Entrevista a Daniel Bultman

Por María Elena Martin

En el mes de diciembre de 2025 realicé una estancia de dos semanas en la Universidad Humboldt de Berlín en el marco del Programa Doctoral en Estudios Globales, que se imparte de manera cooperativa entre dicha casa de estudios y la Universidad del Salvador (Argentina), programa que se encuentra a cargo del Prof. Dr. Daniel Bultman, experto en sociología de las elites. El programa funciona dentro del Instituto de Estudios sobre Asia y Africa y constituye un espacio de trabajo interdisciplinario sobre una multiplicidad de tópicos. En ese contexto se desarrolló la entrevista, que luego fue completada a través de correos electrónicos.

R.C.: From *Revista Complejidad* we are interested in learning about the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt. Could you tell us something about its history and current research lines?

D. B.: The Institute of Asian and African Studies (IAAW) has a long and somewhat unusual history at Humboldt — moving over the past two decades from a more classical area-studies model toward a transregional approach that takes "Asia" and "Africa" not as bounded objects but as relational fields embedded in global processes. What I think outsiders often misperceive is just how broad the institute actually is. My own work on elites and political violence is only one corner of it. We have colleagues working on linguistics across Asian and African language families; on the history of these regions; on Global China and its entanglements; on francophone literature in West Africa; on mobilities and migration; on religion, on gender, on urbanism, on political economy. It is genuinely interdisciplinary, and a good part of what makes the institute productive is the friction between philological, historical, literary, and social-scientific traditions sitting in the same corridor. There is also a long-standing reflexive concern with how knowledge about the so-called Global South has been produced in European institutions, which runs as a critical thread through much of what we do.

R.C.: The Institute offers a binational PhD in Global Studies that you direct, conducted jointly with USAL (Argentina). Are there other lines of work or research related to the Latin American region?

D. B.: A small clarification first: the Global Studies Programme and our cooperation with the Universidad del Salvador in Buenos Aires are in fact two different things. What we have with USAL is a binational doctoral programme in Global Studies, and it has been one of our most productive bridges to Latin America. Beyond these two programs, Latin America enters our work through several channels. My own current project — a DFG-funded Heisenberg professorship and project on the *Global Sociology of Elite Conflict* — is anchored substantially in Argentina and Spain, because that is where the libertarian movement we study is most radicalized and most institutionally consolidated. We have followed networks from Buenos Aires and Madrid out to think tanks and conferences in the United States and Germany — treating the field transnationally rather than as a comparison of national cases. Latin America also enters through comparative work on political violence and post-conflict transitions that puts Latin American cases in dialogue with African and Southeast Asian ones, and through the doctoral cohorts themselves, who bring projects ranging from social movements, cash transfer programs during Covid in Europe and Latin America, neoliberal time regimes and far-right politics to the political economy of extractivism. The polycrisis discussions inside the binational programme have been particularly fruitful precisely because our Latin American colleagues bring a much longer experience of living through compounded crises than is typical in European debates.

R.C.: What do you consider to be the central aspects of the polycrisis in which order and chaos seem to coexist in a complex way? Does it have a particular impact on the Global South?

What I find analytically striking about the present moment is not chaos as such, but the way an emerging order is being constructed through the deliberate intensification of disorder. The notion of polycrisis usefully captures the entanglement of climate, pandemic, financial, geopolitical, and democratic crises — but it can also flatten what is actually happening, which is that influential actors are now doubling down on the very practices that produced these crises in the first place. After Covid, which dramatized the risks of pandemic governance, we have health ministers who are vaccine sceptics — already producing a measurable resurgence of measles in the United States. After the financial crisis, we are watching a new wave of deregulation. Amid an unusually broad scientific consensus on climate change, we see denial returning to the center of policy and the expansion of methods like fracking. Order and chaos are not

really competing here; one is being built out of the other, and what is being constructed, behind the noise, is an attempt to sever economic governance from democratic deliberation altogether.

