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PERFORMING MASCULINITY ON STATE FRONTLINES: GENDERED REPERTOIRES OF STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY IN ARGENTINA AND CHILE

Performando Masculinidad en la Primera Línea del Estado: Repertorios de Género en la Burocracia de Calle en Argentina y Chile

Performando Masculinidade na Linha de Frente do Estado: Repertórios de Gênero na Burocracia de Rua na Argentina e no Chile

Jael Goldsmith Weil [1]
Luisina Perelmiter [2]
Neida Colmenares Mejías [3]

[1] Universidad de Los Lagos, CHILE
[2] Universidad Nacional San Martín, ARGENTINA
[3] Universidad de Santiago, CHILE

ABSTRACT
Drawing on three cases from Argentina and Chile, this article shows that frontline state workers enact everyday authority through gendered repertoires—situated performances of masculinity that shape how the state is experienced on the ground. The analysis reveals three broad modes of masculine performance operating across institutional arenas. First, an expansive and assertive masculinity grounded in verbal agility, physical presence, and street credibility is mobilized to manage conflict, confront resistance, and reinforce bureaucratic discretion. Second, a reflexive and deliberately softened masculinity is deployed to downplay hierarchical distance, build rapport, and signal political alignment with marginalized groups while still mediating access to state resources. Third, a hyper-masculine and coercive mode—characterized by authoritarian aesthetics, embodied domination, and heteronormative boundary enforcement—emerges in repressive settings and intensifies in moments of political contestation. Across these modes, the findings show that state agents do not merely apply rules but actively stage authority through embodied, affective, and culturally intelligible scripts rooted in national political cultures and gender regimes. These performances illuminate how competing masculinities—hegemonic, contested, and emergent—coexist within contemporary bureaucracies and shape the texture and outcomes of street-level interactions.
Keywords: street-level bureaucracy, gender regimes, Southern Cone politics, political masculinity, stategraphy.

RESUMEN
A partir de tres casos de Argentina y Chile, este artículo muestra que las burocracias de nivel de calle ejercen autoridad cotidiana mediante repertorios de género: performances situadas de masculinidad que moldean la experiencia concreta del Estado. El análisis identifica tres grandes modos de actuación masculina presentes en distintos ámbitos institucionales. En primer lugar, una masculinidad expansiva y asertiva, sustentada en la agilidad verbal, la presencia corporal y la sabiduría de la "calle", que se activa para gestionar conflictos, enfrentar resistencias y reforzar la discrecionalidad burocrática. En segundo lugar, una masculinidad reflexiva y estratégicamente atenuada, orientada a desarmar distancias jerárquicas, construir cercanía y señalar afinidad política con grupos marginados, aun cuando media el acceso a recursos estatales. En tercer lugar, una modalidad hipermasculina y coercitiva —marcada por estéticas autoritarias, gestos de dominación corporal y refuerzo de límites heteronormativos— que

emerge en contextos de represión y se intensifica en escenarios de conflicto político. En conjunto, estos repertorios muestran que los agentes estatales no solo aplican normas: performan autoridad mediante guiones corporizados, afectivos y culturalmente inteligibles, enraizados en culturas políticas y regímenes de género nacionales. Estas performances revelan, así, la coexistencia de masculinidades hegemónicas, deconstruidas y emergentes, que configuran la textura y los efectos del quehacer estatal cotidiano.
Palabras clave: burocracia de calle, regímenes de género, política del Cono Sur, masculinidad política, estadografía.

RESUMO
Com base em três casos da Argentina e do Chile, este artigo mostra que as burocracias de nível de rua exercem a autoridade cotidiana por meio de repertórios de gênero: performances situadas de masculinidade que moldam a forma como o Estado é vivido no território. A análise identifica três amplos modos de atuação masculina presentes em diferentes arenas institucionais. Em primeiro lugar, uma masculinidade expansiva e assertiva, sustentada na agilidade verbal, na presença corporal e na credibilidade de rua, mobilizada para gerir conflitos, enfrentar resistências e reforçar a discricionariedade burocrática. Em segundo lugar, uma masculinidade reflexiva e estrategicamente suavizada, voltada a reduzir distâncias hierárquicas, construir proximidade e sinalizar afinidade política com grupos marginalizados, mesmo enquanto medeia o acesso a recursos estatais. Em terceiro lugar, um modo hipermasculino e coercitivo —marcado por estéticas autoritárias, gestos de dominação corporal e reforço de fronteiras heteronormativas— que emerge em contextos repressivos e se intensifica em momentos de contestação política. Em conjunto, esses modos mostram que agentes estatais não apenas aplicam normas: performam autoridade por meio de roteiros corporificados, afetivos e culturalmente inteligíveis, enraizados em culturas políticas e regimes de gênero nacionais. Essas performances revelam a coexistência de masculinidades hegemônicas, contestadas e emergentes que configuram o fazer estatal cotidiano.
Palavras-chave: burocracia de rua, regimes de gênero, política no Cone Sul, masculinidade política, statenografia.

