born in March 2015 in a “Reading Marathon” held at the main entrance of the National Library in Buenos Aires city by a group of women writers, poets, journalists, actresses, intellectuals, and social activists as well as relatives and friends of the victims. The demand was basically addressed to the entire institutional system of the State, but also to the mass-media, which were accused in many cases of misogynist news reporting of femicides. This first expression of “Not one woman less” had an limited effect as a social protest, mainly reaching urban middle-class activists.

THE SECOND ASPECT is that this originally particular demand became a popular one. Following Laclau,³ we understand popular demands as those that – although different from each other – establish by contiguity a solidarity link when facing a common antagonistic “other”. This solidarity link, known as a chain of equivalence, is the first step towards constituting a broader social subjectivity, namely “the people”. As mentioned, we can locate this change in the massive demonstration of June 3, 2015 which – retroactively – acquired the status of an event. This is because the irruption, on the one hand, was not within the given system of countable possibilities of the social space and, on the other, when it publicly exposed that gender violence was not an exception

but an widespread practice, it modified the way in which social antagonisms were disposed up to that point. However, one thing needs to be mentioned regarding the discursive context of the irruption of “Not one woman less”. By the time this event took place there was a discursive space that had already been crossed by different antagonisms anchored in social claims made by subordinated social groups. Therefore, the social space was available, let us say open, to receiving demands associated with vulnerable or minority social groups that were pursuing social justice, inclusion, wealth distribution and equality. Let us remember that by 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s left-wing populist government was nearing the end of its period in office, and it had supported, among other things, many demands of subordinated social groups and had passed laws in the National Congress such as the egalitarian marriage law and the gender identity law, as well as introducing the element of femicide into the Penal Code.⁴ The feminist movement had already gained an important place because the National Meeting of Women, attended annually since 1986 by steadily growing numbers of women, gave feminism a wide and varied public space of social and political debate. Then we can say that thanks to and beyond this discursive context, the irruption of “Not one woman less” and its becoming a popular demand reshaped social antagonisms in a double sense: firstly, feminism turned into a popular struggle – becoming equivalent to other political demands, including demands that are not specifically necessary – and consequently started to be part of “the people”; secondly, feminism overlapped struggles for other popular demands, putting itself forward as a polemic issue within the different popular organizations inasmuch as they also reproduced unequal gender relations. In other words,

feminism established a new antagonistic frontier between “us, the people against patriarchy” and “them, the ones that reproduce gender inequality that affects the people”, as well as the different popular organizations that compose feminism from within.

A clear example of how feminism became part of “the people” is the struggle to legalize abortion. The “National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion” was born during the debates of the National Meeting of Women in 2003 and 2004. Therefore, it was obviously an already inscribed demand in the social space, but the irruption of “Not one woman less” re-signified it in an entirely different popular way. We find the clue in 2016 when “Not one woman less” protests included another signifier: *Vivas Nos Queremos* (We want ourselves – women – alive). This new element enabled, on the one hand, the demand for legal abortion to be rewritten in terms of *Ni una muerta más por aborto clandestino* (Not one woman less due to clandestine abortion), and entailed a noun slipping into the signifier and its meaning. In this way the signifier “legalizing abortion” was linked to the idea of a legitimate access to basic rights; because it was the first time that in the political struggle for legalizing abortion, the signifier “life” was effectively associated with abortion. And this was a major political victory for the women’s movement as abortion had normally been associated with death and murder by the Catholic Church and the different evangelical branches, as they placed abortion as equivalent to murder. On the other hand, these signifiers also entailed a reaction against the political context in a country marked by the return of a conservative-neoliberal coalition to government in December 2015 (headed by President Mauricio Macri) after 12 years of left-wing populism in power. In this way, the slogans “Not one woman less”/

