



Struggles over Rights and Representations in the Migrant Metropolis: Reverberations of the Trump Effect in the Global South

María V. Barbero

While Latin America figures in US debates about immigration as a source of immigrants, Trump-style anti-immigrant politics have gained a following in Latin American countries as well. María Barbero examines rhetoric and resistance in Argentina.

It is 5:30 in the afternoon on November 22, 2016, and the sun is beaming on the faces of about 500 of us marching from Avenida de Mayo to the congressional palace in Buenos Aires. I am surrounded by flags of Bolivia, Paraguay, Senegal, and Brazil, the LGBTQ rainbow flag, the multicolor Whiphala flag representing indigenous communities of the Andes, and a number of popular and labor party flags. All have joined a march organized by the Red Nacional de Migrantes y Refugiados en Argentina (National Network of Migrants and Refugees in Argentina; *red* means “network” in Spanish) against “the xenophobic and discriminatory politics of [Mauricio] Macri’s government”¹ (Red Migrante 2016). The march comes in the wake of a number of shifts in the Argentine state’s official approach to immigration policy and heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric in public discourse. Flyers advertising the event and chants at the march announce the main messages: migration is a human right; halt plans for a detention center for migrants in Buenos Aires; stop xenophobia and racism. While many are unsure about whether Donald Trump knows much about Argentina, they are deeply aware of his anti-immigrant sentiments and have strategically placed him at the center of their messages as they mobilize to protect migrant rights and make claims to the migrant metropolis.²

Trump effects: criminalization of immigrants and discourses of the border

Argentina’s immigration policy is arguably one of the most progressive in the world. The National Migration Act (law 25.871) implemented in 2004 considers migration an “essential and inalienable” right, and seeks to guarantee equal access to social services, health care, education at all levels, work, and social security for all migrants, regardless of their immigration status (Hines 2010; Novick 2010). However, over the past year, the administration of President Mauricio Macri has taken steps that imperil the future of this policy. Early this year, Macri declared a national state of emergency, with the objective of “reverting a ‘situation of collective threat’ created by complex crime,³ organized crime, and drug trafficking” (Presidencia de la Nación 2016). The state of emergency, active for 365 days and subject to renewal, significantly expands the power of the military, and facilitates the expansion of border-enforcement efforts and allocations. In addition, the

¹ All translations are the author’s.

² I use this term following Nicholas De Genova’s (2014) theorization of migrant cities as sites of constant border struggles where increased efforts at immigration enforcement reinscribe national borders while migrant presences and claims to the city simultaneously disrupt them.

³ “Complex crime” is a legal term used to refer to one criminal act that involves multiple violations.

administration has taken a series of steps that affect migrants living in Argentina—such as cutting back resources to facilitate documentation processes and announcing plans for opening an immigrant detention center in Buenos Aires.

Figure 1. Multiple flags are raised and waved in the air as demonstrators march down Avenida de Mayo in Buenos Aires



© María V. Barbero

Migrants are worried by these steps. Perhaps the tipping point, however, was when Argentine senator Miguel Ángel Pichetto went on national television to discuss issues of security just a week prior to the election of Donald Trump. Pichetto began by paraphrasing a question raised in the 1980s by former French prime minister Michel Rocard: “How much misery can France sustain by taking in poor migrants?” Pichetto stated, “This is a question that I too reflect on and ask myself in Argentina” (Canal 26 2016). He argued that migrants were “occupying” Buenos Aires’ hospitals throughout November and receiving unfair and unreciprocated access to public higher education in Argentina. His most incendiary statements were about Bolivian and Peruvian migrants, claiming that Argentina had “always” functioned as “a social valve for Bolivia [...] and a criminal valve for Peru” (Canal 26 2016). He expanded by explaining that Peru had largely resolved its problems with drug trafficking for the betterment of the country, and concluded that Argentina had been incorporating “this ‘residue’⁴ where we don’t have migratory controls, where we haven’t had them.” (Canal 26 2016). Pichetto not only used discourse similar to that of Donald Trump, characterizing bordering migrants as criminals, and poor, and using language such as “stupid” and “politically correct” to refer to Argentina’s current approach to immigration, but he also referred directly to the potential election of Donald Trump in the United States, arguing that a new outlook that accounted for a “closing world” was necessary when it came to Argentine immigration policy (Canal 26 2016).