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INTRODUCTION

Well-known for doing 'manly things', on August 3rd, 2009, Vladimir Putin was photographed bare-chested, riding a horse in the Siberian mountains (CBS News, 2012). In June 2018, a video of Dutch leader Mark Rutte mopping up spilled coffee went viral after being posted on BBC Arabic's Facebook (Washington Post 2018). The international attention sparked criticisms from Dutch readers who argued that cleaning up after oneself was simply "normal" and not news-worthy (Taylor, 2018). On October 21st 2013, while delivering a speech US president Barack Obama caught a pregnant staff member before she fainted (BBC, 2018). All of these are performance of different versions of masculinity: soviet and patriarchal, Scandinavian style – a particular brand of masculinity resulting from decades of a welfare state that actively promotes gender equity, and empathetic- belonging to a president whose race aligns him with the 'other,' unprivileged by traditional power structures. These gendered state performances, however, are not only staged at by government leaders but enacted in everyday interactions between front-line state workers and citizens.

This paper makes several contributions to the field of stategraphies (Thelen, Vetters & Keebet 2018). We build on diverse scenarios of everyday state life observed in case studies from Argentina and Chile, noting how front-line public servants routinely draw on gendered prototypes that are embedded in local political and institutional culture and

gender regimes. We deploy the concept of gendered repertoires referring to the state's performative aesthetics in seeking ways to get their job done. Building on site-intensive methods such as ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews, complemented with process-tracing of political events in local press, we categorize strategies whose scripts and values are traditionally associated to the 'masculine' into three prototypes of masculinity enacted in these two countries of the southern cone: boisterous Argentine labor inspectors capable of outwitting employers who attempt to hide illegal hires, professionals from the Ministry of Social Development in Argentina, whose masculinity is strategically deconstructed so as to obscure the hierarchies implicit in state power, the repressive police enforcer who draw on symbols from Chile's authoritarian legacies and comes into direct confrontation with versions of deconstructed males enacted by protesters in 2018.

These all simultaneously draw on particular national political legacies such as Peronism in Argentina and the military dictatorship in Chile while simultaneously reflecting contemporary conflicting visions of masculinity. In conjunction, these contribute to the conclusion that finds a wide variety of gender performances of masculinity in everyday state life. We use a fusion of frameworks focusing on the state at the capillary level through gendered observations of theatricality in everyday life of street-level bureaucrats and examine the ways these are situated in local political cultures and gender regimes. We begin by offering a brief overview of the literature and the broader context surrounding gendered political cultures in Chile and Argentina. This serves to ground our case studies, in which our observations of everyday state-making reveal a range of masculine performances. These performances draw on gendered tropes circulating in both popular and political culture and are mobilized to accomplish the work of the state.

GENDER PERFORMANCES AND POLITICAL CULTURES ON THE STATE FRONTLINES

In this section, we briefly review the state of the art on studies of the state that focus on front-line public servants, particularly at the intersection of gender, everyday state-making, and masculinity. We then proceed to examine the particularities of political cultures and gender regimes in Argentina and Chile to set the stage for our case studies.

The street-level bureaucracy literature systemizes micro-level observations of everyday interactions between state agents and citizens to characterize state practices, focusing on how bureaucracies operate (Hupe, 2019; Lipsky, 1980/2010). It identifies a common structure among those who routinely interact face-to-face with citizens. The theory of 'street-level bureaucracy' argues that the daily relationship between state and society is materially shaped and transformed by the discretionary decisions of these bureaucrats

(Haney, 1996; Hancock, 2004; Hill, Hupe & Buffat, 2015; Lipsky, 1980/2010; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011). The state is thus personified by agents whose roles reflect either the protective (e.g., social workers, teachers, healthcare workers) or punitive (e.g., labor inspectors, police, military) functions.

These encounters furthermore do not occur in cultural isolation. Rather, they are embedded in gendered scripts and tropes grounded in national political cultures (Kovacs, Morris & Grauslund 2025). Scholars have identified how the discretionary spaces in policy implementation often reproduce existing race and class cleavages in ways that ultimately deepen inequality (Lara-Millán, 2017; Soss, 2000; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Feminist stategraphy has further illuminated how the messages of these institutional gender regimes are often contradictory (Haney, 1996, 2002; Thelen, Vetters, & Benda-Beckmann, 2018). Although much of this scholarship has focused on state interactions with women, a growing body of work addresses how masculinity is enacted within state-making practices (Morrell, 2001; Yildirim & Bulut, 2023). Connell (1995/2005) argues that while dominant analyses of masculinity emphasize "men's predominant use of violence… which includes men's predominance in state authority and corporate management; these modes coexist with 'emergent forms of masculinity' embodied by men that are both privileged and unprivileged by existing power structures" (Connell, 1995, 2005) and that both reinforce and subvert existing power structures. Ozbay and Soybakis (2020) introduce the concept of 'political masculinities' to capture how men reshape, adjust and reform their gender identities in response to political movements, ideologies, and discourses, influenced by the aspirations and fears associated with political figures, movements, ideologies, and discourses.

State performances, in turn, are embedded in popular cultures, which in turn are embedded in local political cultures and gender regimes (Jewell, 2007). Political cultures vary in the extent of their orientation—liberal versus state-centered, legalistic versus informal—and in the extent to which they uphold traditional or egalitarian gender norms (Møller, 2019). These intersecting axes create a matrix for interpreting how gendered performances of state authority unfold in everyday life. Gender stereotypes and their interfaces with 'national / local' political cultures enable a matrix of interpretation of the microscopic forms of state authority in everyday life. The observed gendered performances of the state reflect the broader, often conflicting, gender regimes within a given society, and differ across class lines. While most of the street-level bureaucracy literature is grounded in research conducted in the Global North, a growing body of work based on case studies from Southern Cone countries has begun to expand and nuance these debates. (Autora 1, 2018; Autora 2, 2016; Rojas Lasch, 2019; Peeters, Lotta and Nieto-Morales, 2024; Lotta and Pires, 2025).