We want ourselves – women – alive” were also linked to demands such as the rejection of the closing down of public gender-based programs developed by the former left-wing populist government; the rejection of police repression against the National Women’s Meeting in October 2016 in Rosario city; the rejection of the irregular imprisonment of the native community leader Milagro Sala in the Province of Jujuy; and the International Women’s Strike in March 2017 also included the demand to reject austerity policies that mainly affected women and directly pushed them into precarious situations, etc. In any case, this slipping of the meanings and signifiers attached to the women’s movement was linked to broader political subjectivity, “the people”. The women’s movement was associated with a series of heterogeneous demands not necessarily considered feminist but usually as part of the long-standing tradition of popular struggles associated with the “social justice” element. At this point we would like to emphasize that “social justice” is the empty signifier that has been the key nodal point articulating every popular struggle over the past sixty years in Argentina’s political life.⁵ We can think of “social justice” as the structuring element of an ever-increasing chain of equivalence of rights in terms of a livable life. This is the reason why the “green wave”⁶ was structured around the nodal point “social justice” and not only in terms of a basic individualistic civil right (I decide about my own body), but mainly as a social right. This is a crucial aspect that makes the women’s movement in Argentina mostly anti-neoliberal.

THIRD, THE DEVELOPMENT of the feminist struggle in Argentina gives us a key to understanding how feminism in a neoliberal context can become a decisive emancipatory fight. Because if feminism remains as a particularity or an isolated element within the social space – that is, if it attempts to remain as a demand of identity – it is likely to become an easy target for the markets and to be incorporated into the circuit of neoliberal practices and translated into a mere commodity. But if we leave any essentialism behind

and take into account that no practice in itself is intrinsically emancipatory, we can understand that any practice may only become emancipatory when linked to other practices. Solidarity among the demands of different subjugated groups permits the emergence of a wider political subjectivity, not so easily available to be captured by the solipsistic terrain imposed by neoliberalism. And it also gives feminism the chance to overflow its own frontiers and “dye green” – to influence – “the people”.

A fourth aspect, the emancipatory potency of “Not one woman less” built upon a solidary chain of equivalence largely exceeded the construction of “the people” in Argentina. It also provoked enthusiasm, becoming an internationalist signifier that translated its politicizing effects into different contexts. “Not one woman less” reactivated and updated the past history of women’s strikes as a practice through which women collectively protested not only against the capitalist oppression but also against their subjugated position in relation to men. This renewed global, massive and historically built struggle allows us to see that femicides, austerity policies against women and their consequent precarization, the refusal to legalize abortion, etc. are the limits to patriarchy itself in terms of dominant social relations. This also explains the hatred incarnated in the conservative reaction against the renewal of feminism.

A FIFTH AND FINAL aspect I would like to mention has to do with the challenge that feminist militancy as political activism faces. The irruption of “Not one woman less” had the full attraction of a moment of reactivation as it questioned sedimented practices and established hierarchies. On the other hand, any militant subjectivity that attempts to make that irruption last necessarily assumes the risk of institutionalization, because the moment of irruption can never be completely resolved through a passage to a militant institutionalized moment. In this passage there is always a loss or a remainder. That is to say, the moment of the irruption can never be exhaustively absorbed by the activist political organization, no mat-

ter how horizontal or democratic that is. Institutionalization always brings, at some point, disappointment, discontent and annoyance as it entails new routines, established spaces, hierarchies and antagonisms. However, the paradox is that without this second moment, the first would vanish into thin air without really producing any change in the social order. So that is the challenge for feminist militancy: to generate an activist institutionalization that at the same time keeps alive at least something of that moment of irruption. Maybe, a first step into this impossible yet necessary challenge is to have an awareness that there is no institutional format (whether meeting, party, social movement, union, etc.) capable of resolving completely and once and for all that moment of irruption. This subjective position is the only one that can prevent militancy from domesticating it all under an organizational logic and keep alive the enthusiasm for change. □

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references

- 1 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy; Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 1985/2014); Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London/New York: Verso, 1990); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London/New York: Verso, 2018).
- 2 Laclau, 2005.
- 3 Laclau 2005.
- 4 The “egalitarian marriage” law was passed in 2010, the “gender identity” law in 2011 and the element of femicide was introduced in the Penal Code in 2012, after the murder of two young French women tourists in the Province of Salta.
- 5 ‘Social justice’ has been a key nodal point in popular struggles since the first Peronism was in power in the 40s and 50s.
- 6 The emblem of wearing a green handkerchief was initially associated with the demand of legalizing abortion; now it is linked to the feminist movement as such.