⁴ The word used is *resaca* which translates literally to “hangover”, but in this case is used to refer to the leftovers, or “unwanted residue” of Bolivia and Peru.

Key government officials including the minister of foreign relations, Susana Malcorra, the minister of security, Patricia Bullrich, and the secretary of human rights, Claudio Avruj, have since weighed in on the topic. When asked about the relationship between Trump’s campaign rhetoric and current state discourse on immigration in a radio interview, Malcorra stated almost indignantly that “to assume that the decisions that the government of President Macri makes are conditioned by the campaign announcements or comments of President-elect Donald Trump is, I think, to underestimate our work” (Radio Mitre 2016). Bullrich and Avruj, while not explicitly rejecting the influence of Trump’s campaign discourse, argued that Argentina is and will always be an “open country” with “open doors” (Quintans 2016; Radio La Red 2016). They rejected “generalizations” and “xenophobic attitudes” toward neighboring countries’ migrants, all the while failing to make any statements about migrant rights to education and health care and repeating some of the most Trumpian elements of Pichetto’s speech, making a discussion of migration fundamentally a discussion about criminal activity and perceived border crises. Bullrich, who stated that migrants with criminal records should simply not be allowed to enter the country, also argued that, under the previous administration, Argentina gave “total” and “absolute” access to criminals, allowing people to enter “without any type of minimal conditions” (América TV 2016). Avruj similarly said he was in agreement with Pichetto that “owing to a lack of control, in recent years many people have come to settle here with other intentions” (Quintans 2016).

Re-centering Trump: struggles over rights and representations

Pichetto’s comments, and the subsequent reaction from key government officials, have led many advocates of the migrant community, such as the Red Nacional de Migrantes y Refugiados and the Comisión Episcopal para la Pastoral de Migraciones y Turismo (Pastoral Episcopal Commission on Migration and Tourism) to issue statements of concerns about the current climate. The ambassador of Peru and consul general of Bolivia presented a complaint to the National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI). And ultimately, about 500 people took to the streets on November 22. The mobilization was perhaps the most challenging of all these actions for two reasons. First, the march exemplified the very realities of migrant presence, mobility, and visibility during a current political climate under which such realities are being called into question and delegitimized. The theme of the march was “STOP, we are not scapegoats!” and, throughout the event, different migrant groups, advocates, and labor parties rallied for the right to migrate, and challenged the discourse of migrant criminality of the past few months. As one organizer put it, “We are not the *resaca* that Pichetto said. We are people who have come to work. We are exercising our right to migrate. And we do not want them to stigmatize us as criminals or trash, as some representatives are trying to do” (field notes, 22 November 2016).

Although to a lesser extent this march was similar to the 2006 migrant mobilizations in the US, in these marches—during a period of increased nativism and xenophobia—migrants defiantly claimed their presence in cities across the country (De Genova 2014; Lugones and Price 2009). As De Genova explains, claiming to be “here” is a “simple but defiant gesture, the very ‘here’ that migrants invoke is always already a new and radically transformed one: ‘here’ we find ourselves in the migrant metropolis” (p. 5). In Buenos Aires, migrants not only claimed their presence by mobilizing through the city, but also claimed this as a legitimate presence, chanting “migration is a human right” along the way. In addition, while government officials had worked hard to distance debates about Argentine immigration policy from debates about Donald Trump, activists at the march strategically brought Trump back to the center of the debate. Signs read: “No to xenophobia—it’s not Trump, it’s Macri”; “Macri and Pichetto are racist like Trump”; and “Macri-Trump hetero white supremacist builds prisons for migrants” (field notes, 22 November 2016).