In terms of political culture, neighboring Argentina and Chile share a history of colonization, authoritarian regimes (notably their military dictatorships of the 1980s), and

cultural norms influenced by Catholicism and machismo. However, as in other countries, there are national differences in terms of the expression of their gendered regimes (Bose, 2015; Leschke & Jepsen, 2014; Lombardo, 2017; Moghadam, 2020; Shire & Walby, 2020; Walby, 2020).

Argentine politics is uniquely dramatic, with performance occupying a central place in the construction of national identity (Archetti, 1999). Peronism plays a central role in shaping this identity, blending the hypermasculine figure of General Juan Perón, leader of the 'shirtless' populist labor movement with the legacy of his wife, Eva Duarte (1946–1955), affectionately known as *Evita* and whose legacy is re-performed in everyday politics and began a long legacy of women-as-wives in Argentine politics. Her hands-on, emotionally resonant approach to governance—personally responding to citizens' letters requesting toys, homes, and assistance—established a state-making style grounded in empathy and proximity. Auyero (1999) shows how this legacy endures in the gendered performances of political brokers in Buenos Aires shantytowns, where women perform politics as an extension of their maternal duty, while men adopt the role of "caudillos," or political bosses (Auyero 2000). This symbolic legacy persists: in 2011, with the image of her face was imprinted on the newly created headquarters of the Argentine National Ministry of Social Development (MDSN). In Perelmiter's analysis of interactions between central-level welfare workers and local governments during Cristina Kirchner's presidency (2007-2015), traces of *Evita* were visible in the speech and strategies MDSN workers employ to do their jobs (Perelmiter, 2016). Thus, while Argentina's gender regime is being actively contested by younger feminist movements and radical anti-feminist backlash, its political traditions remain imprinted by maternalist and Peronist-inspired performative repertoires.

Chile is often characterized as Argentina's more restrained neighbor. Its state-making traditions are marked by a combination of maternalism, authoritarianism, and technocratic neoliberalism. In the 20th century, maternalist discourses shaped the expansion of women's citizenship, granting mothers generous social benefits while limiting women's broader participation in public life (Goldsmith Weil, 2019; Illanes, 2007; Molyneux, 2000; Mooney, 2009; Ramm & Gideon, 2019; Suárez-Cao & Miranda, 2018; Zárate Campos, 2008). This was mirrored by a hyper-paternalist state, focused on repression and control. In the 1980s, Chile adopted a neoliberal economic model under the influence of the 'Chicago Boys,' a group of U.S.-trained economists. This model privileged technocratic governance and elite decision-making, dominated by [male] experts trained abroad (Silva, 2008). Azócar (2020) argues that expertise in social policy became gendered, sidelining citizen-based perspectives and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and market ideology. These traditional gender structures were challenged during the 2018–19 feminist student mobilizations and the 2019 social uprising, which collided against state repressive forces to eventually get streamlined into

failed constitutional processes where gender parity was at the core (Suárez-Cao, 2023; Suárez-Cao & Arellano, 2019).

Our paper focuses on the repertoire of performance of masculinity observed in 3 cases studies finding examples in traditional and revised masculinity and differences depending on power and territory. We conceptualize the state as a complex, multilayered organizational entity with multiple "hands" and purposes (Morgan & Orloff, 2018); where "processes of redistribution and interpretation stand in complex relation to one another" (Haney, 2002, pp 7-8). In doing so, we will illustrate how there is a broader spectrum of gender performance of the state in everyday life than the paternal or maternal functions that are commonly associated with the state in gender studies [1].

In this paper, following Auyero (2000), we draw from a dramaturgical sociological approach to examine how state authority is enacted and reproduced at the capillary level. First-line state workers engage in public performances, managing impressions and shaping the behavior of others. Within these everyday performances, street-level bureaucrats draw on legitimate government sources of power—such as uniforms, weapons, and the ability to impose fines and grant funds— as well as informal, socially embedded sources, including gendered stereotypes, to assert their authority over civil society.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative approach drawing on interpretive sociological traditions, conceiving state practices as socially constructed and culturally embedded. Instead of viewing bureaucratic action as purely administrative, it treats frontline encounters as performative moments in which authority, legitimacy, and gendered identities are enacted. Accordingly, the analysis relies on inductive, context-sensitive strategies to capture the situated meanings and symbolic repertoires mobilized by state agents.

Fieldwork for the first case involved participant observation of multiple activities conducted by Argentina's National Directorate of Federal Inspection in the Ministry of Labor. These included inspections in textile workshops and transport companies, routine street-level inspections of small businesses, and training activities within the Ministry. Additionally, around twenty in-depth interviews were carried out with labor inspectors and senior policymakers or technical staff involved in inspection policy. The fieldwork took

[1] Despite the fact that definitions and boundaries of a binary sex order are contested and blurry, there are mountains of empirical research which demonstrate that inequality is distinctly laid upon gender cleavages. In this piece, we operationalize masculinity as in Connell 2019: In the seminal piece in the field of masculinity studies, Connell loosely defines masculinity as "configurations of practice [...] unequally distributed between social groups".

place between August 2015 and March 2016, during a period of economic downturn, when nearly 400 inspectors were employed across 40 regional delegations nationwide.

