

# Rhetorical strategies across borders: The case of Brazil (1964) and Argentina (1966 and 1976)

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This study compares the rhetorical strategies used by the Brazilian press in 1964 and by the Argentine press in 1966 and 1976 to legitimize the dictatorial governments inaugurated in those years. Starting from proposals by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca,<sup>1</sup> It argues that similar rhetorical strategies underpinned the diplomacy of both countries — a *soft power* diplomacy that aimed to make military regimes in the Southern Cone acceptable to the international community.<sup>2</sup>

On 31 March 1964, Brazil's constitutional president, João Goulart, a disciple of Gertulio Vargas and a promoter of pro-worker policies, was overthrown in a military-led coup sponsored by the United States of America's government under President Lyndon B. Johnson.<sup>3</sup> The coup was supported by Brazil's upper and middle classes as well as by the country's right-wing political hardliners. On 28 June 1966, Argentina's constitutional president, Arturo Illia, of the Radical People's Party, was similarly overthrown by the Argentine military with the support of the Peronist movement and several leaders of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) as well as a number of employers' federations.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, on 24 March 1976, the Argentine military — with the backing of most of the population — overthrew "Isabel" Perón, who had come to power as Vice-President after the death of her husband, President Juan Domingo Perón, on 1 July 1974.<sup>5</sup>

During the twentieth century, bilateral relations between Brazil and

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<sup>1</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*, John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Nye Jr. defines *soft power* as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments, It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies". Nye adds: "When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes the others, our soft power is enhanced". See Joseph Nye Jr., *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> On the overthrow of João Goulart, see Elio Gaspari, *A ditadura envergonhada* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For an account of the coup against Arturo Illia, see Eugenio Kvaternik, *El péndulo cívico-militar. La caída de Illia* (Buenos Aires: Tesis, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the coup of March 24, 1976, see Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *La dictadura militar 1976-1983* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2003).

Argentina alternated between conflict and agreement, competition and a tendency toward integration.<sup>6</sup> However, these military coups occurred at moments when diplomatic efforts to create a framework for cooperation between the two countries had already been reactivated.<sup>7</sup> After the breakdown of democracy, the National Security Doctrine,<sup>8</sup> which was hegemonic in the armed forces of both countries, encouraged the search for alliances in order to repress “subversion”. Under the National Security Doctrine, the greatest military threat to the Third World was revolutionary war resulting from “communist infiltration”, which in practice meant any organised opposition strong enough to challenge government policies. This effectively put internal security on the same footing as national defense against occupation by a foreign army.

### Legitimizing rhetoric

According to Hannah Arendt, governments never base their power exclusively on violence; they always seek legitimacy in the sense of support and recognition and the right to be obeyed.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the press, which plays a central role in shaping *doxa* and consensus in modern societies, worked as an ally in building the legitimacy of the military governments of Brazil and Argentina. It appealed to a number of topics<sup>10</sup> which stated that the ousted

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<sup>6</sup> Bilateral relations between Brazil and Argentina are analyzed in Mario Rapoport and Amado Luiz Cervo, eds., *El cono sur. Una historia común* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the rapprochement between Brazil and Argentina, see Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, in *Argentina, Brasil y Estados Unidos. De la Triple Alianza al mercosur* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See María José de Rezende, *A ditadura militar no Brasil. Repressão e pretensão de legitimidade 1964-1984* (London: UEL, 2001) and Alicia García, *La doctrina de la Seguridad Nacional/II* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1991). See too Bandeira, *Argentina, Brasil y Estados Unidos*: Chapter 17, and John Dinges, *The Condor years. How Pinochet and his allies brought terrorism to three continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> I use the term topics not in the Aristotelian sense of empty forms used to make arguments for any subject, but as ideologemes that belong to the *doxa* and are considered obvious and beyond dispute by a particular social group. See Marc Angenot, “La parole pamphlétaire. Contribution à la typologie des discours modernes”, (Paris: Payot, 1982); Ruth Amossy, *L’argumentation dans le discours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000); and María Alejandra Vitale, “Memoria y acontecimiento. La prensa escrita argentina ante el golpe militar de 1976”, in Patricia Vallejos, ed., *Los estudios del discurso: Nuevos aportes desde la investigación en la Argentina* (Bahía Blanca: Universidad Nacional del Sur, 2007): 165-182.

constitutional governments had not respected democracy or the Constitution and that military rule, by contrast, would restore both of these.

