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Author(s): Guillermo O'Donnell

Source: *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1982), pp. 41-50

Published by: The Latin American Studies Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2503144>

Accessed: 28-11-2025 20:53 UTC

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## REPLY TO REMMER AND MERKX

*Guillermo O'Donnell*

*CEDES, Argentina and IUPERJ, Brazil*

It is a pleasure to comment on a critical work like that of Remmer and Merkx, written in the best scholarly tradition. Following the line of recent contributions,<sup>1</sup> these authors advance the discussion about bureaucratic-authoritarian forms of political domination: they clarify problems, formulate better questions, and propose more precise criteria for the study and comparison of those forms. In this spirit, I will limit myself to beginning with a rather personal commentary and then to making what seem to me some necessary clarifications, in order to collaborate with Remmer and Merkx on a better delimitation of the problems that interest us.

Although I think I have changed quite a bit, I do not feel that there is the sharp discontinuity that Remmer and Merkx note between "the O'Donnell of yesterday" and "the O'Donnell of today." Yesterday and today I agree with these authors that an adequate analysis of the dynamics, evolution, and impacts of bureaucratic-authoritarian states (or regimes, I cannot get into this debate here) must be centered on the alliances of internal social actors, on the "political game" played among them, and on the changes over time of those processes. But such analysis can only be the result of careful, detailed research. I have done this sort of investigation on Argentina, for the period 1966–73, but I have yet to publish the results of that work. The main reason for not having given the final touches to the volume that resulted from four years of research was that, when the moment for it came—1976—it was no longer possible to publish it in Argentina. My motivation for writing such a book was—and is—somewhat parochial, quite emotional, and not exclusively academic: its principal meaning for me is that it may have some impact on political discussion in my country; above all, that it make a contribution to the political learning without which there will be no escape from the tremendous brutalization of social and political life that has characterized Argentina for many years.

Meanwhile, I published some papers in which I treated, in a more general and comparative manner, some of the themes related to bureau-

*Translated with funds provided by The Ford Foundation.*

cratic-authoritarianism. It was a poor publication strategy, since those articles deserve the criticism that Remmer and Merkx level at me—there is too little analysis of the processes mentioned above; as said, this can only be done on the basis of, at least, a carefully researched case study, and that is the book which I have choked back for these years.

To go more directly to the matters discussed by Remmer and Merkx, I believe, and I have argued in this vein not a few times, that the level of threat prior to the imposition of the BAs is a crucial factor in understanding their subsequent evolution. At no time, however, did I either think or write that it was the *only* factor to consider. I believe that those prior factors shape, but do not univocally decide, what happens after the implantation of those states: the course of events seems to me codetermined by not a few of the factors that Remmer and Merkx mention—the economic structure, the class structure, the prior political alliances, as well as present institutional resources and interrelationships among various political actors.<sup>2</sup>

I also agree with Remmer and Merkx not only that the imposition of the BA implies a crucial change in those alliances and in the distribution of resources of various political and social actors (I have insisted on this point in all my works), but also that the impact of the “past configurations” on the “political game” in the BAs (especially the level of the threat) tends to diminish over time, giving way—in their increasing importance—to “emergent historical realities.” This seems quite obvious and I do not see in it matter for debate.

Having thus cleared the way for this dialogue, it remains to discuss the *relative* incidence of the previous level of threat as an explanatory factor (crucial but partial, and which tends to diminish with the passage of time) of the course taken by the BA state.

On this subject I concede that the concept of threat is blunt. But it seems to me that at least it is useful for distinguishing between cases of relatively low threat (Argentina in 1966 and Brazil in 1964, in that order) and the coups of the 1970s, all of them of significantly higher threat than the former. Undoubtedly, “threat” is a multidimensional concept that requires multiple indicators that I do not think we know how to aggregate into a single index. The fundamental dichotomous distinction is, on the one hand, between cases—those of the 1960s—in which the paranoia about the “communist threat” of the local dominant classes and their allies abroad did not reach the point of seeing as imminent the rupture of the capitalist parameters and of the international affiliations of our countries, and, on the other hand, the cases of the 1970s, where such parameters and affiliations were perceived as imminently and intentionally challenged.

