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THE HORIZONLESS GENERATION: CALLINGS, NARRATIVES AND YEARNING OF A GLOBAL YOUTH (PART II)

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«**metapolis** is a pluralist space: it is a place to propose ideas that supersede the traditional borders of knowledge, mobilizing them to confront global challenges. **metapolis** is a territory of hyper-connection, liberated from past nostalgia, critical of the present and committed to a sustainable

and just future. It does not wait for reform that maintains the status quo, nor does it aspire to do so, either. In fact, in **metapolis** everyone suspects that this future may never come, but still are

not convinced to give it up for good. The latest political, economic, technological, environmental, sociological and health emergencies just reinforce the need for us to work harder».

metapolis is an initiative by common action forum. A collective effort of caf's team, members, collaborators and participants. Our goal is to develop and support a progressive agenda as alternative to the current model that has led us to a world of increasing inequalities, environmental devastation and unaccomplished freedom for most of the global citizenry.

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Photo_ **Eva Bronzini**

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THE HORIZONLESS GENERATION: CALLINGS, NARRATIVES AND YEARNINGS OF A GLOBAL YOUTH (PART II)

Paula Medina | Tristán Torrejón

Dec, 2025

Kindness among the ruins was the motto of a video showing a Gazan boy feeding his kitten, surrounded by a view of nothing but rubble—a reflection not only of the destruction of the Palestinian people, but also of the fractures and moral ruin of an international community that has chosen to look away in the face of genocide. A "genocide broadcast live". This stark phrase, repeated ad nauseam to the point of becoming almost a slogan for the barbarity, has followed us for over two years, without a decisive or even commensurate response from any international actor. It would seem that the *cornucopian* [1] euphoria, technological optimism and the promise of linear progress that we discussed in *The Generation Without a Horizon: Demands, Narratives and Aspirations of Global Youth* have not made us any more engaged or aware of the history of the present [2]: a reality that shakes us to the core and challenges our humanity. The lived history we seek to understand is one of death, of normalised war rhetoric, of the pain of *otherness* before passive spectators—who, in a sense, seem to remain, day after day, in their own *Matrix*.

And it is not as though this international community, which appears lethargic and unmoved, had not previously shown obvious signs that it was stuck in a groove. The rise of far-right parties, the fascistisation of politics and the illiberal shift across the globe, coupled with the rise of megalomaniacal leaders and figures who behave like *quasi-kings*, absolute and untouchable. This could not, in fact, be explained without considering the societal normalisation of the dismantling of post-World War II democratic consensuses. This scenario is increasingly embedding the logic of *laissez-faire* into the very fabric of society, accepting the predatory nature of late capitalism—and its intrinsic need to devour resources, places and lives through what authors such as David Harvey have termed "accumulation by dispossession" [3]—as inevitable and unquestionable. We are witnessing this through the rise in poverty and inequality, the precariousness of work, the global structural housing crisis, the privatisation of public goods such as education and healthcare, the financialisation of the economy, mass digitalisation, and the leap into the unknown with Artificial Intelligence—driven by powerful Big Tech firms that are also part of the "smartification" of the arms industry. Added to all this is an ecological crisis, often described as "irreversible", which has been denounced for years—and, paradoxically, overlooked—in terms of political action, social change and intergenerational responsibility. Over the past year, it has become clear that, of the nine planetary boundaries set for life on Earth to continue within safe, stable and resilient limits, seven have already been breached [4].

This could be the fatalistic reading with which we conclude this volume, and we would have no shortfall of reasons or grounds to reach that verdict. However, without wishing to succumb to a fit of detached or delusional optimism, this volume does justice to the horizons of possibility. With it, we sing an anthem to hope which, though somewhat off-key, refuses to abandon the potential for transformative action that young people harbour as agents of change—a status or ability as an agency that

A "genocide broadcast live". This stark phrase, repeated ad nauseam to the point of becoming almost a slogan to barbarity, (...) without a decisive or even commensurate response from any international actor.

we shall, however, see challenged in this issue. That is to say, we do not wish to take for granted, nor to regard as lost, the world in which we live, especially in the wake of certain events in the *history of the present* that continue to pile up as the months go by.

"Wanting to Be Human, We Seek Evidence That We Are" [5]

In her "bag of fiction" theory, Ursula K. Le Guin, a global icon of feminist science fiction and utopian thought, sought, with a sense of urgency, "nature, the subject, the words of the other narrative, the untold story, the story of life" [6]. This is the very exercise we aim to explore here, looking at the multiple identities, positions and repertoires of action of the new generations, clinging to every tiny revolutionary gesture—of awareness, affection, kindness, defiance or denouncement—that keeps hope burning and prevents a single narrative of terror, collapse and catastrophe [7] from ultimately engulfing everything. Embracing, as Le Guin put it, "strange realism", starting from the recognition of a plurality of actors and processes, of the simultaneous coexistence of forces that are eminently opposed, as well as those that resonate with one another. It could be said that, in a political landscape seemingly overwhelmed by polarisation, we believe there is still room not only for conflict, but also for solidarity. This volume is therefore a call to highlight a plethora of synergistic manifestations of resistance. Forces that transcend the single narrative and challenge the senselessness of violence for the sake of violence.

"When Governments Are Silent, the People Rise Up" [8]

The *Global Sumud Flotilla*, an international coalition of ordinary people [9], launched in the summer of 2025, sought to break the international blockade with which Israel continues to strangle the Gaza Strip, but it achieved much more than that. The flotilla was an act of genuine defiance. This coalition, which even today openly champions active defence and the power of non-violent collective action, resistance and international solidarity, has proven to be a catalyst, capable of generating a global resonance. Before, during and after the initiative, hundreds of movements and mobilisations were catalysed around the world, calling for an end to the genocide of the Palestinian people: mass protests and demonstrations, campaigns to expose injustices, and shifts in political direction at an institutional level, amongst others.

In a concerted effort, we have also witnessed another wave of global protests across different parts of the world, said to be led by Generation Z [10]. Although grouping these under the same label sometimes seems like an attempt to deny the cross-cutting nature of the structural problems against which they have rallied, young people and the specificities of their position—from Africa to Asia and Latin America—are its undisputed protagonists. The spread of discontent to the streets of Nepal, Indonesia, Peru, Morocco and Madagascar has generated a new narrative of revolution in which the Asian, African and Latin American youth, weary of authoritarianism, empty promises and global power imbalances. They are charting new horizons for action—*their* horizons for action—regardless of the hegemonic models of antiquated colonial centres that still believe themselves in a position to lecture others. It is intriguing, to say the least, that this very letter, which has served to fuel the apocalyptic imagination—"Apocalypse Z", as Emmanuel Rodríguez calls it [11]—is also the letter that identifies, by mere alphabetical sequence, the various youth movements which, in a scattered and uncoordinated manner,—each in or with their own historical, geographical, economic, political and cultural context—have temporarily converged in their particular ode to revolution. It would seem that not all young people are *zombified* and that not everything is speculative fiction in this intergenerational exercise of (re)thinking the future of *our* world.

And when we speak of the multiplicity and spacetime dissemination of such actions, in which we can find liminal glimpses of a revolution that need not always take place on a grand scale or in a monumental manner, we must ground our analysis

and bring our imagination down to the realm of everyday life. At a time when society is becoming increasingly fragmented, and the loss of social ties and networks has become a genuine social concern in terms of relationality and collectivity—phenomena such as unwanted loneliness, deteriorating mental health or suicide are beginning to feature on the agenda—perhaps we need to start thinking about the different scales on which the revolution must take shape and find its place. When the seams of the social fabric come undone, we must also mend them at the local, neighbourhood and community levels, recognising the power of everyday life and the potential of human connection, paying attention to the survival strategies and small transformative acts of ordinary people, the people on the street.

In this second issue of the volume, in "*The Kids Are Not All Right: Why Youth Will Not Succeed in Cooling the Planet*", geographer **Matthew T. Huber** reflects on the *potentia*—power as capacity or agency [12]—of youth as a movement, a political subject and an agent of change. To this end, he traces a genealogy of the contemporary environmental movement, led primarily by European youth. He does not detract from their organisation, their political alliances, their achievements, or their repertoires of action—with that global re-signification of the strike as an insurgent practice—but he does question the scope and the spatial-temporal projection of these movements from the perspective of the theory of change and the relationship between the moral, the symbolic and the material. In his critical reading and attempt to answer the question "what went wrong", Huber offers us a Marxist analysis of the horizon of action that is unfolding before us at a critical juncture, when we need, on a large scale, not only to "change the world" […], but also to "save the planet."

And when we consider the multiplicity and spread of actions across space and time, in *What Was Lost with Jesús Santos: Portrait of a Leadership Rooted in Closeness*, by journalist, writer and anti-racist activist **Lucía Asué Mbomio**, the scale of analysis narrows, without, however, becoming narrow-minded. In a narrative tone that shifts between ode, elegy and epitaph, the author records a living collective political memory and champions the value of the common good and the power of political mobilisation of ordinary people. Jesús Santos is both a part of and the entirety of this story. His death and the void left in the community, in local politics, and among the young people and generations he inspired, serve as the catalyst for emphasizing the potential of the so-called emotional shift, of everyday politics, and of the ordinary geographies of neighbourhood identity—that local scale defined as "an experience of life, a point of reference and a meeting place", but also as a space for political organisation within strained urban peripheries. The neighbourhood thus emerges as a central unit of analysis: a place to nurture hope and build an intergenerational momentum capable of resisting the housing crisis, social injustice or the loss of sense of belonging.

It would seem that not all young people are *zombified* and that not everything is speculative fiction in this intergenerational exercise of (re) thinking the future of our world.