In the case of Brazil, the media felt that President João Goulart sought to destroy representative democracy in order to establish a republic run by Communists and labor unions.<sup>11</sup> In the Argentina of 1966, these topics were formulated more moderately. The Peronist party had been proscribed from electoral competition since 1955, when Juan Domingo Perón was overthrown in a coup. Now, the press accused President Arturo Illia of endangering democracy by allowing a quasi-Peronist candidate to run for Governor of the Province of Mendoza.<sup>12</sup> In 1976, however, the press was more vigorous. It felt that the government headed by "Isabel" Perón was not a democracy but a demagoguery with no power to rein in "subversion". Nevertheless, the military governments led by Marshal Humberto Castelo Branco in Brazil in 1964, and by Generals Juan Carlos Onganía and Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina in 1966 and 1976, respectively, were presented as respecting democracy.<sup>13</sup> The Armed Forces' commitment to fighting Communism supposedly guaranteed under the National Security Doctrine, that they were acting to defend democratic institutions because — as is well known — communism was portrayed as an enemy of democracy.

In Brazil, João Goulart's government had programmed a series of reforms that would have benefited the poorer classes, such as granting illiterate people the right to vote, agrarian reform and a new tax policy. Meanwhile, the unions led by Brazil's General Confederation of Labor (CGT) had initiated a period of social mobilisation.<sup>14</sup> The media viewed all this, together with the fact that Goulart was supported by the Communist Party, as a sign of imminent revolution sponsored by "the Kremlin".<sup>15</sup>

Guillermo O'Donnell<sup>16</sup> has described the Argentine bourgeoisie's fear of social revolution after Argentina's General Confederation of Labour (CGT)

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<sup>11</sup>See "O expurgo", *O Globo* (6 April 1964).

<sup>12</sup> On the election results in Mendoza as a trigger of the 1966 military coup, see Alain Rouquié, *Poder militar y sociedad política en la Argentina II* (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1986), Eugenio Kvaternik, *El péndulo cívico-militar. La caída de Illia* (Buenos Aires: Tesis, 1990) and Catalina Smulovitz, "La eficacia como crítica y utopía. Notas sobre la caída de Illia", *Desarrollo Económico* 13, 131 (1993): 403-423.

<sup>13</sup> This statement must be qualified in the case of General Juan Carlos Onganía, as the conservative daily *La Nación* and the business-oriented magazine *Análisis* distanced themselves from his corporatist model, which differed from Humberto Castelo Branco's liberal model. On the corporatist leanings of Onganía's government, see Marcelo Cavarozzi, *Autoritarismo y democracia (1955-1983)* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Boris Fausto and Fernando Devoto, *Brasil e Argentina. Um ensaio de história comparada (1950-2002)* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> *O Globo*, "A vitória do Brasil traído", 7 April 1964.

<sup>16</sup> See Guillermo O'Donnell, *El Estado burocrático-autoritario 1966-1973* (Buenos Aires: Belgrano, 1982).

launched its own Action Plan in 1964. The gradual shift by the Peronist unions towards class struggle along with the fact that the first armed group, *Úturuncos*<sup>17</sup> (rural in nature and influenced by the Cuban revolution) had emerged linked to resistance against the proscription of Peronism, fuelled perceptions that Peronism and Communism were the same threat under different names.

However, as O'Donnell points out, in 1976, when the press and the military began to speak of "subversion", calling for the overthrow of "Isabel" Perón on the grounds that her government was colluding with the Peronist and Marxist guerrillas (principally Montoneros and the People's Revolutionary Army), the guerrillas had largely been defeated the previous year.<sup>18</sup>

The topic that the military were defending democracy was combined both in Brazil and Argentina with statements denying that the military government was a dictatorship — statements such as "The Brazilian Armed Forces are not asking for a dictatorship",<sup>19</sup> "it was not directed at installing a dictatorship",<sup>20</sup> and "no dictatorship has been created".<sup>21</sup> In Brazil, the press also responded to criticism in the French media that the coup had been orchestrated by the United States. The Brazilian press retorted that this accusation was motivated by rivalry between the French and the Americans for leadership of the non-Communist world and that it was Goulart's government that had been under the control of a foreign power (this time, referring to China). The Brazilian press also brought into question the independence of Goulart's foreign policy, which had prioritised the North-South conflict and relations with non-aligned countries, by implying that his policy responded to the needs of the communist bloc.

The argumentative technique that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call *dissociation of notions* — and which always involves the splitting of an existing notion into at least two notions — played an important role in relation to the topic already mentioned. The print media in both Brazil and — in 1976 — Argentina dissociated the notion of democracy into 'inauthentic' democracy, present during the administrations of João Goulart and "Isabel" Perón, and 'authentic' democracy, which these countries would soon enjoy thanks to the Armed Forces.

