

Neopatrimonialism and Institutional Culture

At the beginning of 2012, a group of professors from different disciplines of UCA started to meet monthly to find answers to a question: where is Argentina going? We set off from the conviction that the formulation of such a broad question –although it did not seem very accurate for the current academic canons– was in fact very typical of the University, which should always seek for the ultimate reasons of things. In addition, we had the intuition that responses could only arise from an open dialogue with different disciplines, experiences, approaches and people; in short, a plural dialogue that would seek to reduce the ideological component that favors answers over questions. On the other hand, if we wanted to avoid also the typical confinement of specialists within an epistemic community in which the same *a priori* ideas are generally shared believing that these are the only ones that count, we had to open the dialogue to people from other universities and even from other backgrounds different from Academia. This is why we decided to alternate our meetings with conversations with guests that enriched and challenged our own perspectives.

Another implicit aim of our Seminary has been from the beginning to try to understand and rethink Argentine reality as a contribution to those who lead and represent our citizens. Therefore, we outlined some subjects and problems as a potential agenda able to be used by others in regard to what our guests would transmit us.

Along the first year (2012) we received the visit of Santiago Kovadloff, Alieto Guadagni, Vicente Massot, José Nun and Luis Alberto Romero. From the first meeting we posed that our country's difficult situation was probably due to the influence of a "cultural component" and for this reason the relation between *culture and politics* was of our interest. One of our guests pronounced a usually repeated statement by Latin-American authors when referring to our region's cultural identity: "The problem is that salvation has become an individual task in Argentina, and a country is not an individual matter". Another one referred: "It is necessary to analyze the anthropological dimension of society. As long as we do not make any cultural introspection, we will keep falling in the temptation to appeal to shot-time saviors". However, and despite the acknowledgement of the cultural component, we did not give up on the idea that politics is just a reflection of our society's singular culture. In fact, another one of the guests in the Seminar affirmed: "The *Government subject* is one of the keys to what occurs in Argentina. The institutional question should be the core of a transformation program (...) There is no way out without solving the problem of Government". Culture and Government, Culture and Institutions, words that reverberated continuously at our table. But how could we think them as a whole?

By the end of the first year, we had arrived to the first provisional conclusion that one of the paths to respond our initial question was related to the cultural dimension of our complex institutional reality. The idea was not to choose between culture and institutions, but to focus our research on the intricate relations between them. That would lead us to study not only the formal important aspects of our political, legal, corporate, and media institutions, but also its historical and cultural aspects, which would take us to analyze also the role of its respective leaders as interpreters and living mediators between culture and institutions in a

process of permanent interaction and evolution.

It was then when our experience started to be called *Permanent Seminar on Argentine Institutional Culture* (CUIA). During the second year (2013) we continued to alternate our meetings with the reception of guests among which we received Rubén Giustiniani, José O. Bordón, Julio Cobos and Roberto Lavagna. It was a fruitful year to specify even more our research object. We were able to identify some issues and problems of Argentine democracy transition: difficulties around the validity of law in the determination of our actual behavior, public officers and politicians' attitudes towards the truth –especially before INDEC's explicit lack of credibility– the broadcasting of corruption practices at the top and bottom of the Government, lack of transparency in the process of selection of political leaders and of public officials, an excessive tolerance in the eligibility of candidates at responsible positions in the Government, lack of transparency in the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns. All this merges in a great cultural-institutional issue that could synthesize the essence of our problem: the phenomenon of Government colonization by a patrimonialist culture that turns the Government into a big source of corruption, greatly blocking the production of public goods which are essential to society, such as justice, education, and health, basic to the achievement of the common good.