For the Global South the asymmetry is brutal. Wealthy economies absorb shocks through institutional buffers the South largely lacks — reserve currencies, central bank capacity, automatic stabilizers, and access to cheap debt that means the same external tremor produces a policy adjustment in Frankfurt or Washington and a sovereign debt crisis in Buenos Aires or Accra. And the "natural order" that libertarian and far-right elites in the North invoke as restoration looks, from a Southern perspective, very much like a colonial order being re-legitimized: the same deregulation, the same dismantling of public institutions, the same subordination of social life to market logic, only now celebrated as liberation rather than imposed as conditionality. The more important analytic point, however, is that what we are seeing is less a novelty than a repeating pattern that was, for a long time, simply invisible from the North. Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s was already the original site of neoliberal shock therapy; structural adjustment across Latin America and Africa in the 1980s and 1990s rehearsed many of the dynamics now appearing at the center of global politics. What has changed is not the pattern but its direction of travel: it is now arriving in the North too, and the ideas and political experiments that produced it are increasingly flowing back. Milei's election in Argentina is the clearest case — Trump's circle, parts of the German FDP, Italian and Spanish far-right actors all reference it explicitly. As Jean and John Comaroff have argued, the contemporary capitalist order increasingly turns its peripheries into vanguards. The South was never simply at the receiving end of these dynamics; it was where they were first made visible, first lived, and first survived — and it is now also among the places from which the new authoritarian-market politics is being named and exported.

R.C.: You are an expert in the sociology of elites. What role do these elites play in generating new factors of instability?

D. B.: My current project — a DFG-funded Heisenberg professorship and research project on the *Global Sociology of Elite Conflict* — started elsewhere; we arrived at the libertarian and far-right networks somewhat by accident, following the data. What we have found is that these networks are sociologically distinct from the established neoliberal elite. Their members tend to come from the *margins* of the field of power —

from displaced, half-pushed-out, or fallen power elites — rather than from its established core. This matters, because the established neoliberal elite tends to look at these networks with something close to horror: they share a vocabulary about markets, but the underlying political project is quite different.

The distinction is sharper than is usually acknowledged. Neoliberalism, as Foucault showed in his lectures on biopolitics, does not simply want less state — it wants a different state, one that is itself disciplined by and modelled on market rationality, that uses competition as its organizing principle, and that creates and maintains the conditions under which markets can function as the site through which governmental reason is judged. The state is not the enemy of the market in this logic but its instrument and its product: reshaped from within so that governance itself becomes a form of market conduct. Libertarianism in the version we are studying breaks with this fundamentally. It does not want to discipline the state through the market — it wants to abolish the state as such, rejects central banking, rejects evidence-based and data-driven governance, and seeks to confine all social relations directly to the market without institutional mediation. This is why in central respects it is anti-neoliberal: it refuses the technocratic governmentality that has been neoliberalism's operating system for forty years and replaces it with what one could call, drawing on Carl Schmitt, forceful decisionism — a strong leader who imposes the natural, sometimes literally divine, logic of the market against democratic deliberation rather than through it. The intellectual references shift accordingly: not Hayek or Friedman in their canonical readings, but the more marginal libertarian tradition — Rothbard, Hoppe, Huerta de Soto, Nozick, Block — which provides the language of a natural order disturbed by state intervention and of an old elite, a Swamp, that must be removed before that order can be restored.

Two further sociological observations matter. First, biographically, our cases very often turn on ruptures — financial crises, the pandemic, professional dislocation. People who lived these as personal breaking-points are disproportionately represented; the new instabilities are not just being narrated by these elites, the elites themselves are *products* of crisis. Second, what we see between the established neoliberal elite and the new libertarian challengers is rarely a straightforward conflict. As classical elite theory from Pareto onward would predict, parts of the old elite resist, but other, more pragmatic factions adapt — engaging in what Padgett and Ansell, in their study of the

Medici, observed already: aligning with the challenger to retain or improve their own position. That is precisely what is happening internationally now, and it is one of the reasons the libertarian-far-right project has been able to scale so quickly.

R.C.: How would you relate your research trajectory on genocide, political violence, and the disarmament of armed groups to your current work on elites, and especially right-wing elites?

D. B.: The continuity is more direct than it might at first appear. My earlier work on Cambodia, on post-conflict transformation, on insurgent pathways out of war, was, sociologically, always work on collective actors who organize themselves around the project of breaking an existing institutional order — and on the conditions under which such projects gain traction, recruit, hold together, and sometimes dissolve. The questions one asks about an armed faction in a civil war — what is its social composition, what biographical pathways led people into it, what ideological resources does it draw on, how does it relate to surrounding elites, what does it imagine the post-rupture order looks like — turn out to be remarkably useful when transposed to the libertarian and far-right networks I work on now.