From the insurgent proposal of a seemingly almost oxymoronic pairing, sociologist **Fefa Vila Núñez**, an expert in cultural and gender studies, reflects on the "politics of failure" or, in other words, the *potentia* of defeat, fragility, boredom and slowness—not of surrender—in contrast to the neo/post-neo/techno/liberal imperatives of success and productivity. However, this political and creative power of failure does not arise in a vacuum, but within queerness, as a movement which, despite having emerged from "the margins of success", has reimagined the horizons of possibility through resistance to the singular narrative, to biopolitics and to the binarism of the Western sex-gender system. It is in dissent and disobedience—in the reiterated vindication of the right to be, to exist, to think and to create; the subversion of language; and the appropriation of spaces denied to abject bodies—that the author ultimately identifies that political *locus* of hope, with the potential to generate a "space [of the] common": relational, intersectional and intergenerational.

In *The Mobilised Youth: Present Disputes and Future Prospects*, sociologist and anthropologist **David Veloso** reflects on the mobilisation of young people and "Generation Z" as a political entity, *addressing* the central questions of this volume.

In clear resonance with the notion of the "politics of failure" introduced in the volume by the author Fefa Vila Núñez, the author pinpoints the fissures in the bleak, despondent, apathetic and apocalyptic narrative that often looms large over youth movements and their repertoires of action. Way beyond the age factor, his intersectional, localised, and contingent reading of this political agent also challenges, in a delayed manner, the one-dimensionality that authors such as Huber seem to attribute to youth as agents of change. For Veloso, systemic crises, disaffection and disenchantment—the aftershocks of the failure of the neoliberal capitalist model—are, in a sense, spaces of enunciation for a multifaceted political subject—with ideological shifts that place them as much within progressivism as within the far right. A subject whose capacity to exercise their rights of citizenship, transform politics and build "a liveable future" is inscribed not only in institutional spaces and social movements, but also in the overflowing energy he attributes to solidarity and care as forces of change.

Addressing one of the issues running through many of the articles in this volume, *The Tenant Generation: Inequality and Class Conflict in Rentier Capitalism*, the political economist, researcher and housing activist **Javier Gil** tackles the housing crisis from an intergenerational and class-based perspective. In this article, the author locates the gradual shift in housing from a social good and right to a financial asset and central gear in the "economic architecture of contemporary capitalism", looking into the recent consolidation of what he terms "rentier capitalism", as part of a historical process dating back to the late 20th century. It is in the material reality of this predatory rentier capitalism—where landlords profit by turning a deaf ear to social needs and demands regarding the right to housing and the right to live in the city—that the author also locates the emergence and transformative potential of the "renter generation" or "renters": a young and/or young adult political subject who, starting from a position of precariousness and housing exploitation, uses a new form of trade unionism to demand the re-politicisation and de-commodification of housing, as well as equal access to it—without distinction based on age, class, nationality, race, gender, etc.

Revolution doesn't always have to take place on a grand scale: we must ground our analyses and bring our imagination down to the realm of everyday life.

Finally, in *Youth in Handcuffs: A Tale of Criminalisation in the Slums*, the criminal lawyer and candidate to Argentina's National Ombudsman's Office, **Tatiana Delgado**, portrays the realities and structural paradoxes that suffocate Argentinian youth. In the "villas", housing and economic vulnerability feed into arbitrary punitive policing that exacerbates insecurity, both through omission and abuse. This issue has a particular impact on the young population, who remain unprotected and exposed to truancy, substance abuse and the commission of petty crimes as a source of income. In the face of the extremely punitive policies espoused by the current administration, Tatiana calls for justice and the enforcement of rights—measures that can rehumanize the youth of the villas and serve as an antidote to an insecurity that, under "heavy-handed" policies, has only increased. Just as the suffering of the people. Despite the grim reality revealed by statistics, the author reminds us how true security endures within community networks—despite mistrust toward law enforcement. Furthermore, through the story of a young ex-convict-turned-poet, she asserts that hope for prosperity remains the driving force behind transformation.

[1] L. Simon, Julian (1981) *The Ultimate Resource*. Princeton University Press. This notion was popularised first by Paul Ehrlich and other ecollogists, to refer to that limitless faith in growth and technological innovation in face of the biophysical limits our our planet.

[2] https://historiadelpresente.com/

[3] David Harvey (2005). *The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

[4] c.f. «Planetary boundaries» (Available at: https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html) and «Seven of nine planetary boundaries now breached – ocean acidification joins the danger zone». (Available at: https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/seven-of-nine-planetary-boundaries-now-breached-2013-ocean-acidification-joins-the-danger-zone)

[5] From Ursula K. Le Guin (2024 [1986]). *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Rara Avis Editorial, pp. 33.

[6] Ibidem, p. 36.

[7] c.f. Emmanuel Rodríguez (2025). *El fin de nuestro mundo. «La lenta irrupción de la catástrofe»* [The End of Our Wolrld. "The Slow Advent of Catastrophe"]. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

[8] https://globalsumudflotilla.org/

[9] c.f. Emmanuel Rodríguez (2025). *El fin de nuestro mundo. «La lenta irrupción de la catástrofe»* [The end of our world, "the slow advent of catastrophe"]. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

[10] c.f. ElSalto (2025). *La bandera pirata de "One Piece" se convierte en icono de las protestas globales de la Generación Z* (Available at: https://www.elsaltodiario.com/comic/bandera-pirata-serie-manga-anime-one-piece-simbolo-protestas-generacion-z-peru-nepal-marruecos), and Amnesty International (2025). *The Gen-Z Movement: This is why we're risking our lives to protest* (Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2025/10/the-gen-z-movement-this-is-why-were-risking-our-lives-to-protest/)

[11] Emmanuel Rodríguez (2025), pp. 78.

[12] Lukes, Steven (2005 [1974]). Power: A Radical View. Ebbw Valea: Palgrave Macmillan

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01.

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT: WHY YOUTH WILL NOT COOL THE PLANET

Matthew T. Huber

Jul, 2025

Introduction

In September 2019, the world erupted in a kind of climate insurgency. The global "climate strike" movement filled the streets in 4,500 locations, in over 150 countries. Estimates suggest as many as 4 million people filled the streets across the globe. Insurgent electoral campaigns in the US and UK, respectively led by Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, proposed radical climate investment programs that both built green infrastructure and offered public jobs and provisions, following decades of brutal austerity.

The climate movement was no doubt inspired and led by youth, particularly in Europe. In January 2019, Greta Thunberg, founder of the climate strike and Fridays for the Future (FFF) movement, calmly reprimanded global elites at the World Economic Forum: "I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is" [1]. Thunberg rose to fame by employing a modest but powerful tactic—the strike. By refusing to attend school on Fridays, Thunberg, and eventually thousands after her, aimed to disrupt ordinary life and bring attention to the climate crisis. In his call for the climate strike in September 2019, Bill McKibben called on everyone to disrupt business as usual, because "Business as usual is what's doing us in" [2]. Just two months earlier, in the United States, the youth-led Sunrise Movement was joined by the recently elected democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) in a protest "sit-in" occupation of establishment Democratic Party Leader Nancy Pelosi's congressional office in Washington, DC. The youth brandished signs calling for "Green Jobs for All", and AOC praised the activists for putting their bodies on the line.

Dipesh Chakraborty suggests climate change is a "collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" [3]. The fossil fuel mode of production ushered in during the 19th Century has created a planetary society, and, for the first time in the planet's history, a single species can now influence the entire natural cycle of planetary life itself. However, the climate movement aims to intervene in this history by interrupting our inexorable path toward global heating and civilizational collapse. The challenge of such a movement is formidable. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change put it starkly that decarbonization entailed "[…] rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" [4]. What kind of movement is up to that task? What theory or agent of change could possibly arrest such a globe-spanning process?

In the Fall of 2019, these questions pointed to clear answers—the movement would force governments to embark on a war-like investment program, call it a Green New Deal, to tackle the challenge at the speed and scale required. The agent of

change was also clear. It was the kids, call it the youth bloc. The young generation, whose future was most imperilled by climate change, would rise up and force all of society to transform itself, pushing them to ensure a better tomorrow. From the standpoint of 2025, however, it's clear this theory of change has not worked out. Emissions hit another record in 2024 and are likely to do so again in 2025, and global temperatures keep rising. Although governments and even corporations around the world set modest targets for climate action around 2020-2021, many, if not most of them, are now clearly backtracking on their pledges. Meanwhile, it's also clear that "climate change" itself has become a less important issue to the popular masses amid a relentless "cost of living" crisis. What went wrong?

We believed the young generation, whose future was most imperilled by climate change, would rise up and force all of society to transform, pushing them to ensure a better tomorrow.

Climate Youth as An Agent of Change?

If an agent of change is to "be the change", then there are some premises to account for. First, it must have an *interest* in change. On the one hand, for the younger generations on a warming planet, this interest seems unequivocal, material and existential. If we fail to act, it will be their generation that bears the worst consequences—I often claim that I began writing on climate politics out of concern for my own daughter, who will reach retirement age in the year 2080. On the other hand, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the youth bloc's interest is *not* universal. There are children of fossil fuel executives and other carbon-intensive sectors of capital who do not have an interest in climate action. And, if the status quo is "doing us in" as McKibben put it, there are many more affluent children whose interest is in maintaining the status quo as it is. In any event, having an "objective" interest in change does not automatically create a "subjective" awareness of it, or a desire to fight for it. There are many children who are not particularly activated by the climate crisis and are instead subsumed in media culture, K-pop, or whatever else. Even poor and marginalised kids, you could argue, have a stronger interest in climate action and are probably more focused on everyday survival than the abstract concerns with global temperatures and parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. So, while youth do have an interest in climate action in the most general sense, it is not at all clear that this interest could translate into action.

This is clearly the mark of a movement with little concern for strategy—it is more a symbolic act thean an effort to build real political power.