Concerning the cases of the 1970s, was the threat higher in Chile,

Argentina, or Uruguay? I am inclined to think it was in that order, from higher to lower. However, we are beyond the threshold where only concepts more refined than those that I have elaborated, and indicators more sophisticated than those that Remmer and Merx use, could elucidate that question. Certainly, in Chile, the imminent end of capitalism and the bourgeoisie seemed announced by the expropriations promoted or tolerated by political movements controlling part of the apparatus of government. In Argentina and Uruguay there was none of that. But (with greater intensity in the former), although it was not formally subject to the risk of expropriation, the bourgeoisie found itself confronting a situation in which—partly because of the militancy of labor groups, partly because of the temporary retreat of the armed forces—its ability to direct the work process was repeatedly (and increasingly) challenged.<sup>3</sup> If in Chile what was directly at stake was the *ownership* of the means of production, in Uruguay and, especially, in Argentina, no less at stake was the *possession* of these.<sup>4</sup> The point is that, in one form or another, the bourgeoisie seemed (and believed itself) to be facing a situation in which it soon would no longer exist as a class.

In principle the Chilean situation appears more “serious,” inasmuch as expropriation carries with it the dispossession of the means of production; but we do not know how much weight, by comparison, a situation like that in Uruguay and Argentina can have, particularly if we consider that, in addition to the risk or reality of dispossession, guerrilla actions meant that the physical integrity of businessmen and military seemed also at stake (something which did not happen in Chile).

This, I admit, is an agnostic commentary. It concludes that we do not know how to disaggregate with sufficient precision the threat between cases like Chile 1973 and Argentina 1976. But, on the other hand, it helps us in tracing a clear distinction between those cases and Brazil 1964 and Argentina 1966. Moreover, to the extent that the Uruguayan and Argentinian processes of the decade of the 70s resembled each other, the lower degree of popular political activation in Uruguay suggests that the level of threat was less in that case than in Argentina 1976. This is indicated by the rates of inflation prior to each one of these coups. Those rates are not a “purely economic” problem. They are also, in various and important senses, an expression of the degree of speculative panic of the bourgeoisie and of governmental inability to dictate and implement policies; in turn, both factors follow directly from the depth of the political and social crisis to which the concept of threat alludes.

On the basis of what has been said up to now, I will move on to more concrete comments that appear to me important to clarify in the work of Remmer and Merx.

*Regarding Threat and Repression\**

Despite the fact that the 1964 coup in Brazil did not suppress parliament and political parties, and that it was not until 1968 that repression increased, it seems beyond doubt that, even during 1964–1967, the repression applied there was greater than in Argentina after the 1966 coup. [Pp. 11–12]

For obvious reasons, it is very difficult to obtain reliable data concerning repression in the cases of the 1970s. What is wrong is that in Argentina “the coup itself did not give rise to high levels of violence”; actually, the level of violence was already very high, but it took a significant leap dating from that event. [P. 12]

Considering what happened, the secrecy with which many things were done and, consequently, the very partial information we are bound to have, I do not see on what basis it can be said that Uruguay was a case of higher repression than Chile or Argentina. The source cited by Remmer and Merckx, for all its merits, suffers the same limitations, and it says something of the situation that many reports on any one of these countries say—that the particular one analyzed has been (and/or is) the worst one. [Pp. 12–13]

In contrast with Remmer and Merckx’s argument, in all the cases of high threat, the extent and depth of repression were greater in the period immediately following the imposition of the BA than years later. This was due partly to the fact that later on there remained fewer groups and individuals who could be targets of those attacks, and partly to the fact that, once a first period when the new rulers felt themselves legitimized by the “anti-subversive war” they were waging was past, their attempts to institutionalize their rule led to a greater formalization (in a highly authoritarian manner) of the criteria of violence and a reduction of the uncertainties to which they subjected the population.<sup>5</sup> [Pp. 13–14]

*Regarding “Political Deactivation”*

I agree that I fail “to provide unambiguous guidelines for selecting indicators of deactivation.” Nevertheless, the almost uninterrupted “social peace” in Brazil from 1964 until 1978 strongly contrasts with everything which, in terms of popular activation and emergence of political alliances directed against the BA established in 1966, occurred in Argentina from 1969 on. For that reason, in no way do I believe that “it could be argued that “the *least* deactivation occurred in the medium threat case” (i.e., Brazil).” [Pp. 14–15]