Figure 2. A sign held by a demonstrator reads: “Macri [and] Pichetto are racists like Trump”



© María V. Barbero

While Pichetto found an opportunity in Trump’s discourse to justify stricter immigration controls, migrants also found an opportunity in Trump. They deployed the US president-elect’s name as a symbol of racism, sexism, and xenophobia, meant to expose the paradoxes of the Argentine state discourse on immigration, which simultaneously characterizes Argentina as a country of “open doors” and criminalizes certain migrant presences. When I asked a woman holding a sign that read “No to xenophobia—it’s not Trump, it’s Macri” about the meaning of her sign, she explained that while Macri and Trump draw from the same “right-wing playbook,” the problem in Argentina is Macri, who was there before Trump, and would have been there regardless of Trump.

Conclusion

The election of Donald Trump can be understood as a symptom of larger global trends that also encompass the Brexit vote and the rise of nationalist politicians across the European continent. The foreign minister, Susana Malcorra, and the activist with the “It’s not Trump, it’s Macri” sign may be

right in asserting that Argentine immigration discourse and policy would have continued its course regardless of the election of Donald Trump. Nonetheless, the prominence of Trump as a symbol in local border struggles in Buenos Aires is clear, and this should, in the very least, allow us to rethink such urban struggles as always-already enmeshed within broader geopolitical contexts and transnational politics. In this case, the election of Donald Trump has become a political opportunity for those seeking to broaden immigration-control practices, while at the same time acting as a strategic symbol that migrant groups draw on to expose the paradoxes of the Argentine state's discourse on immigration. In this sense, for those of us interested in expanding migrant rights, Trump is simultaneously how it ends, and not how it ends.

Bibliography

- América TV. 2016. "Intratables con Patricia Bullrich", *Intratables*, 9 November. Video available at the following URL: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzxLJM0LzIA&t=1018s.
- Canal 26. 2016. "Miguel Ángel Pichetto en La Mirada de Roberto García", *La Mirada*, 31 October. Video available at the following URL: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM3ykFIAXpc&t=4s.
- De Genova, N. 2014. "Border Struggles in the Migrant Metropolis", *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 3–10.
- Hines, B. 2010. "The right to migrate as a human right: the current Argentine immigration law", *Cornell International Law Journal*, vol. 43.
- Lugones, M. and Price, J. 2009. "Faith in Unity", in M. Ortega and M. Alcoff (eds.), *Constructing the Nation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 91–99.
- Novick, S. 2010. "Migraciones, políticas e integración regional. Avances y desafíos", in S. Novick (ed.), *Migraciones y Mercosur: Una Relación Inconclusa*, Buenos Aires: Catálogos, pp. 9–28.
- Presidencia de la Nación Argentina. 2016. *El gobierno declaró la emergencia de seguridad pública*, Buenos Aires.
- Quintans, M. 2016. "Claudio Avruj: 'Estamos de acuerdo con las declaraciones de Pichetto sobre la inmigración'", *Infobae* [online]. Retrieved on 6 December 2016, URL: www.infobae.com/politica/2016/11/06/claudio-avruj-estamos-de-acuerdo-con-las-declaraciones-de-pichetto-sobre-la-inmigracion.
- Radio La Red. 2016. "Entrevista a la Ministro de Seguridad" [podcast], *Novaresio 910*. Available online at the following URL: <http://radiocut.fm/audiocut/patricia-bullrich-6309>.
- Radio Mitre. 2016. "Malcorra sobre la charla entre Macri y Trump" [podcast], *Le doy mi palabra de Alfredo Leuco*. Available as an audio-only video at the following URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkJNdGWY5ts>.
- Red Nacional de Migrantes y Refugiados en Argentina. 2016. *Marchamos por nuestros derechos*.

María V. Barbero is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University. Her research centers on questions of race and ethnicity, nationalism, migration, and youth both in the United States and Argentina.

To cite this article:

María V. Barbero, "Struggles over Rights and Representations in the Migrant Metropolis: Reverberations of the Trump Effect in the Global South", *Metropolitiques*, 7 December 2016. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Struggles-over-Rights-and.html>.