A second premise is that the historical agent of change should also have a plausible path to assembling a mass coalition capable of implementing their agenda—particularly in democratic societies, where forming electoral majorities is crucial. With the youth bloc, however, we are talking about a part of society that is not only a distinct minority of the population, but also one that is defined by its political incapacitation (i.e. lacks the franchise under a certain age). In fact, the birth rates of rich countries in the Global North are in free-fall, so the "young" proportion of the population is dropping fast. In the United States, at the height of the baby boom in the 1960s, children under 18 made up 36% of the population, but today it is 22% [5]. This rapid demographic collapse is occurring even in poorer countries like Ecuador and Guatemala [6]. But with the youth bloc, we're not just talking numbers. The main issue is that they lack the right to vote, placing much of the burden of their agency on the "older" part of the youth bloc (say, those between ages 18-30). But even that demographic is characterised by its lack of political participation and overall apathy. To be clear, voting is not the only, not even the most important, action in political life. As we cited above, kids can still organise protests and actions—recently, they have even been taking to the courts to sue states or fossil fuel companies for harm to their generation—but suffice it to say, the youth bloc's path to political power would only be tread in coalition with older generations. The main question lingers: how can they lead and assemble a much broader, mass coalition?

The third and most important criterion for an agent of change is that they should have *leverage* to force elites in society to address a set of demands. Here, it is difficult to see where the youth bloc could obtain such power. In fact, Greta Thunberg and the FFF movement took a tactic—*the strike*—from the labour movement, because, as I argue below, it is but a powerful example of how ordinary people, by withdrawing

their labour, can, in Jane McAlevey's words, "create a crisis" that shuts down workplaces and economies to force attention on movement demands [7].

It is *possible* that if each and every student went on strike for a sustained period, it could force teachers, administrators, parents and the larger community to address their demands. The question is what kind of organisational vehicle could exist to obtain such participation from children? There is no union, nor is there a strike vote in play. Indeed, the FFF movement is defined by its pretty tepid tactic of only going on strike on Friday—the day everyone is ready to go home for the weekend anyway. Losing a handful of students every Friday is no existential threat to the operation of the education system in Sweden or anywhere else. More broadly, it was telling that the mass action yielded by FFF—the September 2019 "climate strike"—was decidedly voluntarist and uninterested in the real potential leverage of the strike to actually effect change. In an article meant to inspire action, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben and others gave away the game before it started:

> "We know not everyone can join us. On a grossly unequal planet, some people literally can't do without a single day's pay, or they work for bosses who would fire them if they dared try. And some jobs simply can't stop: emergency room doctors should keep at their tasks" [8].

We are unlikely to win on climate as a single-issue "movement" —single-issue politics has been the hallmark of a divided and defeated Left during the last decades of neoliberalism.

This is clearly the mark of a movement with little concern for strategy—it is more a symbolic act of protest than a real theory of change, or an effort to build real power.

Therefore, the climate youth do not have a universal interest in climate action; they lack a mass base in society, and they do not have the leverage to force society into action. What *do* they have? They have moral righteousness. The FFF movement explicitly claims to attempt to exert "moral pressure" on policymakers [9]. And, of course, this is a crucial ingredient in any social movement—think of Martin Luther King's moral power in his addresses. Greta Thunberg's impassioned speeches firmly position her on the "right" side of history in the struggle for the future. But it is also clear that "moral pressure" is not enough. A truly world-historic agent of change needs more heft. Let me propose another option.

Marx's Wager

> "…the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."
> Karl Marx, International Workingmen's Association, General Rules, 1864

If there's one core position Marx retained throughout his life of politics, it was this belief in what many call "working-class self-emancipation." The idea was that capitalism itself creates its own "gravediggers" in the proletariat, granting them the potential to abolish it. For Marxists and socialists after this point, there was a clear historical agent of change: the working class. For the first time in history, there was not only the material production necessary for the abolition of poverty, but an agent with the capacity to bring it about; in Ellen Meiksins Wood's apt words, "a class which contained a real possibility of a classless society" [10].

In Marx's theory of *proletarianization*, sowing the seeds for socialism also had an ecological angle. For all of human history prior to capitalism, most people made their living directly from the land through communal production of subsistence, using agricultural or foraging techniques. What Marx aimed to show was that capitalism's very existence—its capacity to produce surplus value or profit—hinged upon the social majority being forcibly dispossessed of the land and any other means of production. While this "freed" labour from precapitalist forms of bondage and slavery, it also meant the bulk of the population lived in a constant insecurity, forced to sell their "labour power" on the market in exchange for money so that they could obtain subsistence in the commodity form.

Yet, tearing the mass of the population from the land, making them reliant upon global commodities, also meant the working class under capitalism might dispense with local, parochial or even nationalist interests, and rather look toward the global, international level of working-class struggle against capitalism itself. In the face of a global ecological crisis, this planetary theory of working-class agency takes on new significance. For Marx, the proletariat was an agent that would emancipate humanity; however, we now also need a force capable of maintaining the conditions for the survival of our very species.

It's the imperative of capitalist profitability that both prevents the working class from having a good life and the necessary investments needed to rapidly shift our energy infrastructure.

Compared with the youth bloc, the working class has more promising characteristics as a potential agent of change. First, under capitalism, the working class has a clear, material *interest* in the kind of transformative change necessary to address climate change and broader ecological problems. A Marxist analysis suggests that the basic operation of capitalism—the generation of profits—depends on one class exploiting the other: capitalist owners of productive assets and resources exploit a working class that only lives insofar as they sell their labour power in exchange for a wage. This basic relation between capital and labour ensures that the bulk of the working class not only lives under the despotic rule of capital in the workplace—with no freedom to shape production decisions and subject to endless indignities—but also faces deep proletarian insecurity in acquiring the basics of a good life like food, health care, housing and more. History has proven that if the working class organises itself in its own interests, it can erode the power of capital—and this is precisely what is also needed to address the climate crisis. Plainly, it is the imperative of capitalist profitability that both prevents the working class from having a good life and the necessary—but usually unprofitable—investments needed to rapidly shift our energy infrastructure away from fossil fuels [11].

Second, in contrast to the minoritarian and politically impotent nature of the youth bloc, the working class represents the vast majority of the population. Some Marxists would insist *everyone* who relies on a wage is part of the working class, but even excluding middle-class professionals and managers, Michael Zweig still found it comprises close to two-thirds of the employed population—and it would be closer to three-quarters if we included, as we most certainly should, the non-waged caregivers in households [12]. In the Global South, while the wage-earning population is often much lower, increasing numbers live as what Mike Davis called the "informal proletariat" eking out survival through things like waste collection and street trading [13]. The key is that the vast majority of the global population relies *on the market* for survival, which means they all share the kind of proletarian insecurity described above. Of course, the challenge for us today is that the working-class majority is increasingly divided politically, racially, by gender, nationality, citizenship and more. History shows that the antidote to this relentless division—one that only supports the interests of the capitalist class—is working-class political organisation, such as the labour and other parties of the early to mid-20th century.

Third, the core of Marxism also hinges on the premise that the working class has *special leverage*, by virtue of the fact that society relies on their labour to function. By withdrawing their labour, the working class can *force* political elites to a set of radical demands. In 2018, West Virginia teachers, with support from the community and parents, shut down the state's school system and materialised their political demands in a right-wing state in a mere couple of weeks. Such is the power of the working class. In the Fall of 2023, the United Auto Workers strategically shut down the Big Three automakers' most profitable factories, forcing them to lose hundreds of millions of dollars, and won a record contract for their members. It is no coincidence that the most progressive economic policies passed in US history under the New Deal—Social Security, union rights, progressive taxation—came on the heels of a massive wave of strikes in 1934. Again, the problem for us today is that this power might be *latent* in any capitalist society, but it is almost as if many workers have forgotten the power they possess. Strike activity has declined rapidly in the neoliberal period. Releasing this power requires class organisations that are willing to fight and to take risks to improve the conditions for the class as a whole.

Photo_ **Nicolas Alejandro**_ CC BY 2.0

The key is to recommit to Marx's wager: only the working class under capitalism has the potential for change. We not only have a world to win, but we also have a planet to salvage.

Conclusion: Don't Be a Doomer, Organise!

What does this mean for the youth bloc of climate activists? It does not mean they cannot be central to a strategy to address climate change. However, instead of exclusively building organisations based on climate youth, such as FFF or the Sunrise Movement, climate youth could also put energy into building *working-class organisations*, like trade unions and political parties. These organisations share a general strategic orientation toward the working class as the force in society, with the interests, numbers, and leverage to build the power we need at the scale we need to address the climate crisis. Indeed, there has been an uptick in new union organising in the United States as of late, and it has been largely the younger generations that are leading it, whether we're talking about Starbucks, grad students, or Amazon warehouse workers.

It also means climate activists can partner with and support working-class struggles. That is what happened recently in Germany, for example, where many climate activists speak of a "labour turn" in the movement. Climate activists consciously built alliances with transit union workers to create a campaign addressing worker concerns for better wages and conditions, as well as climate demands for increased public transportation. In Belgium, the PTB, or Workers' Party, has built a powerful organisation based on a traditional working-class agenda: taxing the rich to provide more secure public goods, such as housing, transportation, healthcare, and other essential services. But they also have members and workers in the unions—in heavy, carbon-intensive sectors like steel and chemicals—who are organising to force the bosses to either invest in a green transition or face public takeover. This party is also profoundly shaped by its own student movement (COMAC), which recruits activists at universities through campaigns and political education, with the ultimate goal of transitioning them into party work.

All these efforts recognise that we are unlikely to win on climate as purely a single-issue "movement"—such single-issue politics has been the hallmark of a divided and defeated Left during the last decades of neoliberalism. Rather, we need a much broader anti-austerity working-class agenda to redistribute wealth from the few to the many in the form of public goods. Some of those public goods, such as electricity, housing, and transport, have obvious climate implications, but others, like healthcare and education, do not. The key is to recommit strategically to Marx's wager that it is only the working class under capitalism that has the *potential* power to change the world. We not only have a world to win, but we also have a planet to salvage.

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02.

WHAT WAS LOST WITH JESÚS SANTOS: PORTRAIT OF A LEADERSHIP ROOTED IN CLOSENESS

Lucía Asué Mbomío

Aug, 2025

Jesús Santos (1981–2025) was a trade union leader, councillor and deputy mayor in the southern Madrid town of Alcorcón, where he is remembered for his warmth, jovial spirit and unwavering social, antifascist and antiracist commitment.