This way of identifying the overthrown government as 'inauthentic' is consistent with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca notion of *rhetoric as a*

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<sup>17</sup> See Ernesto Salas, *Úturuncos. El origen de la guerrilla peronista* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell, *Ensayos escogidos sobre autoritarismo y democratización* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1997): 182.

<sup>19</sup> "O Episódio da liberação do Brasil", *O Estado do Minas* (5 April 1964).

<sup>20</sup> "Modernidad: La cuestión es cómo", *Análisis* (18 July 1966).

<sup>21</sup> "Estos son los secretos que manejará el presidente sin demagogias ni altisonancias: ante un nuevo estilo", *La Razón* (27 March 1976).

*process*, which dismisses rhetoric by equating it with the artificial, false and verbal against the natural, true and real. Thus, the press described statements by Goulart, Illia and “Isabel” Perón as rhetoric, while also judging Goulart to be as an uninspiring and mediocre speaker. On the other hand, it praised the language used by Castelo Branco as “dignified, calm, correct” and found “eloquence”, “sincerity”, “truth” and “sobriety” in General Onganía and an absence of rhetoric together with a similar “sobriety” and “clarity” in General Videla.

To legitimise military rule the print media in Brazil and Argentina also appealed to what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call the “argument of direction”, or slippery-slope argument, which assumes that once things start to go downhill they can only get worse. The press represented both countries as rushing headlong towards an abyss of lawlessness, social breakdown and communism — implying that the military coups had halted this process.<sup>22</sup> This argument was reinforced by the orientational metaphor “up is good/down is bad”.<sup>23</sup> Another image much used by the press in both countries was the biological and medical metaphor of disease, which represented the armed forces as physicians and surgeons performing resections or surgery to heal the social body. This tended to publicly legitimise the repression the military practiced in secret and simultaneously masked and exposed a way of doing biopolitics — what Foucault calls, “the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects’ very bodies and forms of life”.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, it is interesting to consider how the Brazilian and Argentine media attempted to exonerate the Armed Forces by refusing to name the military as the real perpetrators of the coups and by toning down the negative connotations of a military takeover. This strategy found linguistic expression in what Argentine linguist Beatriz Lavandera calls “*assertion softeners*”, that is, forms that allow speakers to express themselves vaguely and take for granted what is left implicit.<sup>25</sup> Linguistic resources used to soften assertions

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Brazil’s largest newspaper, *O Globo*, stated: “Only now, after the expulsion of the President of the Republic who was mainstreamed, if not integrated into a Communist “plot”, the nation realizes how close it was to rolling into the abyss that he had prepared” (6 April 1964). Argentina’s largest newspaper, *Clarín*, referred in an editorial to Illia’s government as “a government incomprehensibly determined to move towards the abyss” (3 July 1966). On the use of this metaphor, see María Alejandra Vitale, “Prensa escrita y autoritarismo. El tópico de la caída hacia el abismo (1930-1976)”, *Páginas de Guarda. Revista de edición, lenguaje y cultura escrita* 4 (2007): 47-62.

<sup>23</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press: 1998): 5.

<sup>25</sup> See Beatriz Lavandera, “Decir y aludir. Una propuesta metodológica”, *Revista de Filología* 2 (1985): 21-31.

included intransitive verbs, as in “Joao Goulart finally *fell* victim to his insincerity and his policy of deception”<sup>26</sup> and “Arturo Illia and his committee *fell* because with them the old Argentina was dying of exhaustion and inefficiency”,<sup>27</sup> where the intransitive verb ‘fall’ constructed the coup as involving only the governments themselves without mentioning the military’s role in their downfall. Impersonal and passive voice constructions<sup>28</sup> were likewise used to hide the identity of those responsible for potentially reprehensible actions, as in “*There was* no bloodshed”,<sup>29</sup> “Congress *was closed*”<sup>30</sup> and “João Goulart’s Government *was deposed*”<sup>31</sup>. Nominalisations<sup>32</sup> played a similar role, as in “the overthrow of the former President”<sup>33</sup> and “the new alteration of the constitutional regime”,<sup>34</sup> where the Armed Forces who did the overthrowing and altering are not mentioned.