The second case draws on ethnographic research conducted in Argentina's Ministry of Social Development (MDSN) between 2006 and 2008. This material includes eighty in-depth interviews with program coordinators and mid-level bureaucrats whose daily responsibilities involved direct interaction with beneficiaries, as well as participant observation of policy implementation and bureaucratic encounters across the country.

For the third case and given the mobility restrictions imposed by Covid-19 lockdowns, we constructed a hemerographic database that enabled process-tracing of key events related to the performative repertoire of Chilean police forces during the 2019 social uprising. Although this strategy provides a rich account of the discursive and symbolic dimensions of repression, the absence of direct ethnographic observation makes this case comparatively less empirically dense and sets limits for cross-case comparison. Despite these constraints, we argue that the case remains theoretically valuable, as it provides an illustration of the examined concept within a distinct socio-political setting.

All qualitative materials for cases one and two—fieldnotes and interview transcripts—were transcribed, organized, and thematically coded. The analytic process combined an initial phase of open coding, aimed at identifying emergent patterns in gestures, linguistic styles, interactional scripts, and references to masculine repertoires, with a subsequent phase of axial coding that related these categories to existing frameworks on street-level bureaucracy, dramaturgical sociology, and gender studies. In the ethnographic cases, analysis was guided by constant comparison across scenes, actors, and organizational settings in order to identify internal coherence within each masculinity repertoire as well as situated variation.

For the Chilean case, the hemerographic corpus was analyzed through temporal triangulation—sequencing events to identify continuities and ruptures—combined with interpretive framing analysis and narrative reconstruction. This allowed us to trace the persistence of authoritarian aesthetics and hyper-masculine state performances across different political cycles.

This systematic and multi-source analytic strategy made it possible to integrate heterogeneous kinds of evidence and to reconstruct, comparatively, how different frontline agents mobilize gendered repertoires to assist, persuade, contain, or coerce. Rather than attempting exhaustive case descriptions, the goal was to illustrate gendered state repertoires that could be analytically traced across empirical settings.

EL PORTEÑO CANCHERO: BOISTEROUS MASCULINITY AMONGST LABOR INSPECTORS IN BUENOS AIRES

The word "*Porteño*" refers to the inhabitants of the port city Buenos Aires and '*canchero*' is a play on the word "*cancha*" (field), meaning to have dominance on the soccer field. Loud and confident, the stereotype of the "*porteño canchero*" is re-encarnated in jokes throughout Latin American about the allegedly enormous size of [Argentine] ego. It is a stereotype of expansive masculinity, who speaks loudly, have a (self-proclaimed) sharp wit and are streetwise. His cunning, mental speed, and sometimes offensive jokes weaponize and dominate everyday conversations, transforming these into battlegrounds in which he constantly seeks to demonstrate his dominance over the situation.

Federal labor inspectors in Buenos Aires oversee workers in small and medium enterprises, such as textile workshops, ensuring they are registered with social security. The labor inspectorate in Argentina is a centennial institution (Soprano, 2010). Originally linked to unions and socialist activism, it gradually became independent. In the mid-1990s, the National Labor Inspectorate was cut back and sidelined. Since 2004, this began to change. While the state didn't fully regain authority over labor law enforcement, it significantly expanded its inspection bureaucracy (Peretti, 2016). The National Plan for the Regularization of Labor and Law 25877, establishing the Integral System of Inspection of Labor and Social Security within the Ministry of Labor, targeted high levels of informal employment. Given that the national tax agency AFIP controls social security taxes, the government claimed joint jurisdiction with the Ministry over worker registration. Registration ensures compliance with employer obligations and employee benefits such as health insurance, pensions, vacations, bonuses, and family allowances.

The observations of these on-site inspections occurred in the context of a labor market increasingly composed of informal workers and a government intent on expanding the labor inspectorate's scope. Although a large informal sector is a structural feature of Latin American economies, Argentina historically was an outlier with high levels of formal employment. Until the late 1970s, Argentina's labor formality resembled European countries more than its neighbors (O'Donnell, 1977). Since then, informality has steadily increased[2]. During the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007–2015), informal employment was reduced but never fell below 30% (Contartese et. al, 2015). Consequently, labor inspectors in Buenos Aires faced many conflicts in their daily work

The inspection process is scripted as follows: Central Offices provide inspectors a list of locations to be audited and weekly targets. Inspectors visit the businesses on their list,

[2] During economic downturns, informal employment tends to rise as small businesses risk sanctions to survive.

enter the premises unannounced, and surreptitiously ask owners and workers questions about the workplace. Carrying a portable computer, they covertly cross-reference the workers they encounter against a database of registered employees, and write violation reports if they find unregistered workers. Only then do they identify themselves as labor inspectors and proceed to instruct employees on how regularize their workers and avoid paying hefty financial penalties.