Neighbourhood Life as Experience, Reference and Meeting Ground

Jesús and I were the same age and both from Alcorcón, so our memories were alike not only because of the generation we belonged to, but because they unfolded against the very same backdrop. That creates a bond. As did the kind of "retrotopia" that connected us with a past from which we stripped the ugly moments away, leaving only the lovely ones. A past in which, as much as we kept the harsher and even the violent episodes in mind, we believed we had won wars. Some of those, we now know, were little more than battles—perhaps just little skirmishes with a happy ending.

We must have crossed paths a thousand times, but I think we actually met because I was writing a column in *El País* called *Barrionalismos*. In it, I wrote about those aspects of daily life we tend not to notice. The ones that happen in such small doses, and that are becoming ever more exceptional in this capitalistic and individualistic setting of ours. I mean things like supporting local commerce, befriending your neighbours, stopping for a chat in the lobby, being told at 40 how much you've grown, and simply enjoying parks at a time of crazed, tree-felling policies. Even things like laughing at those who ask us, guys and gals from the outskirts, how we make it daily into Madrid—as if it weren't obvious that we travel by donkey.

I suppose Jesús was struck by the idea of telling lovely stories about the lovely people who live in places that are lovely too, however much the media and popular discourse, imbued with "centro-centrism", insist otherwise. That's what usually happens when you're insulted, belittled or ignored day after day: either you internalise it and fade into invisibility, or you stick your chest out and elevate what has always been cast as the opposite of "good" proper and beautiful. Jesús never hid his roots—quite the opposite. He was so truly from here that he used to say our Alcorcón, the very epitome of the peripheral neighbourhood experience, ran through his very veins. He was so southern-Madrileño that he revelled in our way of speaking, in our trashy "choni" neologisms. Far removed from the "high Spanish"—a typical idiom from Equatorial Guinea for those speaking in a language only they themselves understand—Jesús spoke so that people could grasp him, without stopping to quote thousands of references, millions of thinkers and their trillions of theories, though he knew them all perfectly well. The core of his message was the people, the tangible things, and the streets he walked every day. He moved through them as though he owned the place, stopping at every turn for anyone who hailed him—always on first-name terms, of course, since they gave his closeness and interest for granted—whether to be asked something, congratulated, demanded of, or even scolded.

That's what usually happens when you're belittled and ignored day after day: either you internalise it and fade into invisibility, or you stick your chest out and elevate what has always been cast as the opposite of "good", proper and beautiful.

He always responded politely, with genuine concern, and a promise to take action. That doesn't mean he never slipped, of course, but he truly believed in what he was doing, how he was doing it, and in loving his job with all of his heart. The link between what he said and how he lived was so genuine that many never quite saw him as a politician at all, but rather as a neighbour who—unlike those career professionals in the "sector" who float above the everyday din—was deeply aware of what went on in the daily ordeals of the "low-status" periphery. He navigated the town not by conventional directions, the sort with avenues or numbers, but with the shared linguistic, communal and spatial landmarks that bind us together: the park of the elepahnt, one opposite what used to be Deportes Andorra; the Casas square; the Castillos amphitheatre; the areas around Pizza Brooklyn, Talis, or the Kambalache; or the hill with the pines. Perhaps that's why people adored him, and whenever they had the chance, they did not hesitate to show it.

The Pride of a Maligned Periphery

I once had the chance to attend one of his rallies and witness it with my own eyes. It was in the Parque de la Ribota, packed to the rafters. Jesús was still a member of Podemos [1] then, and alongside him came the party heavyweights, drawing in a crowd of onlookers, sympathisers and potential voters. In a category all of their own—wonderful and endearing—were what you might have called the "JesúsSanters": a mix of fans, devotees, admirers, friends and people who had known him since he was a kid, who had seen him grow from boy to man. From the punk who went to the gigs at the Valderas training school, to the tie-less politician with a ponytail. They weren't all necessarily Podemos supporters, though most probably leaned left. Above all, they were there for Jesús. That evening, the crowd was roaring his name, and when his turn arrived, everyone fell silent. The emotion was palpable. He stepped calmly up to the microphone, and as he began to speak, the words tripped over each other—so much to say, and so eager. It was as if his mouth had filled with plans and dreams that simply wouldn't fit. As if they were jostling and lining up to break through, each one fighting to be the first out.

Or maybe—and perhaps I'm talking more about myself than about him—he was nervous because for people like us it's hard to picture ourselves in certain places. And if we do manage to reach them, even if just to brush them with our fingertips, we'll always feel inadequate. Impostor syndrome, they call it. So, when we arrive at positions that for some are nothing more than a starting point, we feel small or out of place, as if walking a tightrope under dozens—or hundreds, or thousands, depending on the role—of eyes fixed not so much on catching us if we stumble, but on not missing the moment we do.

From that discourse, two words stuck with me: love and Alcorcón. I stopped hearing his voice, drowned out by the applause, the cheers and the pride of a maligned periphery.

But there were no stumbles. Quite the opposite.

—Come on, Jesús!—someone shouted. And hundreds of voices joined in. They were cheering him on, him and everything he stood for. As though it were the harmless revenge of those who had never been listened to, even when they had a voice and plenty to say.

That encouragement must have done the trick, because far from getting flustered, he reacted with utter ease. He started laughing, and then, true to his form, propelled himself into a speech that seemed to come from deep within. What stuck with me were two words: love and Alcorcón. After that, I stopped hearing his voice, drowned out by the applause, the cheers and the pride of a maligned periphery bursting out into the open, from people aged anything between 0 and 99. I don't even remember what he said, but I do remember the lovely atmosphere, how he actually was a prophet in his own land, how there wasn't a seat to spare, how emotions ran high, hairs stood on end, and how the shouts of praise interrupted him every minute, making him bashfully smile.

Jesús never faked his character or his manners, not even that day. He wasn't posh or pretentious, nor someone who had never set foot in the outskirts but made a whole deal of pretending otherwise. He was one of us, a local Joe who had spent years working for the municipal services company that, among other things, takes care of cleaning our town. The guy-next-door who moved on to become the binding force of a political left that, in time, fell apart. Or rather, shattered into a thousand pieces. But that came later. That day, Jesús didn't need to rummage through his hard drive for anecdotes to prove where he came from—because he had never left.

Community Memory and Listening

What fascinated me most about him, beyond that shared *neighbourhoodist* spirit, was his fierce defence of our town, and his remembrance and learning from its struggles. For Jesús, keeping his roots and his place close to his heart, and walking Alcorcón often, made him aware of his strengths, his weaknesses and his own shortcomings —but also of everything we had inherited.

Jesús and his team stood up against collective amnesia towards those small great things—towards the lives and experiences that truly shape us, that build us as a community.

In Alcorcón, the jumble of locals and migrants from all over the country and the wider world spared us from fighting a thousand battles. Many of them had already put their bodies on the line. Emilita R. Montesinos, a local role model for us all, always recalled how, when she and her husband moved into the home they had built brick by brick, it still lacked a floor and a bathroom. With no glass on the windows, they boarded them up with sacks os sand. And they were not the only ones. The Madrid periphery is slowly forgetting it now, but before the conquest of services like the metro or hospitals, migrants from the rural exodus joined forces to build and legalise their houses, working tirelessly to secure even the most basic conditions, such as sewers or electricity. On the outskirts, every rung climbed is a bequest from those who had to demand, to bare their teeth and even their fists.

Jesús honoured the neighbours who paved the way, while also reclaiming the other forms of memory that shape us as a community. Ricardo Rodríguez, the young antifascist murdered by a neo-Nazi in Costa Polvoranca, has his name on a plaque at the Youth Centre, so that neither he nor the vile scourge that still threatens our streets are forgotten. Not far from there, since 2020, the municipal courts have carried the name of Jota Mayúscula, in memory of an absolute icon of hip hop culture who is no longer with us. Jota wasn't from Alcorcón, but he was part of the legendary group "The Violent Poets' Club", alongside six others, two of whom are locals: PacoKing and El Meswy. Side by side, they dared to revolutionise our artistic scene with political and defiant lyrics, while the far right strutted about unchecked in the streets. These acts are not just symbolic gestures; nor do we perceive them as such. Any council can put up a plaque to a notable neighbour or add pomp to the street map by baptising with historical references the very spaces that belong to its people. But Jesús and his team stood up against collective amnesia towards those small great things—towards the lives and experiences that truly shape us, that build us as a community.

That's why, when I decided to reclaim our shared Black memory together with the Afro-centred cultural space Espacio Afro [2], I also reached out to Jesús. I needed to make eternal the name of Augusto Ndombele Domingos, "Jimmy", a boy from Leganés murdered at just 16, also at the hands of a neo-Nazi. Even though 2022 marked two decades since that terrible event, it still felt raw to me. It was something like what I experienced when Lucrecia Pérez was killed in '92, only this time I was older: I had the awareness, almost the certainty, that I was in danger simply for being Black, and that not even minors like Augusto, or like my own brother, would be spared. Not even in Alcorcón, the only place I had always thought of as my motherland, my safe space. Barely a week after his murder, the bouncer at a local nightclub refused me entry because, in his words, Black people caused trouble. The bitter irony was that Jimmy's killer was not Black at all, but a white nightclub bouncer.

To call blindly for younger leadership, or to believe that appealing to the youth is just a matter of slang and a good knack for TikToks, is to insist on swapping the mask on the same monster.

Years earlier, his father had taken the difficult decision to leave Angola for fear that the war ravaging the country might claim one of his children, his wife, or himself. But it was a Nazi who killed Jimmy in Alcorcón. The family did not set foot in the neighbourhood again until twenty years later, on the anniversary of his death—thanks to Jesús, who listened to us. He helped what was left of that diminished family, broken by loss, to give new meaning to the place where it had all happened. Right in front of the spot where he was killed, we unveiled a plaque with the name of the son and brother stolen from them by racist violence. Since then, it has been known as Augusto Ndombele Domingos Park.