Thus, by the end of 2014 we had achieved enough elements to organize a conference on the question "Where is Argentina going?" We focused on Government colonization as the main theme. There were two morning sessions and two evening sessions in which we invited political leaders, business leaders, trade unionists, academics, media referents and intellectuals. After a general introduction by Hugo Gobbi and Gerardo Sanchis Muñoz, who presented the general features of the patrimonial system in Argentina, four discussion groups were opened. In the first one, dedicated to politics, with an introduction by Hugo Dalbosco and coordinated by Clara Mariño, Ricardo Alfonsín, Joaquín De la Torre, Gabriela Michetti and Juan Carlos Zabalza participated as main speakers. The second panel, centered on the institutional-cultural subject, with an introduction by Carlos Hoevel and the coordination of Dulce Santiago, was attended by Nélica Cervone, Gustavo López, Marcos Novaro and Luis Alberto Romero. The third panel addressed the economic and business approach to the subject with the introduction by Marcelo Resico and the coordination of Marita Carballo. Luis Bameule, Alfonso Prat Gay and Cristina Ueltschi were the speakers on these topics. Finally, the panel dedicated to social issues was coordinated by Gabriel Castelli and was attended by Claudia Bernazza, Carlos Custer, Leandro Despouy and Alieto Guadagni.

By the end of the event, we had enriched the list of inquiries rather than the answers to our questions. What can be done to help our Government stop blending together public functions and individual aims, which some describe as Government colonization or patrimonialism? How is it possible to avoid appointing people who do not meet the eligibility requirements to perform their duties? How can the desire to perpetuate oneself in power by the means of buying wills, changing the rules of the game and violating the spirit of the laws be limited? How to give a cultural and institutional framework to a competitive and transparent market economy regulated by fair laws and supervised by an efficient Government and managed by law-abiding officials, rather than the leader of the moment?

These and other questions encouraged our consecutive debates. The year 2015 found us working around the difficulty to generate an institutional culture that would be able to overcome one of the main evils of patrimonialism: corruption. Among our guests were Manuel Garrido, Marcelo de Jesus and Waldo Villalpando. At the end of the year, we convened an open meeting with Fernando Iglesias, Jesus Rodríguez, Orlando Ferreres and Cynthia Hotton, who had an active and interesting

debate on these issues.

The University's duty is to think about reality as a whole, and to reflect on its ultimate causes and its problems. This is the specific mode that attains the responsibility of academics to commit to the situation in which they live. Learning at University is also in regard to opening a dialogue with society, which it nurtures and serves. This necessarily plural dialogue is the reassurance of University's permanent contact with the changing reality that nurtures the teaching and learning process. The responsibility for this dialogue is not only of the head of the institution, but also of its professors who seek to follow the evolution of reality in its economic, social, technical, artistic and spiritual aspects. The notion of culture, in a way, combines knowledge and behaviors that create all the fields that are the object of the university's mission. Therefore, the cultural dimension seems vital for the analysis of social, economic, and political phenomena. Daily practice in social life's different domains, appear to be guided by culturally conditioned criteria on the value of one's own life and the lives of others. This includes different ways of doing politics, managing Government, obeying or avoiding compliance with the law, the ways of generating, accumulating and distributing wealth, the conception of physical, private and public space, the judgement of what is prestigious or reprehensible, and the definition of what we are willing to do or not.

In our culture, as in others, popularity might have replaced prestige, social commitment, or plain honesty. Values that have validity in a certain country's culture and that guide its members' actions, are part of the questions that we are interested to deepen. Throughout these years, our society has suffered long periods of inflation and public corruption and has improvised ways to survive in it, while generating a threshold of anesthesia, tolerance or resignation – implausible in other cultures. These seem to highlight a society whose institutional culture is still weak, insofar as behaviors do not often seem to be ruled by close obedience to laws and norms, but by the defense and promotion of predominantly individual or faction interests.

Our Seminar's modest exercise is part of what we consider a healthy rise of initiatives leading to create awareness and social participation towards the common good starting from civil society, which may not find better ways to be expressed. Moreover, we consider these types of initiatives are emblematic of University life. Not only does learning at University depend on formal lectures by professors and students' own interest in their studies, but also on the imagination and curiosity of research groups in order to discover and analyze the problems of reality. In our case, the starting point has been that of being a group of academics from a University whose principles, based on the idea of a disinterested search for truth, exhorts us to permanently adopt other points of view to seek for the ultimate reasons with the greatest possible intellectual clarity and honesty. Two hundred years after its independence, our country asks us to this service of research and education. In times marked by the dynamism of change in the entire planet and uncertainty regarding adequacy between behaviors and avowed values, this is an exciting task.

Vicente Espeche Gil (CUIA Director)
Dulce María Santiago (CUIA Former Director)
Carlos Hoevel (Director of *Cultura Económica*, CUIA member)