In this context, labor inspectors are street-level bureaucrats whose role is to ensure employers comply with labor regulations; their goals are punitive and at the same time protective of workers' rights. Unlike the police, labor inspectors do not carry service weapons, handcuffs, or wear uniforms that would visibly signal state authority[3]. This is because their purpose must go unnoticed and only be revealed at a strategical dramatic point. Unless a rookie inspector is being trained, inspectors work alone.

For these agents, the staging of their entry is a well-rehearsed performance in which the script, the self-presentation, the tone of voice, the way in which they ask for information, the strategies for overcoming the lack of cooperation are all necessary skills for the job. The subtleties of acting, in the dramaturgical sense, are therefore of great importance.

Their public performance is organized around the management of tension, and the success of their work requires the development of skills to manage stress by avoiding or enduring abuse, insults, or even physical violence, while at the same time achieving the goals of the job: detecting and sanctioning violations.

In my observations, it is common for inspectors to take on a "bodily hexis" (Bourdieu, 2001) and a language that mimics Argentine urban casual uses and customs. This includes an abrupt entrance, and a direct yet respectful initial introduction: "Hey boss. I am from the Ministry of Labor, I need some information" (field notes, 10 June–11 November 2015).[4] The point is to establish, through posturing and gestures, that the inspector is not naïve. Once the hierarchy and tone are established, a jocular tone is maintained throughout the interaction. Even when they detect violations or tricks to hide them, the inspectors react with jokes, a mocking mischievousness that reaffirms their power and status over the tense situation. The mission is that they "don't pull one over you and take you for a fool/ *que no crean que sos un boludo* " (field notes, casual conversation, 15 September 2015),[5] as one of the inspectors said.

[3] Only in some rare cases do they wear a yellow jacket with the acronym of Ministry of Labor.
[4] Routine inspections in *Palermo* neighborhood.
[5] During participant observation of routine inspections in *Once* neighborhood, 09-15-2015.

In casual conversations, inspectors often shared stories of being moved by employers' explanations, only to find out later that they had been "duped".

> Many years ago, something happened to me that made me learn... I went to a dry cleaner, and the guy in charge had an unregistered employee. When I told him, he started to cry ... "Please, please, I'll register her today, but don't give me ticket... I promise, I promise" -he begged. Well, I didn't write him up and left. About a week later another inspector comes and says "Che, where you in such and such a place?". It was the same dry cleaner. And he tells me ... "I ended up giving him an infraction; he had an unregistered worker ... he told me that an inspector had already come and that hadn't found any issues." "And what did you find?" I ask him. "An unregistered employee," he said ... "Did the guy start crying?" "Yes, he said, it was a full-on soap opera" he replied. I felt like such an idiot. The guy tricked me. (Sergio, labor inspector, personal interview, 17 September 2015)

In this scenario, the labor inspector's the goal is not only necessarily the effective exercise of power, but more importantly the ability to maintain control over the interaction. While the inspector may 'choose' to let employers off the hook – 'voluntary nonenforcement'; to fall for an emotional ploy is to lose face/status.

Strategies for concealing violations include "[undocumented workers] posing as customers while the inspector is on premises" or "sending undocumented workers to the bathroom" (Norberto, labor inspector, personal interview, 14 September 2015) or excuses that many employers give for violations, such as "it's my nephew who came to help me today" or "he started working today, I haven't registered him yet" (field notes, 29 September 2015). The inspectors choose to exaggerate and explicitly express their distrust, their ability to anticipate these tricks. One of the most senior inspectors used a well-known colloquial expression to represent the scene: "*Cuando ellos vienen, yo ya fui y vine, fui y vine, fui y vine, miles de veces*" [When they arrive, I have already been there and back, been there and back, there and back, there and back a thousand times!] (Manuel, labor inspector, personal interview, 15 September 2015).

The performance of the *porteño canchero* is maximalist: noise over silence. In these instances, state power is not a given and can potentially be avoided (if one manages to "trick" the inspector). In this sense, the exercise of power is a claim that requires a certain dramaturgy. Agents must prove their authority by demonstrating their street credibility and cunning.

EL MACHO DECONSTRUIDO": (DE)CONSTRUCTED MASCULINITY IN ARGENTINE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE (2003-2015)

An emergent archetype of masculinity has been that of the '*macho deconstruido*' or '(de)constructed male'. The *macho deconstruido* is an ally of the feminist movement. His wardrobe, bodily hexis, language and public performances of carework intrinsically challenges traditional gender roles. He is portrayed as a [male] co-worker who problematizes the gendered division of labor in team meetings, a father who displays his baby on his chest in a carrier. It is a self-conscious staging of masculinity that involves hyper-attention to gendered everyday habits of others. It is performed in opposition to the "toxic male" who mansplains, gaslights, naturalizes jokes with sexual innuendo, and comments on the appearance of others.

When Argentine frontline bureaucrats from Buenos Aires enact the counter-stereotype of the (de)constructed male during provincial visits, it is a performance that aims to communicate a critical deconstruction of central state authority as it was enacted in visits by previous state authorities. The enactment seeks to destabilize the preconceptions of regional political authorities and municipal workers with previous experience with Peronist street-level bureaucrats from the capital who transferred resources through clientelistic channels.