Jesús's commitment seemed endless. I can still remember the pain on his face during the unusual presentation I gave of my second book. Surrounded by secondary school students, we listened to those young people tell stories and describe assaults all too similar to the ones I had written about in those pages. CEIPSO Cervantes is one of those high schools labelled as of "poor performance", the kind where parents hesitate to enrol their children because of the number of Roma, migrant, or foreign-descended pupils—as though race or origin were some contagious disease. With a furrowed brow and total attention, Jesús listened as they spoke of their inability to feel like they belonged, given the constant questioning of their skin colour or identities. Tales of clashes with the authorities, of childhoods cut short by responsibility, and even of the silent odyssey that is finding a home in a country so scarred by housing racism. His heart sank when a girl broke down in tears, recalling how, in schoolyard football matches, she had to choose whether to play on the "foreign" team or the "Spanish" one—when in fact she was, and is, both, but above all, she was from Alcorcón.

Against a digital dystopia and intergenerational resentment, we need recognition, and self-recognition, honest and rooted in our streets, between our bodies and the bodies that care for us. To recognise ourselves and each other in the radical universality running through even the most ordinary and particular of our experiences.

I'll never know if Jesús thought back to that day during the 2020 lockdowns, but I won't forget how his administration worked tirelessly, handing out photocopies to students, doing what they could to soften the blows of the digital divide. They made sure education still reached the homes of migrant and/or low-income families without computers, where the only internet access came from the cellphones of mothers raising children alone while working endless hours.

Conclusions: Recognising Ourselves to Win Back Closeness

It's been only five years since then, yet it feels like centuries. Jesús is gone, and, save for a few honourable exceptions, so too is his pragmatic, streetwise way of doing politics. How I miss you, Jesús—for who you were, for what you stood for, and for what you did. I feel that something great and beautiful vanished when you left. It died with you. Today, I see our neighbourhoods as uglier, sadder places.

The perspectives for our climate and societies look bleak. Everywhere the left persists in splintering, the far right floods our neighbourhoods, criminalising anyone with a different faith or just a darker skin tone. Political aberrations, misogynist streamers, show-offs, fraudsters, proud tax evaders and neoliberal scum gain ground and strut about unchecked. Humble origins are forgotten or glossed over, and when they are exalted, it's only to twist the past, weave tales of insecurity and poison coexistence. As though we hadn't all already seen muggings, parks littered with syringes or thefts long before migrant neighbours arrived. As though those who face the same hardships—or worse—deserve harsher blame than those who plant their seeds.

Collective hope falters. And yet, even as we choke on this social panic over a youth we see as demobilised, disengaged from politics, if not first in line to climb aboard the train of reactionary populism, we rarely display the intellectual honesty to ask ourselves who sowed what we now reap. The crisis of credibility in our democracy is far from just a youth problem, and yet the truth is it hurts the most in what it has broken between generations—who live not only in the same neighbourhoods, but under the same roofs. Those poisoning us are many, and their methods are more, but from people like Jesús I learned that what divides us is always less than what they

try to make us believe. The wider failure of politics is, as always, intersectional. It mirrors that neglect so defining for peripheral experience. Some more than others have been left behind by the promise of progress, on a broken social ladder jammed with job insecurity, economic inequality, racism, structural violence and impossible paths to independence. Disaffection is no accident. The message of those who treat our institutions like a game of musical chairs, unsurprisingly, keeps failing just as badly—or worse—than their diagnosis.

What was lost with Jesús Santos is a life beyond compare, from the personal to the political—a microcosm of an intuition and a vocation rooted in Alcorcón that will always bear his name. And yet, what Jesús Santos filled until it overflowed, what has returned in his absence, is a void that once made us feel as orphaned as we do today—as much as it hurts more this time around. A void of trust in politics, which, in the end, comes down to closeness, to the reassuring warmth of presence, something that can infect us with the hope of possibility. To call blindly for younger leadership, or to believe that appealing to the youth is just a matter of slang and a good knack for TikToks, is to insist on swapping the mask on the same monster. No hall of mirrors can fill the shoes of what we lack. Hatred, for its part, can destroy many things, many lives, but it can never prevail, however much it wants to. The far right is a machine that, without knowing it, aspires only to break itself. It consumes, judges and persecutes; it promises identities even as it hollows them out, community even as it pits us against one another, and security even as it dismantles social institutions day by day.

What we face goes beyond an unbearable crisis in youth housing, social justice, or labour dignity. Even more than a crisis of political answers, we face a crisis of recognition. That is where this abyss begins. We have failed, yes, in recognising the chains we have forced young people to drag, but also in recognising ourselves in others. We will have to throw our weight behind those who truly set out to fill this void till it overflows. This will come from our neighbourhoods—or it will not be at all. Against a digital dystopia that walls us off inside our screens, what we need is recognition, and self-recognition, honest and rooted in the streets, between our bodies and the bodies that care for us. Against an abyss of xenophobia and intergenerational resentment, riddled with scapegoats, we need to recognise ourselves and each other in what we love and in what hurts us. To recognise ourselves and each other in the radical universality running through even the most ordinary and particular of our experiences. Lovely places, lovely atmospheres, lovely people.

Love and Alcorcón. Because for anyone who truly dares to fill that void, to make it overflow, like Jesús did, they both exist everywhere.

Lucía Asué Mbomío

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[1] *Podemos* was the leading party of the Spanish left in the second half of the 2010s. In 2015, the movement managed to channel public discontent with Europe's austericide and the old two-party system, rising from nothing to become the third political force nationwide, with a strong foothold in towns and regions. Although it strengthened its results in the repeat election the following year, from then on it suffered severe internal and external wear, which manifested in the gradual fragmentation and erosion of its brand in town halls and regional parliaments, giving way to municipalist lists and independent figures such as Jesús Santos.

[2] *Espacio Afro* is a benchmark Cultural Centre, for the encounter of Black, African, and Afro-descendant culture in Madrid and all of Spain. You can learn about their projects and find further information in: https://www.conciencia-afro.com/conciencia-afro/espacio-afro

Photo_ **Benjamín de la Calle**_ Portrait of The excluded (Álvaro Echavarría), 1910_ Public Domain

03. OR A POLITICS OF FAILURE: QUEERNESS ON THE HORIZON

Fefa Vila Núñez

Sep, 2025

Fifty years after Pier Paolo Pasolini's murder, his words on the need to educate people about the value of defeat resonate more vividly than ever. In a world where success, efficiency and productivity set the pace for what is considered a dignified life, the queer art of failure, as proposed by Jack Halberstam [1], becomes a form of resistance, a desire for other forms of worldbuilding. It is not about giving up, but about questioning and disobeying the mandates of triumph and the overlords that nurture them. It is about living slowly, about cultivating listening, attention, boredom, about inhabiting the margins, whatever they may be, about sustaining desire in the crevices of what is possible. Today, once again in the recent history of humanity, we need to enable another want more than ever.

I think that failure, insofar as it is *queer*, is but a political and creative force: a manner of building community from fragility and imagination from precariousness, of establishing alliances and expanding democracy in all its senses and pushing it towards a different space, one where (post) fascism and warlords have no shelter. In the face of the arrogance of the neoliberal, post-neoliberal, technoliberal victors, vindicating the strength of those who lose, stumble or are left on the roadside, in the ditches or under the rubble of bombed-out lands, this is the storm that lights up the lighthouse. To fail is also to reject a world that leaves no room for that which is human and its posthuman amalgamations. This is the power of queerness.

Queer—and, later, in Spanish, *cuir*—emerged precisely from the margins of success. Although it has penetrated academic discourse, it was born not in universities, but in the streets, in bodies and lives that do not fit in. It was in the destitute bodies marked by AIDS that this seed sprouted. The philosopher and activist Paco Vidarte expressed it so lucidly [2]: queer will never enter academia peacefully; it is a residue that the system cannot digest. It is the indecent, the unteachable, that which escapes. Its power lies in this break from the norm, in resistance, in its multiple alliances and imaginations. I myself stem from this drift: from a genealogy of bodies and thoughts that learned to survive by improvising strategies in the face of rejection, exclusion and illness.

In the early 1990s, the context of AIDS signalled a turning point. Pain became politics, anger became creativity, grief became action. In Madrid, collectives such as LSD and La Radical Gai burst open cracks within the city and its institutions, including the university, defying the discourses of power and the modes of knowledge production. Queerness seeped into the classrooms from the streets, contaminating those discourses and revealing the fissures in academic universalism. Academia, like other institutions—family, the museum, heterosexuality—was no longer the steady seat of legitimacy, but rather a battlefield. There, dissident bodies began to build their own forms of knowledge, kinship, resistance, and everyday life.

The queer art of failure is a form of resistance, a desire for other forms of worldbuilding. It is not about giving up, but about questioning and disobeying the mandates of triumph.

Over time, the term *cuir* began to replace queer in many Spanish-speaking contexts. It was not a mere translation, but a twist of language. To say *cuir* was to claim a place of one's own, a geopolitical and cultural distinctiveness. As the philosopher Sayak Valencia puts it [3], *cuir* seeks "other methodologies of enunciation," disobedient and decolonial. In the face of the hegemony of the English language and the Global North, *cuir* emerges from mixed-race territories, from the colourful bodies inhabiting both celebration and violence. It is a way of saying: we exist from another place, we think from other wounds.

In Spain, the adoption of *cuir* was also a political statement. It meant locating our struggles within our own framework, between feminist memory, post-Franco activism and local resistance. When pronouncing *cuir*, the words bend, open up, slide, and in that linguistic contortion, a whole history of bodies, accents and desires that do not fit into the neutrality of English seeps in. It is not just a question of phonetics: it is a means of decolonising thought and affirming that theories and concepts do not travel disembodied, that every idea has its own geography, skin, and rhythm.