This strategy of exoneration was supported by the use of alethic modality indicating logical necessity. This was used by both the Brazilian and the Argentine press to “de-historicise” the military coups as inevitable events that were bound to happen.<sup>35</sup> It was reinforced by the repeated use of clichés, such as “Communist infiltration” and “Christian and democratic institutions” (in Brazil) or “communist infiltration” and “Western Christian civilization” (in Argentina). These catchphrases summarized a topic of the National Security Doctrine, namely that Christianity prevented the spread of Communism — an ideology depicted not only as undemocratic but also as anti-Christian. This explains the so-called “March of the family with God for freedom”, in which more than 500 000 people from São Paulo’s upper and middle classes —

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<sup>26</sup> “Passado”, *O Jornal do Brasil* (2 April 1964).

<sup>27</sup> *Extra* (August 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Although the passive voice exists in Spanish, it is less frequently used than in English. Instead, a reflexive verb construct, formed by *se* + the third person singular or plural conjugation of a verb, is preferred for expressing impersonality. This construct also exists in Portuguese although it has not displaced the passive voice to the same extent as in Spanish.

<sup>29</sup> Editorial, *La Nación* (29 June 1966).

<sup>30</sup> See “La City”, *Mercado* (1 April 1976).

<sup>31</sup> Editorial, *O Jornal do Brasil* (3 April 1964).

<sup>32</sup> Nominalisations neutralize most of the thematic and syntactic properties of verbs so they tend to cause ambiguity and vagueness in language. Verbal nominalisations in which the prepositional object is elided (*e.g.* “the overthrow of the president” omitting “*by the army*”) make it possible to avoid naming a specific agent.

<sup>33</sup> “Amanhã”, *Folha de S. Paulo* (4 August 1964).

<sup>34</sup> Editorial, *La Nación* (9 July 1976).

<sup>35</sup> For example, “Congress, in turn, accepted the coup as [an] inevitable feature of the defense of the democratic system”, in “Coisas da política”, *O Jornal do Brasil* (7 April 1964) and “one has noted the painful breakdown of constitutional order, as an inevitable consequence of the wrong style [of government] practiced since 1963 by the UCRP” in the editorial of the *La Nación* (9 July 1966).

most of them Catholic and conservative — turned out to demonstrate against Goulart's. The first political event in Brazil to be organised partly by women's civic associations, the march was staged less than two weeks before the military coup.

The use of clichés, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out, is typical of hierarchical societies, such as those promoted by military governments. This explains the exaggerated emphasis on virility in the pro-coup discourses of Brazil in 1964 and of Argentina in 1976. A comprehensive study of this phenomenon along the lines proposed by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello in their *History of virility* could well become a chapter in similar study for Latin America.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

Far from being the normative and timeless principles of rhetoric laid down in classical treatises and textbooks, the pro-coup rhetoric found in the press in Brazil in 1964 and in Argentina in 1966 and 1976, confirms that what can be argued is specific to ideological families and particular historical and social conditions.

This rhetoric crossed national boundaries and became a soft power that was similar in both countries. It sought to make the breakdown of democracy acceptable to the international community. Indeed, the military were constructed as democratic, Christian, eloquent and virile doctor-surgeons and supported overwhelmingly by the press in both Brazil and Argentina. In both countries, a very similar rhetoric was used to legitimise the dictatorial governments not only locally but internationally. As Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira writes about the 1964 coup in Brazil:

The military that seized power resorted to the methods of civil war to destroy the opposition and crush all forms of resistance. Therefore, they sought to preserve a formal appearance of respecting the Constitution, and representative democracy in order not to embarrass President Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy's successor, in the eyes of the United States public and not to inhibit the provision of military cooperation and financial assistance to Brazil.<sup>37</sup>

The press played a key role in this strategy by using "*assertion softeners*" to render invisible not only the Armed Forces as leaders of the coup but also the

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<sup>36</sup> Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello, eds., *Histoire de la virilité* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Bandeira, *Argentina, Brasil y Estados Unidos*, 343.

very coup itself.

Finally, it is remarkable how in Argentina invisibility became an integral part of the human rights violations committed by the military junta that seized power on 24 March 1976. This strategy crystallised in the use of the term “the disappeared” (Spanish: *los desaparecidos*), a nominalisation of the verb “disappear” (Spanish *desaparecer*) in the sense of “cease to exist” which, as the Dictionary of the Spanish Language of the Royal Spanish Academy says, is intransitive. Because semantically intransitive verbs involve only one participant role (in this case, the people who disappear), the identity of those who made them disappear remained hidden. The fact that the murdered bodies of “the disappeared” were also concealed, only serves to confirm that rhetoric and performativity are inseparable.

(Translated by Douglas Andrew Town)

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