There is no doubt that, in 1967 and 1968, “the opposition in Brazil

\*The page numbers that appear in brackets below refer to the Remmer and Merckx article in this issue.—Ed.

did pose an important challenge" to the BA. Nevertheless, it seems evident that such an unsuccessful challenge cannot be equated with what the cordobazo of May 1969 in Argentina, and its consequences, meant as a factor directly precipitating the collapse of the BA. On the other hand, I agree with Remmer and Merckx that the explanation of such different results does not arise only from the previous level of threat but also from its interaction with other historical specificities of each country.<sup>6</sup> [P. 15]

I never said that "more threat leads to more deactivation." My opinion is that more threat leads to *more efforts* from the BA state apparatus to deactivation. That is to say, the degree of deactivation achieved is not only a function of the previous threat, but also of the organizational resources and possible alliances of the sectors against which those efforts are directed. [Pp. 15–16]

*Regarding "Economic Performance"*

I admit that the term "economic orthodoxy" is not univocal. However, in terms of monetary policies, of quite unrestricted opening of our economies to the international market, of hostility toward the economic role traditionally played by local industry and the government apparatus and, in general, of an approximation to the views of the Chicago economics' school, it seems abundantly clear that the cases of lower previous threat (Brazil 1964 and Argentina 1966) were much more heterodox than those of the 1970s.

Certainly, as can be expected in cases of higher previous threat, with its concomitant, pointed out by myself and by Remmer and Merckx, of a deeper economic crisis, the BAs of the 1970s have succeeded only in getting short-term loans from abroad. Undoubtedly, the differences between the international economic situation of the 1960s and that of the 1970s has also contributed to this, but it would be exaggerated to attribute the whole weight of the explanation to the latter factor; see for example, how Brazil managed to continue to attract direct investment in the past decade. [P. 19]

In an article written with Robert Frenkel,<sup>7</sup> we were careful to make clear that in our view the importance of the International Monetary Fund does not derive so much from the economic resources that it controls directly, but from the role it plays as a "technical secretariat" that certifies to international (especially financial) capital the "soundness" of the policies carried out by countries with serious balance-of-payment problems. [P. 19]

Another argument advanced here by Remmer and Merckx is that there was not in post-1976 Argentina "the drastic reduction in popular consumption prescribed by economic orthodoxy" which, in cases of a

similar level of threat, is observable in Chile and Uruguay. The authors are empirically wrong, because they have been confused by the time-baseline of the data they cite, all of which date from June 1976. The point is that, the coup having occurred in March 1976, the immediate “salary freeze” and “freeing up of prices” that were decreed under very high inflation meant that, by May of that same year, salaries and wages had lost not less than 30 percent of their real value. Thus, the post-June 1976 salary fluctuations in Argentina represent the consolidation of a severe loss.<sup>8</sup> [Pp. 20–21]

*Regarding “Economic Orthodoxy”*

It surprised me that, taking only one indicator—the fiscal deficit in Chile—Remmer and Merks called into question the claim that a greater orthodoxy in economic policy tends to correspond to a higher degree of previous threat. Clearly, the capacity to reduce the fiscal deficit, as well as to control other variables, does not depend only on the more or less orthodox intentions of the policymakers. Furthermore, it may be noted that, correcting their former argument, the authors say later on that the Chilean government “dismantled the state sector of the economy.” [Pp. 23–24]

It seems to me unjustified to see as basically similar the economic policies of Uruguay and Brazil. It is true that the first had more heterodox traces than did the economic policies of Chile and post-1976 Argentina. But what Remmer and Merks themselves describe for Uruguay is much closer to orthodoxy than a policy like the Brazilian one (not only post-1968 but dating from 1964), which reaffirmed the industrial sector and the state apparatus as the axes of economic growth—the same as in the other case of low threat, Argentina 1966. Furthermore, it is significant that, after the first years, Brazilian economic policy should have turned (1967 until today) much more heterodox, while Uruguay’s followed the opposite course. The level of previous threat (although, admittedly, the international economic situation has an influence which, however, does not seem to be so determinative), indeed, seems to help to differentiate degrees of economic orthodoxy between the cases of low and high threat. It does not seem, therefore, correct to affirm that “the policies pursued in high threat cases differ as markedly as the policies pursued by BA regimes confronting varying levels of prior threat and crisis.”<sup>9</sup> [Pp. 24–28]