There is also a more substantive overlap. Both objects involve elites or counter-elites mobilizing a discourse of restoration: a "natural" order, a community, a sovereignty that has been stolen and must be retaken, often with the aid of a strong figure. What is worth underlining here is that this "natural order" is, of course, always *their* order — one in which they sit at the top, in which their social biography, their values, their social ontology (as we call it) and their way of life become the implicit norm against which everything else is measured as deviation or decay. The naturalization is precisely what does the political work: it converts a particular position in the social structure into the appearance of a cosmic, divine, or biological given. The repertoires of violence differ — and I am careful not to collapse that distinction — but the sociological grammar of how a project to refound the political order is assembled is recognizable across the cases. Disarmament research in particular taught me how slowly such projects dissolve, and how easily their personnel and networks reconvert into other political vehicles, in short, the reproduction of hierarchies even during major rupture. That is precisely what we are seeing now in several countries. And the methodological lesson — that one has to follow people, networks, and ideas across sites rather than study them inside a national container — carries over directly: my current project is built on a "follow the

network" ethnography across Argentina, Spain, the United States, and Germany, which would have been unthinkable inside a classical area-studies frame.

R.C.: You have been working on Argentina's elites. How do you see the country under the current radical right-wing government?

What is happening in Argentina is, in many ways, easier to see than what is happening elsewhere — perhaps because it is moving faster, or because its contours are sharper — but it is not, sociologically, a special case. The patterns we are observing there can be observed, in different rhythms and with different local inflections, in India under Modi, in parts of the United States under Trump, in the trajectories of the AfD and parts of the FDP in Germany, in Italy, in Spain. This is precisely why a Global Studies approach is needed: if we keep reducing these processes to the specificities of a national container, we miss the fact that they are constituted *transnationally*, through circulating networks of actors, institutions, money, and ideas. The interesting object of analysis is the global field, not the national exception.

That said, the Argentine version is articulated with unusual frankness, and it is worth describing on its own terms. The intellectual references Milei explicitly cites — Rothbard, Hoppe, Huerta de Soto, Block — are precisely the marginal libertarian tradition we identified as the ideological reservoir of these networks internationally. The figure of the *casta politica* operates exactly as the *Swamp* does elsewhere: a placeholder for "old elites" whose removal is presented as the precondition for restoring a natural order. And the promise of a strong leader who will protect what is sometimes openly described as the divine logic of the market against state interference is stated more directly than almost anywhere else — Huerta de Soto, one of Milei's principal intellectual references, has gone as far as describing God himself as "an anarcho-capitalist."

Sociologically, what is worth noting is that the libertarian movement in Argentina did not emerge from the center of an established pro-market elite. It emerged from its periphery — from a small, marginal current that for decades sat below the more mainstream neoliberal actors. Milei is, in social-position terms, an institutional outsider; the long history of dependency on the IMF, the cycles of inflation, and the unresolved tension between Kirchnerist statism and external pressure created precisely the rupture in which a peripheral figure could move to the center at

extraordinary speed — together with peripheral actors from Spain, Germany, and elsewhere who form part of the same transnational network. The cost is now visible: Argentina has very thin social buffers, and a programme built on the deliberate undermining of statistical, scientific, and administrative institutions is being absorbed by a society that cannot easily afford it.

Two things should be added. First, what happens in Argentina does not stay in Argentina. Milei's government is being studied and cited as a model by Trump's circle, by parts of the German FDP, by far-right actors elsewhere in Europe — which again is exactly the point about transnational fields: the flows are not unidirectional, and treating any of these national cases in isolation misses how they constitute one another. Second, as a sociologist of elites I would resist any reading that treats the current configuration as either consolidated or inevitable. Argentina has deep traditions of social organization, memory politics, and democratic mobilization, and these will not disappear quietly. It is a coherent project — ideologically and internationally networked — but it is contested, and the trajectory is genuinely open.

Fuente: Foto de la Conferencia inaugural Prof. Bultman. 11 de diciembre 2025. Universidad Humboldt de Berlín.