From this perspective, *cuir* is not a fixed identity, but a complex, radical social relationship. It does not describe who I am, but how I relate. It is a way of being in the world with others, of articulating unstable, affective, precarious alliances and fighting for beauty and joy among and alongside others. It is not about claiming one's own space, but about devising a common one. That is why *cuir* is, above all, a politics of the relational. As Karen Barad writes [4], the important thing is not to universalise *cuir* experience, but to materialise it in its specificity. There is no pure 'outside' from which to act: change happens within, in the very matter of who we are. And we are different. That is why *cuir*-ness is committed to a radical equality of difference. It is impossible to conceive gender without its intersection with race, class or nationality. *Cuir* struggles are always plural and collective, born in action and transformed in encounter. This relational vision is nourished by the thinking of De Lauretis, who warns of the risk of turning equality into indifference while calling for radical openness to difference [5][6].

The young look for a place where they can think without fear and put their uncertainty into words. There, within that tremor, lies the political opportunity of the present.

The political power of *cuir* lies precisely in its instability. Unable to settle on a fixed identity, it forces us to constantly reinvent ourselves. This plasticity makes it resistant to market or state co-optation. In contrast to representation policies—which seek faces, slogans, and quotas—*cuir* is committed to collective practices, affective networks, and cross-cutting alliances that transcend class, race, gender, age, and physicality. Its method is contagion, not purity. Its tactic is improvisation. Its ethic is care. Its territory is well-being, which is constructed collectively.

Feminism is its closest genealogy and its most demanding partner in conversation. From it, we inherit the critical tools to think about bodies and politics, but also the tensions between equality and difference. Queerness challenges feminism; it prompts it to reexamine itself and question its own limits. Not because it denies feminist history, but because it continues it through other means. Just as feminism fought for equality, *cuir* clings to difference as an emancipatory horizon. There is no contradiction between the two: there is dialogue, friction, and expansion.

In the 1990s, while institutional feminism sought legal recognition, *cuir* and transfeminist movements opened up space to imagine other ways of life, beyond the heterosexual household or the 'woman' subject as a central figure. We proposed other forms of kinship, motherhood, affection, exchange, and science. We questioned the naturalness of sex, desire, and even the species. On the margins of the system, we invented an ethics of risk, an aesthetics of care, a politics of bonds and the body.

Failure, in that context, proved to be a powerful tool. To fail was to not meet the expectations of gender, the market, academia, and the state. It was to not fit in, and in that non-fitting in, having the space to breathe. *Cuir* lives, precarised and multiple,

showed that there is no single way to live right. That cultural homogenisation and the success that defines it are not, in fact, a universal value, but a trap—a fateful and tragic one. In failure, we find a way to inhabit time, to resist the speed and competitiveness that demand we be productive even in pain.

Today, we are experiencing a crisis of gender, but also a crisis of meaning. Certainties are faltering, reactionary discourses are proliferating, and yet something is opening up. The younger generations no longer place as much faith in norms, but they also struggle to find a clear refuge. They are driven by a mixture of freedom and exhaustion, desire and anxiety. As a professor, I see it every day: the young look for a place where they can think without fear, where they can put their uncertainty into words. And I believe that there, within that tremor, lies the political opportunity of the present.

Cuir-ness does not offer closed solutions, but rather questions. It teaches us to inhabit contradiction, to sustain discomfort. To remember that critical thinking is not about having answers, but about continuing to ask questions. As José Esteban Muñoz [7] says, utopia is not a place, but a gesture. This gesture—that of imagining another way of being together—is, for me, the essence of *cuir*.

Sometimes people ask me if I'm not afraid that all this will turn into a fad, a commodity, an empty slogan. Of course, I'm afraid. However, I also know that *cuir* politics resist being completely domesticated. Its strength lies not in words, but in the bodies that utter them. As long as there are bodies that deviate, that dance, that love differently, *cuir* thought will live on.

To think from failure is to practise radical hope. We seek not redemption, but possibility. In the ruins of the post-neoliberal world, *cuir* creates community, desire and language. To fail is not to give up: it is to tear open a crack in the machinery of success so that life can break in. *Cuir* future promises not happiness, but shared existence. And that in itself is plenty.

To fail is not to give up: it is to tear open a crack in the machinery of success so that life can break in.

Fefa Vila Núñez

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04. THE MOBILISED YOUTH: PRESENT DISPUTES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

David Veloso Larraz

Oct, 2025

When I received the invitation to contribute to this volume, *The Horizonless Generation*, I considered writing about the various topics that actually challenge the bleak future often attributed to the so-called "Generation Z." From my personal and professional experience, I have found that resignation, apathy, and indifference are not in fact the predominant attitudes among young people. There are numerous examples, such as the Landless Movement or Youth Without a Future, where seemingly negative or apocalyptic labels have been branded to reverse the situations they denounce, triggering the necessary outrage at a reality that is perceived as unfair, serving also as frameworks for collective identification, from which to dispute the present itself.

The widespread perception that young people have no interest in politics is not supported by existing data and studies. In fact, scientific literature indicates the opposite: there is significant vitality in the political involvement of young people [1]. Nevertheless, media discourse tends to present a negative portrayal of young people, reducing the enormous complexity and diversity of new lifestyles or, in the worst cases, turning them into scapegoats for society's woes. As one of the most widespread and socially recognised categories, "youth" is very much part of common sense. This implies that, although it is understood as an age-based stage, its meaning has fluctuated across periods and cultures. Youth is shaped by other variables—gender, social class, ethnicity, and others—that play a significant role in explaining their life trajectories and the social inequalities they face. This is why age is not always the most decisive variable in understanding their situation. This issue is largely reflected in the demands of youth groups for public policies that incorporate a youth focus. One that combats both generalisations and the associated prejudices and stigmas.

In recent decades, major socio-economic transformations have had profound effects on young people. Paradoxically, although opportunities have improved substantially, young people have become among the most vulnerable groups. Hence, in the face of this global dynamic, there is widespread talk of a future without prospects. In Spain, for example, the face of poverty has changed. It is no longer concentrated among the elderly, as it was in the last century, but rather among children and young people. This has practical and discursive implications: it justifies suspending the effective exercise of young people's citizenship rights until they achieve stability —associated with an age at which such a situation is supposedly left behind. In societies where total precariousness extends to all generations, however, the boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. For this reason, rhetorical strategies that defend the status quo seek to depoliticise and stigmatise young people's discontent, shifting the focus from structural causes to a supposed emotional frailty. The generational use of the label "snowflake"—analogous to the Spanish expression "the glass generation"—has become a symbol of the narrative's global spread. In response to these attacks, there has been a wave of public denunciations seeking

to place the social scourge of endemic mental health issues at the forefront of the political agenda as well as public policies, especially after the impact of the pandemic on the lives of this group. Despite the sharp increase in mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour among young people in the years prior to the pandemic, these problems had remained largely invisible, regarded as individual issues.

Participation and Movements Against Disaffection

Contrary to popular belief, resignation, apathy, and indifference are not the predominant attitudes among young people.

When young people are asked about disaffection, issues such as the lack of responsiveness from political systems and the marginalisation of their social demands often feature in their responses. This reply is closely related to the crisis that political parties are experiencing worldwide and its impact on liberal democracies. Therefore, from a critical perspective, the decline in youth militancy cannot be understood as an explicit renunciation of politics. In fact, based on these new preferences, many parties have attempted to renew their organisational structures, incorporating the main demands into their electoral programmes and opening up to other forms of participation. However, new political subjectivities, characterised by a preference for more flexible engagement or unstructured activism, generate tensions in articulating these practices, even within new party movements.

Politics does not end in parliament, nor does participation end on election day with the vote. The Chilean uprising of 2019, triggered by increases in public transport fares and which quickly consolidated into a broader critique of the model that had prevailed in the country for the last three decades, represents a paradigmatic case of how young people have transformed politics. Until then, the stability of Chilean democracy was celebrated in the region for its formal soundness, while its essential dimension was ignored, progressively hollowed out by economic and political elites who, cloistered in the bubble of Santiago's most exclusive neighbourhoods, displayed a profound indifference to growing social inequalities. But in just a few months, the student movement was able not only to destabilise the consensus that underpinned this political order, but also to build an alternative that put its leaders in power.

On the other side of the Andes Mountains, however, another global trend is making headlines: "the conservative shift among young people." The political radicalisation of a significant proportion of young men was a determining factor in the rise of the far right to power in Argentina. This success is part of a populist moment that polarised the political dispute between those who proposed disruptive solutions and those who had not renewed their formulas for dealing with a prolonged economic crisis—marked in the last election year by an annual inflation rate of close to 200%. But although data and studies highlight the increase in support for the radical right among young people, its ideology is not actually shared by the majority of young men [2].

In contrast, in the United States, since Trump's first victory, the progressive shift among young women has been sharp and of greater ideological depth. At first glance, one might think this is due to the mirrored behaviour of their male peers, but conservatism among young men has increased modestly. This ideological shift among women seems to be largely in response to the rise of feminism and the escalation of violence against women, such as the constitutional onslaught ending universal abortion rights [3]. Such a conservative shift, already described as historic, is largely framed within electoral cycles that polarise discontent against the ruling party, rather than as an ideological process linked to the radicalisation proposed by far-right forces. The recent victory of 34-year-old socialist Zohran Mamdani,—the youngest mayor of New York since 1892, who won 62% of the votes of young people under 30—who, through counter-hegemonic ideas, has managed to gain broad support from the youth, exposes the cracks in this cultural process, promoting disenchantment and fuelling enmity among the subordinate social classes.