At no time have I made a teleological statement of the sort “economic recovery under conditions of high threat necessitates careful adherence to orthodoxy. . . .” What I have said is that, the higher the level of threat, the stricter the adherence to economic orthodoxy tends to be—a point which, as I have insisted above, seems supported by the

available evidence. In addition, I have taken pains to point out<sup>10</sup> that the greater the orthodoxy, the lower—and not the higher, as Remmer and Merckx understand—the probability of economic recovery. [P. 28]

*Regarding "Political Alignments, Dominant Class Cohesion and Military Unity"*

I have already covered the major points regarding this section in the preceding paragraphs. I only want to add some considerations. What appears not to have been seen clearly by these authors is what I consider an important factor for the dynamics of the BAs. This is that the higher the level of crisis and previous threat, the greater the degree of economic orthodoxy which tends to be applied. The greater the orthodoxy, the deeper the damage done to economic and institutional interests of a good part of the supporters of the coup that installed the BAs—the middle sectors and not a few segments of the bourgeoisie. This tends to generate numerous complaints from those sectors (which Remmer and Merckx record). But, because in great measure of a high level of previous threat, such complaints have considerable difficulty, and tend to take significantly more time, in transforming themselves into a *political movement* which poses a serious alternative to the policies and class alliances in effect under those BAs. There is a level of collective action that does not result from the sum of individual grievances but from the perception of the possibility of new alliances between those "disenchanted" sectors that initially supported the BA and those (basically the popular sector) whom it excluded. On the other hand, in the cases of low previous threat, although—given the lesser orthodoxy—the damages to the supporters of the coup (and, in general, to national society) are smaller, the possibility of the disenchanted sectors forging new alliances with the popular sector (and thus challenging more quickly and profoundly the BA) is much greater. This is so because, in contrast to the cases of high threat, before the coup the popular sector and its spokesmen did not appear as the willful and imminent carriers of the supreme risk of termination of the capitalist parameters of society, nor—consequently—is repression directed as severely against that possible alternative alliance.

Certainly, in all BAs there have occurred, first, purges of constitutionalist officials immediately after the coups and, second, conflicts surrounding the socioeconomic policies in force, the "political model" that was taking shape, and/or the rules of presidential succession or of renewal of the military junta. But here, once again, the cases of low threat appear as clearly distinguishable from those of high threat. As for post-1966 Argentina, it is enough to remember that the government of Onganía continually skirted a military coup until it fell in this manner in 1970. In post-1964 Brazil, certain fundamental decisions (like the role of



elections and parties, and the criteria that would determine the presidential succession) were determined by means of putschs barely disguised for having occurred without movement of troops—vide, especially, the presidential investitures of Costa e Silva and Garrastazú Médici, as well as the sanctioning of *Actas Institucionales* during the presidency of Castello Branco. In none of the cases of the 1970s, despite conflicts and disagreements, as well as the dismissal of military chiefs that seemed to challenge the existing situation, has anything like that as yet happened.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is true that, as Remmer and Merkx say, “even under conditions of high threat, military cohesion presents a continuing problem,” but the degree to which it is a problem, the ways in which it manifests itself, and the forms in which it tends to be resolved while the threat continues weighing on the memory of the actors appear to be strongly influenced by the degree to which such threat has preceded the respective coups.<sup>12</sup> “Emergent configurations” are indeed important, but the shape they take (especially with respect to the range of political coalitions that actors perceive as possible) is largely a function of history—particularly a very recent history, lived as most traumatic, although for different reasons, by practically all actors.

The valuable effort of Remmer and Merkx demonstrates the need to specify more clearly the dynamics of the BAs and the comparative differences between them. I do not believe, however, that, by means of indicators more or less arbitrarily chosen from secondary sources, they have falsified my argument that the previous level of threat has a crucial effect, diminishing during the course of time, on the political processes that shape the dynamics of the BAs.

Finally, I do not share the opinion that my work is a generalization “from the Brazilian experience.” Rather, since my first article subsequent to *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*, I have been explicitly concerned with discussing the reasons—resulting from the interaction between the level of threat and other factors specific to each case—that seem to determine bifurcations and differences in the course taken by the BAs and their impacts on the respective national societies.