The performance of state agents belonging to the Ministry of Social Development of the Argentine Nation (MDSN) during the leftist governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007-2015) can be well understood with this personification of deconstructed masculinity. These leftist governments occupied the presidency after Argentina's massive financial crisis (2001) which involved a loan default, 25% of unemployment, more than half of the population under the line of poverty and an intense process of social mobilization. In the context of the commodity boom of the early 2000s, the economy improved, and the government expanded social policies targeted towards previously disenfranchised populations (Arza et al, 2022).

Much of this social expansion was carried out through the MDSN. The focus on the disenfranchised required bypassing and transcending the central-local Peronist patronage that had historically governed the dynamics of policy implementation. During this period, the MDSN expanded its financial and infrastructural power, becoming the most visible face of the state for the poor along the territories of the country (Etchemendy, 2019). The MDSN's central-level representatives often travel to different localities in Argentina, referring to these trips as visits "to the territory." Their tasks on these visits required interactions with local officials, street bureaucrats and community leaders. These

encounters staged negotiations between hierarchies of central versus local state power. The desire for access to central-level resources shaped local state actors' and communities' strategies for impressing central-level state actors, creating bonds, and orienting central level state agents towards providing support for particular programs, actions or groups.

The deference expressed in the attention of the hosts marked the status of the visitors. This included warm receptions, public acknowledgments, meals and gifts organized around an unseen but understood spotlight on the power attributed to the national state, embodied by the state agents arriving from Buenos Aires. Given the centralized concentration of financial resources and the weak institutionalization of politics and programs for the informal workers and the poor, ministerial agents were seen by provincial counterparts as gatekeepers to these resources. Some of the phrases used by national-level welfare agents used to describe bureaucratic encounters include: "They treat you like royalty" (Orlando, MDSN welfare worker, personal interview, 24 August 2008); "It is as if you were the president or the minister "They roll out the red carpet" (Oscar, MDSN welfare worker, personal interview, 30 April 2008). Even in interactions with local political elites, the institutional and geographical hierarchal position were visible in the enactment: "You meet mayors who take out the only suit they have and turn it into a carpet for you because you visit them, they know you and they do not receive visits from the ministers to their province" (Pablo, MDSN state official, personal interview, 14 May 2008).

The interactions had a structural duality. On the one hand, the usual elements at the surface of the scene: topics of conversation, people present, and gestures. On the other hand, a series of 'accidental' details: someone outside the purpose of the visit who was 'casually' present and who happened to bring up another community need, the backdrop of the meetings that was strategically orchestrated in such a way as to provoke specific questions or topics, and intertwined conversations about problems or needs. These carefully planned 'casual incidents' were deployed with the intention that the central-level agent would 'decide' to change the content of his agenda. The goal is for the central agent to be moved to shape the exchange in a particular way, rather than being told to do so, and thus remaining mindful of the hierarchical boundaries. This would than allow central level agents to take credit for the innovation, his attention to detail and ability to 'listen' and 'connect' with the subjugated other.

Central level agents anticipated and expected these strategically coded messages. Furthermore these are to be expected and were problematic in that the patriarchal imagery adhered to their positions is overestimated. It exceeded their potential to deliver and was an obstacle to be dealt with. The performance of the deconstructed male helped alleviate this tension, where power is overrated but not non-existent. "We know being from *La Nación*/ The Nation" is significant; we recognize that we occupy a position of power. However, the

projection of this discretionary power is overestimated and needs to be manage (Pablo, MDSN state official, personal interview, 14 May 2008)."

In the past, the centralization and concentration of financial resources by the national state and the weak institutional nature of policies and programs aimed at the informal and poor sectors, ministerial agents functioned as gateways to the possibility of obtaining resources. In this context, the MDSN agents' on-site performances as 'de-constructed men' strategically aligned their discourse with social opposition movements, were based on contempt for the material and symbolic hierarchy of the state. They acted as if their position of power was incidental and perhaps even erroneous, downplaying their ability for decision-making. Thus, what characterizes of this performance is the intention to refute a traditional Peronist performance, paternalistic and distant, or a technocratic state performance, both rooted in the role that the national state has historically played in social policy.

When national-level state agents describe these encounters, there is always a moment where the agents suggested that their ability to bring resources to the region is an exaggeration or a misunderstanding that is central to their narratives. Ministry interlocutors were of the opinion that local officials and community leaders overestimate their discretionary power.

This sense that regional agents overestimated their discretionary power is consistent with the analogy of the deconstructed masculinity, which, in its deference to otherness, often underestimates or downplays its male privileges. From their point of view, this role, degraded the democratic/egalitarian aspirations of the content of their practices condemning them to a patriarchal masculinity. The agents sought to change their 'role' in the interaction into a goal around which they aligned through their words and gestures; they sought to create a 'trusting' and 'transforming' relationship that would then allow them to 'move away' from the role of 'benefactor'.