In protests that have been taking place across countries such as Peru, Paraguay, Nepal, Madagascar, and Morocco since the second half of 2025, young people have emerged as a major force challenging political immobility. These uprisings have not only channelled political demands but also questioned the legitimacy of the elites and their mechanisms of political representation. It was in 2012, during the civic renaissance that we would come to call the Arab Spring, that budding social networks began to be used to coordinate protests. This form of politics marked a turning point in which digital agency became a constitutive dimension of the identities and practices of social movements. From a Eurocentric perspective, that wave of mobilisation was initially met with scepticism and distrust, denying the possibility that something similar could sweep away the foundations of liberal democracies in the global North. While it is true that this new global cycle of protests has already contributed to the fall of several governments, it is still too early to assess its transformative impact. This is especially true because, in several cases, they have ended with the eternal dilemma of "what to do next", once everything returns to normal. What is already clear is that Generation Z is very much on the map and is being acknowledged for its enormous potential for change.

Age is not always the most decisive variable in understanding their situation, life trajectories and the social inequalities they face.

The GenZ 212 movement—named after Morocco's international telephone prefix—was not structured around visible leaders or formal organisations, but, imitating its predecessors, used a gaming platform as a space to coordinate marches and define its demands. This strategy, aimed both at circumventing the control mechanisms of mainstream social media and at fostering alternative forms of community, also finds parallels in other recent experiences, such as that of Nepal, where the use of Discord has enabled young people to articulate collective demands, connect local struggles with global causes, and shift political action from physical space to collaborative digital environments.

Contrary to what is sometimes thought, international issues have always influenced social movements, whether in terms of their strategies, their ideological content, or the intellectual training of their activists. The difference is that, nowadays, the link between the local and the global is constructed on a day-to-day basis. Generation Z has taken the genocide in Gaza as a central cause in the defence of human rights, building new forms of transnational solidarity and coordination with other organised civil society groups. This orientation reflects the interdependence between echelons, the shared vulnerability of territories, and the desire to transform ways of life through a culture of care that is both widespread and cooperative with other populations.

As evidenced by the examples provided, hashtag activism is used to spread awareness about GBVF and call perpetrators to account. In the face of the lack of justice, survivors receive, their frustrations with the system and sustained humiliation by officials, social media has become a space for solidarity, resistance and non-traditional forms of awareness.

Utopian idealism has given way to a more pragmatic approach shaped by the need to build "a liveable future", focusing on the environment, mental health and quality of life.

Towards a New Political Culture: Care and a Liveable Future

As the last cycle of mobilisations faded, the achievements, unfinished business, and defeats that remained etched in memory began to weigh heavily on the shoulders of younger generations, sparking new expectations for change. In the current context of interconnected crises that are multiplying their impact on humanity, the emergence of a new ethos of care is overturning many categories still anchored in the last century. Young people have not turned their backs on politics. They just do not fully identify with the classic and formal ways in which modern social conflict has been organised. In this sense, they are also following in the footsteps of early-21st-century activists, who sought to rethink an alternative to new capitalism and to reverse disenchantment in the face of the crisis of grand narratives.

Over the years, the utopian ideal that "another world is possible" has given way to a more pragmatic approach shaped by the need to build "a liveable future", focusing on the environment, mental health and quality of life. The environmental movement illustrates this political and generational transition [4]. The new wave of youth activism—with Greta Thunberg as its most prominent figure—is characterised by a shift from sustainability and individual practices to a discourse focused on the immediacy of the emergency and the reframing of climate justice. Fridays for Future, for example, has built its moral authority on the legitimacy conferred by its generational status: young people and future generations are those who will suffer the most serious consequences of climate change. Science plays a central role here, both in diagnosing the problems and in proposing solutions, but collective practices are not only based on this technical know-how, but they also integrate the intersectionality of climate impact for populations in the global North and South.

Photo_ **Dying Regime**_ CC BY 2.0

For its part, the new wave of feminist movements has placed care at the heart of renewed demands regarding the welfare model and social policies. Care is also part of a new understanding of militant commitment, establishing itself as the basis for participation, the strengthening of bonds and sisterhood in the face of gender-based violence. In the Global South, feminists have promoted intersectionality as the cornerstone of the movement's global actions, understanding that the struggles for gender equality cannot be divorced from territorial, post-colonial and migrant issues. In 2016, a women's strike called by the "Ni Una Menos"—*Not One Less*—movement was held in Argentina in response to the latest wave of femicides ravaging the country. This action had a major impact and inspired the coordination of the International Women's Strike on March 8 of the following year (2017), which would ultimately become the first global strike against gender violence. This transnational experience contributed to the growing importance of intersectionality within the feminist movement, which acknowledges the diversity of forms of violence and inequalities faced by different groups worldwide, thereby broadening the struggles and demands to build a new generation of public policies.

Ultimately, although some political and media narratives have attempted to create conflict through a kind of "intergenerational populism," pitting young people against older generations—suggesting that their economic difficulties are the result of accumulated wealth by previous generations—this narrative has not resonated with most youth groups. Far from accepting this logic, young people have displayed widespread distrust of such polarisation, choosing instead to defend their rights from a perspective that calls for greater cooperation. Issues such as job insecurity and access to housing are interpreted as the structural result of an economic transformation affecting society as a whole. The fight for affordable housing has led to the creation of new organisational approaches, such as tenants' unions, which place responsibility on market dynamics and the lack of public regulation rather than on their parents' property ownership. In this sense, youth collective action is more oriented toward building alliances with other groups, rethinking intergenerational solidarity, and developing a welfare model that addresses the social problems faced by young people in the 21st century.

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05. THE TENANT GENERATION: INEQUALITY AND CLASS CONFLICT IN RENTIER CAPITALISM

Javier Gil García

Nov, 2025

Housing as the Cornerstone of Rentier Capitalism

Over the last few decades, housing has taken on a central role in the economic architecture of contemporary capitalism. It is not merely a necessity for life or a feature of urban planning; it is the material and financial mechanism that enables us to understand the fundamental transformation of the economic model that emerged after the 1970s crisis and was consolidated under neoliberalism. Housing has transitioned from a mere element of well-being to a preferred asset for global capital, giving rise to new forms of accumulation, inequality, and conflict.

This shift from social right to financial asset is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader historical reconfiguration. Since the end of the 20th century, capitalism has shifted from a productive regime, based on the manufacture of goods and the expansion of industrial jobs, to a rentier regime, whose emerging logic is the appropriation of income derived from asset ownership. Asset appreciation is becoming increasingly influential in the organisation of the economy.

In this new framework, housing enjoys a privileged position. Its apparent stability and ability to generate a steady income have made it the star asset of rentier capitalism. In a context of low economic growth, low interest rates and declining returns in productive markets, real estate investment has established itself as a safe haven for global capital. This explains why, on a global scale, real estate holdings far exceed the combined value of large technology companies, global stock markets and traditional assets such as gold or oil.

But the centrality of housing in the contemporary economy is not limited to its financial dimension. Its role is fundamentally political. The organisation of welfare, social mobility, class structure and the distribution of power are today intertwined with property ownership. Those who own real estate assets share in the benefits of rentier capitalism; those who do not are trapped in a cycle of vulnerability and dependence. Housing thus becomes one of the primary mechanisms perpetuating inequality.

Rentier capitalism does not create new wealth: it redistributes it upwards. It captures income—rents, capital gains, interest—generated by social activity and channels it to owners, funds, and financial institutions. Through renting, households transfer part of their wages to rentiers, fuelling an economy that does not increase production but intensifies extraction.

This article builds on a clear premise [1]: the housing crisis is an outcome of the consolidation of rentier capitalism. It is not simply a matter of apartment shortages, poorly planned urban development, or a failure of public policy; it is the result of an economic system that has prioritised financial profit over the right to housing.

Current tensions cannot be understood independently of this structural realignment.

The aim is to illustrate how housing has become the backbone of contemporary capitalism and why its metamorphosis has reshaped both social organisation and the possibilities of political action. The financialisation of housing, the emergence and collapse of the homeowners' society, and the rise of the tenant generation are all part of the very same historical process: the transition to a rentier-financial model of accumulation, in which power is expressed through property and social conflict is articulated around housing. To this end, the Spanish case is examined, given its particular significance: Spain is a country where homeowners once accounted for over 85% of households, where the 2008 crisis had a particularly severe impact, and where the tenant generation is growing at an accelerated rate, giving rise to a new and remarkably abrupt speculative cycle.

At stake is not just a market price or a specific urban policy, but the kind of society we want to build. To the extent that housing embodies the fundamental vectors of rentier capitalism—debt, rent, speculation, inequality—it also becomes one of the places from which alternatives capable of reorganising social life beyond rentierism can emerge.

The Financialisation of Housing and the Birth of the Homeowner Society

The financialisation of housing is one of the most decisive economic and political developments of recent decades. It represents the shift whereby housing became a central instrument for capital appreciation and the cornerstone of the new neoliberal social pact. To understand how the property-owning society came into being, it is essential to place it in the context of the crisis of the Fordist-Keynesian regime and of the shift from productive to rentier capitalism.

After World War II, advanced economies experienced a period of sustained growth based on industrial production, stable employment and an expansive welfare state. This Fordist-Keynesian regime ensured that wages grew in line with productivity, allowing mass consumption to fuel a virtuous cycle of accumulation. The state redistributed, trade unions negotiated, and wage labour was the foundation of welfare.

But this model began to fracture in the 1970s. The emergence of new industrial competitors, increased global production capacity, and falling profit margins created a situation of chronic stagnation. Surplus capital that could not find profitability in manufacturing began to shift toward finance and, in particular, the property market. Housing proved to be an ideal asset: stable and government-backed.

For housing to become a mass financial asset, a mechanism was needed to bridge the gap between consumer demand and global markets: mortgage credit. Starting in the 1980s, governments liberalised financial markets, deregulated interest rates and facilitated the expansion of credit. This led to an apparent democratisation of access to property, but in reality it operated as a large-scale household-debt operation.

The key innovation was mortgage securitisation. Until this point, banks had granted mortgages and kept them on their balance sheets for decades. With securitisation, mortgages were bundled and transformed into financial products that could be sold in international markets. This operation multiplied the banks' lending capacity, while transferring the risk to investors around the world. The result was a massive influx of credit that fuelled demand for housing, drove up prices and turned the property market into a seemingly endless appreciation machine.