In any case, as I suggested at the beginning of this commentary, much remains to be done in terms of conceptual refinement and research. It is not a matter of each one’s remaining frozen in defense of every opinion he/she gave on themes that pose such a fundamental intellectual and ethical challenge. This is another level on which, without prejudice to the disagreements stated here, I concur with Remmer and Merkx in the serious and pressing tone with which they propose the present discussion.

## NOTES

1. See, especially, David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Manuel A. Garretón, "En torno a la discusión sobre los regímenes autoritarios en América Latina," Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, Latin American Program, Washington, D.C., 1979.
2. Cf. "Reflections on the Patterns of Change in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State," *LARR* 13, no. 1 (1978):3-38 and "Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy," in *New Authoritarianism*, pp. 283-318, where I state this, although I do not carry out the detailed analysis that follows from that statement. After the care that Remmer and Merckx have taken in studying most of my publications, I cannot reproach them for not having taken account of others in which I analyze themes that they point to as neglected in my work. With respect to the armed forces and their relationship with other actors, see "Modernization and Military Coups: Theory, Comparison and the Argentine Case," in Abraham Lowenthal, ed., *Armies and Politics in Latin America* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976); with respect to the dynamics resulting from comparative differences (between Brazil and Argentina) in the economic and class structure, and the political resources of the popular sector and the bourgeoisie, "Estado y alianzas en la Argentina, 1956-1976," published in Argentina as a CEDES Working Paper, 1977, and in *Desarrollo Económico*, December 1977 (the English version of this work is supposed to appear in a book resulting from a conference organized by the Center for Inter-American Relations in 1976, which has not yet been published); finally, more specifically on the bourgeoisie, "Notas para el estudio de la burguesía nacional en sus relaciones con el aparato estatal y el capital internacional," *Estudios CEDES*, Buenos Aires, 1978.
3. Aside from the quite obvious case of Argentina, in an article to be published in the *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* ("Labor-Industrial Conflict and the Collapse of Uruguayan Democracy"), Howard Handelman demonstrates the high degree of threat existing before the imposition of the present regime in Uruguay, which clearly places it within the "family" of those established in the 1970s. In line with my arguments, that author (based on data on strikes and the political role played by the labor unions) shows that, beside guerrilla activities, there was an important process of political activation of the popular sector, against which was directed a good part of the repression.
4. This useful distinction has been proposed by various authors; see, especially, Nicos Poulantzas, *Las clases sociales en el capitalismo de hoy* (Mexico, DF: Siglo XXI, 1974).
5. See Garretón, "En torno a la discusión."
6. The discussion of this point is the central theme of "Estado y alianzas."
7. Roberto Frenkel and Guillermo O'Donnell, "The 'Stabilization Programs' of the International Monetary Fund and Their Internal Impacts during Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Periods," Latin American Program, The Wilson Center, Working Papers, no. 14, Washington, D.C., 1978.
8. In addition, the "anti-statist" fury, characteristic of the BAs of higher threat established in the 1970s, brought with it in Argentina, as well as in Chile and Uruguay, the loss, or the notable increase in cost, of access to services (transportation, education, health) which previously provided an important part of the real income of the popular sector.
9. My argument gains further plausibility when we consider the Argentine case. In 1966, the Argentine coup was, among all cases considered here, the one carried out in the most moderate conditions of threat. In 1976, the threat had reached levels similar to, or slightly lower than, those in Chile. I do not think that, as Remmer and Merckx argue, a different international situation can explain the important differences between the economic policies in post-1966 Argentina (whose numerous traces of heterodoxy were similar only to Brazil after 1964 and, above all, after 1968), and the much more orthodox one adopted following the coup of 1976.
10. See, especially, Frenkel and O'Donnell, "The 'Stabilization Programs.'"
11. For an elaboration of this and related points, see O'Donnell, "The Armed Forces and the Authoritarian State in the Southern Cone of Latin America," paper delivered at

- the symposium organized in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Armed Forces and Society Group, University of Chicago, October 1979.
12. See "Reflections." Perhaps I should point out, for a proper interpretation of the issues discussed here with Remmer and Merx, that I wrote that article in 1974, four years before its publication in English—as well as before the 1976 Argentine coup, the sharp authoritarian turn in Uruguay, and the adoption (in 1975) of highly orthodox policies in Chile.