> For decades, the state has been paternalistic, a relationship of gift-giving... and there a perverse relationship [...] What are the possibilities for the State in the intervention when they see you as a suitcase full of money? So, there is no co-construction possible... You are nothing but a financing entity... "What do you want to hear?... We will say exactly that to get the financing"... It's complicated... then, we need build a relationship of confidence... change one's role, right? (Nicolás, technical evaluator, personal interview, 15 December 2007)

The agents' performance thus sought to deconstruct this 'imaginary power' In their narratives, the relationship and details of their introduction on the scene are key issues. "I

try to avoid grandiose introductions, drink some "*mate*"[6], like everyone else". "Lowering oneself" meant entering the scene and trying to remove traces of status: casual clothing, avoiding technocratic or academic vocabulary, listening to others, expressing interest in topics unrelated to the purpose of the visit, and looking for common ground to ease the relationship with interlocutors. "Well, you tell him, let's eat a little barbecue, chat and drink a glass of wine… that's where the best things happen"- commented one of the agents (Nicolás, technical evaluator, personal interview, 15 December 2007).

This performance usually included a strategically chosen wardrobe. Instead of dressing like government bureaucrats in a business suits; MDSN workers wore clothes that they felt revealed their sensitivity to social issues, but most importantly, their will to be "equal". They usually dressed informally, as 'ordinary' people, as 'young' people, as people of the 'popular classes'". One of the agents proudly shared that she once arrived early to an activity and while she was waiting, a person approached her and told her that "People from *La Nación* were coming". When she was introduced, this person exclaimed in surprise "It was you! People don't expect a guy with backpack and sneakers. Sometimes when you get off the plane, they stare at you as if saying, is it you?" (Santiago, MDSN welfare worker, personal interview, 6 September 2007). Their clothes were one of the resources to produce a deconstructed state authority. Therefore, when people were surprised by the appearance of MDSN state agents, it was considered a successful performance, a performance worth mentioning. The goal was not to look like a person from the central state to the audience. The deconstructed male is, in fact, a performance that in order to be effective, must off-balance its audience.

To summarize, this performance, aimed to deconstruct a hierarchical-vertical image of state power to achieve social and symbolic proximity with the beneficiaries of aid, disregarding the traditional Peronist party personifications while at the same time drawing on Evita's legacy, contributed to regaining the legitimacy of the national state after the 2001 crisis. This type of bureaucracy, delivered as sensitive and with proximity, but bypassing traditional Peronist channels also operated as a mechanism of effective political control.

EL MACHO VIOLADOR: REPRESSIVE FORCES CHILE 1973-1989 AND 2019

At the center of this third case is the reenactment of dictatorial performances of state hegemonic authority which trigger traumatic memories and are confronted with alternate

[6] "Mate" is a popular caffeinated hot beverage served in a single gourd or vessel to which hot water is consistently added and the gourd passed around for participants to take turns sipping from a metallic straw. Sharing mate is symbolic for closeness, friendship, equality of status.

modes of masculinity that surfaced in Chile's 2019 social mobilization. In October 2019, a metro fare hike was met with spontaneous mass fare evasion. The situation escalated, with thousands not only jumping turnstiles, but also pouring into the streets. United by the slogan "It's not thirty pesos, it's thirty years/ *no son treinta pesos, son treinta años*" in reference to the persistence of the neoliberal state overhaul that was installed during the dictatorship. This included a privatized pension system, decentralized public education and a private health insurance scheme which have resulted in large numbers of seniors living in poverty, unequal educational opportunities and high levels of debt. The government's response to this outpouring of social malaise was a series of restrictive measures and human rights violations that seem intent on graphically and textually recreating scenes from Chile's authoritarian past.

Right-wing President Piñera announced that the "country is at war" declaring a state of emergency, imposing a curfew[7] and unleashing police in riot gear to engage in street combat with protesters and the military to enforce nighttime curfew. In March 2020, with Chile's first Covid-19 cases these restrictions mutated into mandatory complete lockdown and curfew, now justified with epidemiological concerns. By this point, the National Institute for Human Rights had tallied 1,456 human rights violations committed by the police and/or military. These included 460 cases of eye trauma after being shot in the eyes by riot police, 34 deaths, beatings, shootings, sexual assaults, denial and/or obstruction of medical care after arrest (Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2020).

An examination of the aesthetics of the Chilean state front-line repressive forces reveals how wardrobe, scripts, weapons and urban battle tactics performance of hyper-masculinity that has remained unchanged through three decades, multiple elections and regime change. Leading up to and after the October revolt as during the dictatorship, downtown Santiago was saturated with military personnel and police in full riot gear, even in the absence of protesters. Entrances to the metro were restricted and riders forced to squeeze by ostensibly armed police and military for their daily commute, creating a sense of constant vigilance and threat of military violence against civilians. Both the police and the military continued to don the now very outdated model of uniforms worn during the military dictatorship, something which many survivors of the dictatorship's human rights violations describe as jarring and a constant reminder of traumatic experiences (Jelin, 2002). Their tactics to combat the protesters were also recreations of Chile's violent political past. They included the same models of armored water cannon guns, colloquially known since the 1980's as *Guanacos* after a llama-like mammal whose defense mechanism consists of strong

[7] The state of emergency and curfew was then extended intermittently until the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic in march 2020 where it has been again re-instated, this time allegedly out of public health considerations.

and smelly spit, and alleged rubber bullets which were proven later to contain metallic components shot (Sepúlveda, 2019).

Two emblematic cases highlight how this was also a struggle between emerging and established modes of masculinity. The first, Gustavo Gatica, a 21-year-old lanky animal rights activist, vegan, amateur musician and sociology student whose face became the symbol of police brutality. On November 8th, 2019, he was taking pictures of protestors at what became ground zero for the protest movement. A police officer repeatedly shot him directly in both eyes, blinding him (Toro Agurto & Toro Góngora, 2019). Images of Gustavo, with a stream of blood falling from each eye, became symbols of the abuses and were reproduced in visual art and songs (Nano Stern, 2019).

Detained individuals who did not conform to the gender expectations of the uniformed men were singled out for sexualized punishments. On the night of October 27 2019, José Maureira, a 23-year-old medical student at a top university –who coincidentally carries the same name as a 26-year-old agricultural worker last seen when he was detained by the military on November 7th, 1973 –heard screams for help in a nearby supermarket after curfew. He rushed in to administrate first aid and was there when police arrived to enforce curfew. At the scene, the police detained him, noticed he was wearing nail polish and kicked him until he was semi-conscious. They then transferred him to a police van where the beating continued accompanied by homophobic slurs. Once at the police station, the beating and verbal abuse continued, and he was forced to verbally "admit" that he was a *maricon*/ slang for homosexual man. He was then stripped and violated with a police baton (24 horas, 2019). This second incident shows how repressive statemaking not only enacts but also maintains boundaries of masculinity, a particular kind of heteronormative masculinity that is tied to violence.

Feminist activists were quick to point out the similarities between the violence in government responses to the uprising and everyday violence against women. For example, graffiti reading "*Las mujeres siempre hemos tenido toque de queda*/ We women have always lived under curfew" points to the ways in which women's freedoms are always already restricted by the pervasive threat of gendered violence beyond incidents of state brutality. In November 2019, in a performative artistic intervention in Santiago, Chile, thousands of women gathered in front of the national soccer stadium, which was used as a concentration camp during the military dictatorship. With their eyes covered by red scarves, participants performed a choreographed chant that included synchronized squats, referencing the police practice of arresting stripped protesters and observing them squat to allegedly check body cavities for weapons. Participants repeated a manifesto that shifted the blame for sexual violence from victim's clothing and whereabouts to the judicial system, the police, the president, and patriarchy in general. In the pauses between choruses, participants shouted

personal testimonies of violence and, at prescribed moments, directed insults at the police. The climax of the performance, the chorus "*El estado opresor es un macho violador*/ The oppressive state is a rapist man," links brutal police repression to the social movements that exploded in October 2019 to the pervasive experience of violence against women. Videos of this performance went viral and became a global anthem against patriarchal structures, and it has been adapted and re-performed in different contexts such as Berlin, India, Colombia, the Turkish Senate, Mexico City, and outside the Harvey Weinstein trials (BBC News Mundo, 2019).

In this way, both the aesthetics and the content of Chilean frontline repressive performance reveal an unchanged nature, one that draws on brutal masculinity within the state apparatus; a version of masculinity which is intensified when encountered with emerging forms as embodied in the figures of Gustavo and Jose.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how frontline state workers in Argentina and Chile mobilize gendered repertoires to enact state authority in everyday encounters. Across the three cases, we observed that masculinities are not merely personal dispositions but culturally embedded scripts through which bureaucratic actors perform persuasion, proximity, surveillance, or coercion. These performances—boisterous, deconstructed, and authoritarian—are anchored in national political cultures and gender regimes, revealing how everyday state-making is deeply shaped by historically sedimented notions of masculinity. By tracing these enactments, the article contributes to ongoing debates in gender and masculinity studies that emphasize the relational, theatrical, and situational character of gendered identities within institutions.

The concept of gendered repertoires advanced here helps illuminate how state agents selectively activate particular aesthetic and interactional resources to manage discretionary spaces. Rather than assuming a single hegemonic masculinity within the state, our analysis underscores the coexistence and strategic use of multiple masculinities, each entangled with specific institutional legacies and organizational settings. This framework extends scholarship on street-level bureaucracy and feminist stategraphy by showing how gender operates as a performative resource in capillary forms of state power—shaping how authority is claimed, resisted, and recognized in quotidian encounters between agents and citizens. It is particularly salient to analyze 2025 executive power representatives in our cases: in Argentina, President Milei, who ran on an explicitly anti-gender plurality platform; and in Chile, President Boric, a 35-year-old former student activist who campaigned on a pro-diversity message, self-identifies as a Swiftie and Pokémon enthusiast. fathered a child

during his presidency and routinely attends public state affairs wearing the new bon baby in a sling across his chest.

Although grounded in Southern Cone contexts, gendered repertoires offer analytical traction beyond the region. Because they capture culturally situated performances rather than fixed typologies, they can be used to examine how frontline agents in different administrative traditions draw on gendered aesthetics to enact state authority. This opens pathways for comparative research on how masculinities are reconfigured in welfare bureaucracies, policing institutions, migration offices, or judicial settings, and how broader shifts in gender politics—such as feminist mobilizations or anti-gender backlashes—reshape the performative landscape of frontline governance.

Finally, our findings suggest that attending to gendered performances is key to theorizing the contemporary state. More broadly, as global politics witnesses the resurgence of hyper-masculine leadership styles that erode democratic institutions, the everyday enactment of state authority becomes a crucial site for understanding how gender regimes are stabilized or contested. By foregrounding gendered repertoires as a lens for analyzing state practice, this article invites future research to further explore how cultural scripts, affective dynamics, and embodied performances constitute the micro-foundations of state power.

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