The expansion of mortgages not only transformed housing but also the way welfare was organised. Under the Fordist-Keynesian regime, stability was based on

employment and redistributive social policies. Under neoliberalism, home ownership became the new foundation of welfare. Security no longer came from the state, but from family assets. This model, described as "asset Keynesianism," is sustained by debt, secured by the revaluation of assets.

While wages stagnated, the value of housing grew steadily. Families felt their wealth increasing, which stimulated consumption. Mortgage loans, refinanced over and over again, acted as an extension of wages. The state stepped back, and the financial market moved in. This arrangement was politically powerful because it created the illusion that there was no conflict between the interests of the working class and those of financial capital: both seemed to benefit from rising house prices.

The homeowner society was therefore more than an economic phenomenon: it was a deliberate political project. Neoliberalism needed a new consensus that would replace the legitimacy lost after the erosion of the welfare state. The idea that every family could secure its future through property became the cornerstone of that vision. Politically, it meant neutralising the potential for conflict within the labour movement. Culturally, property was associated with individual accountability, autonomy and full citizenship, and was presented as the prerequisite for accessing middle-class lifestyles: those who owned a home were "stable" and "sensible"; those who did not were left out of the path to prosperity.

But this asset-based model of welfare only worked under one fundamental condition: the widespread belief that house prices would never fall. Real estate bubbles became a governance mechanism, a means of sustaining growth without redistribution and maintaining social cohesion without collective rights. For more than two decades, this balancing act worked: prices rose, credit flowed, banks made extraordinary profits, and families felt wealthier. The state reinforced the cycle through tax breaks, market-friendly zoning policies, and the systematic downsizing of public housing stock.

But that order rested on shaky ground. Debt-based accumulation is inherently unsustainable: it depends on perpetual credit expansion and a constant influx of new buyers. From this perspective, the real estate-financial system looked more like a Ponzi scheme than an efficient market: current returns depended on future expectations and the continuous supply of new borrowers. The homeowner society, touted as a model of stability, carried within itself the seeds of its own demise.

Debt-based accumulation is inherently unsustainable: it depends on perpetual credit expansion and a constant influx of new buyers.

The 2008 Crisis and the New Rentier Cycle

The 2008 financial crisis represents much more than the bursting of a property bubble. It marks the historic breakdown of the system that had sustained homeownership and the turning point that ushered in a new regime of accumulation: a rentier capitalism based no longer on the massive expansion of mortgage credit to households, but on the concentrated ownership of real estate assets by large investment funds and global players.

The 1980-2008 cycle was sustained by the idea that house prices would rise indefinitely. This belief fuelled the expansion of credit and justified mortgage securitisation, inflating real estate bubbles in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain and Ireland. For millions of families, real estate seemed to be the safest asset; for banks and financial institutions, it was the perfect money-making machine.

However, the system's internal rationale was unsustainable. When prices stopped rising and mortgage defaults began, the securitisation chain collapsed. Banks, investment funds and insurance companies were exposed to assets that had suddenly lost their value. What had been presented as sophisticated financial architecture turned out to be a sandcastle built on low-quality debt.

On 15 September 2008, the collapse of Lehman Brothers signalled the end of this fiction. To contain the crash, governments intervened with unprecedented swiftness, mobilising massive amounts of taxpayer money to bail out banks and financial institutions. A decisive aspect of this process is its political nature: governments did not bail out indebted households or evicted families; rather, they bailed out the banking and financial system. Private losses were socialised, whereas profits accumulated in previous years remained in the hands of the entities.

The crisis thus revealed the true nature of rentier capitalism: a system that is structurally dependent on state intervention to sustain asset appreciation. Neoliberal rhetoric about market self-regulation was debunked: when the bubble burst, the state became the ultimate guardian of asset value, ensuring that financial capital survived and regained its dominance.

After the burst, the expansion of mortgage credit to households came to an abrupt end. Mortgage conditions tightened, banks restricted risk, and large segments of the population were shut out of home ownership. What had been a widespread path to prosperity—borrowing to become a homeowner—was no longer widely available. At the same time, the crisis wiped out the wealth of millions of families: mass foreclosures in countries such as the United States and Spain highlighted the fragility of a debt-based model. The dream of universal home ownership was revealed for what it truly was: a pipe dream sustained by a speculative bubble.

From 2008 onwards, the homeowners' society underwent a structural collapse. This was not only because families could no longer afford to buy property, but also because the economic system no longer needed them to sustain its accumulation mechanics. A new cycle began, one that was more concentration- and finance-driven, based on a central player: investment funds. While the 1980–2008 cycle relied on household debt, the post-2008 cycle is based on the massive acquisition of housing by institutional investors. Banks, burdened with devalued real estate assets, sell entire portfolios at discounted prices; opportunistic funds seize the chance to rebuild a new rentier regime.

This shift ushers in a new speculative cycle: homes are no longer purchased to be inhabited but to generate income through rent. Demand no longer comes from households seeking a roof under which to live, but from financial actors seeking profitability. Financialisation no longer operates by putting families into debt, but by turning rent into a systematic mechanism of income extraction.

The consequence is a radical narrowing of the geography of capital: urban markets, already connected to global circuits, become increasingly constrained by international investment flows. Housing behaves like a financial asset whose value depends on capital flows, interest rates, monetary policy, and investor expectations. Companies that manage large rental portfolios standardise contracts and package homes. The property market thus ceases to respond to domestic dynamics, becoming subject to a global logic that is increasingly disconnected from real housing needs.

This new economic and social paradigm is giving rise to the emerging phenomenon that forms the backbone of the rest of this article: the tenant generation.

The Rise of the Tenant Generation

In Spain, this new cycle of rentierism takes on a specific form, marked by its long history in building a society of homeowner. The origins of this model date back to the Franco regime, when the government gradually abandoned rental policies in favour of promoting home ownership as a mechanism for social pacification and integration. The infamous quote by Housing Minister José Luis Arrese—"we don't want a country of proletarians, but of property owners"—sums up this project: defusing social conflict by turning the welfare state into real estate.

The transition to democracy did not reverse this trend; it reinforced it. Policies such as the 1985 Boyer Decree, which eliminated mandatory lease extensions and liberalised rental prices, further consolidated the shift towards home ownership. The property bubble of 1995–2007 was the largest period of expansion for the homeowner society: more than 80% of the population lived in homes they owned. Housing became a source of economic and emotional stability, but on increasingly flimsy financial grounds.

The 2008 crisis shattered this model. The unravelling of the homeowner society took place "from above" and "from below." At the top, the higher-income sectors took advantage of the context to become multiproprietors and, in many cases, landlords; at the bottom, large segments of the population—especially those on lower incomes—found it impossible to access property, which broadened the social basis of renting and gave rise to a new historical phenomenon: the tenant generation.

The crisis thus revealed the true nature of rentier capitalism: a system that is structurally dependent on state intervention to sustain asset appreciation.

The concept of the tenant generation refers to a cohort of young adults whose housing trajectories are structurally predetermined by their exclusion from homeownership. Rather than a transitional stage, renting becomes a prolonged or permanent form of tenure. This situation reflects the profound transformations in housing regimes, driven by the financial and political arrangements that followed the 2008 crisis.

Between 2007 and 2023, the share of households in rented accommodation rose from 13.55% to 18.7%. In the same period, the rental stock grew to around 3.6 million primary dwellings, some 1.3 million more than in 2007: an increase of over 50%. This is not a temporary imbalance but rather a structural reconfiguration.

This process revolves around three core factors: territory, nationality and age. In the Autonomous Community of Madrid and Catalonia, rented households account for 23.7% and 24.9% respectively, reaching 44.1% in the city of Barcelona. By nationality, 71.6% of the non-EU foreign population and 61.3% of the EU population live in rented accommodation, compared to 14% of the Spanish population. By age, 56% of households headed by people aged 16 to 29 live in rented accommodation, compared to 8% of those over 65.

The emergence of the tenant generation did not begin with the financial crisis; it began during the housing bubble, when the progressive rise in housing prices was already making it difficult to become a homeowner. However, after 2008, the process gained momentum. In the 16-29 age group, the share of households in rental accommodation rose from 28.2% in 2006 to 56.6% in 2023. In the 30-44 age group, it grew from 18.1% in 2007 to 34.3% in 2023. Among those aged 45-65, it grew from 8.8% in 2005 to 16.1% in 2023. Only those aged 65 and over remained relatively unaffected: in 2004, 8.1% lived in rented accommodation; in 2023, 7.6%.

Inheritances and intergenerational wealth transfers introduce nuances, but do not reverse this trend. In Madrid, 67% of the tenant generation report not expecting to inherit a home; in Barcelona, that figure rises to 71%. Among those who expect to inherit, in most cases, the inheritance would be shared [2]. Family wealth thus acts more as a mechanism that perpetuates inequality than as a structural remedy.

The emergence of the tenant generation is occurring in a context in which housing is treated as a liquid asset, a trend favoured by changes implemented after the Great Recession of 2008: the emergence of investment funds, the packaging of rental properties, and the standardisation of management. The rentier logic prevails over the social function of housing; what matters is not its use, but the profitability it generates.

For the tenant generation, this translates into a way of life marked by instability, economic stress and structural vulnerability. According to the Bank of Spain, in 2022 approximately 40% of tenant households were in a situation of over-exertion.

For decades, home ownership functioned as a mechanism for integration and social mobility. Today, for the tenant generation, the lack of property ownership has become a structural obstacle to autonomy.

The Family Budget Survey shows that the percentage of households spending more than 30% of their income on rent rose from 33% in 2015 to 38.2% in 2022, and if basic utilities are included, this figure rises from 52.3% to 60.5% [3]. Reports such as Fotocasa-InfoJobs (2024) [4][5] estimate that the share of income spent on rent has risen from 38% in 2019 to 43% in 2023, reaching extreme levels in the Balearic Islands, Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country.

In this scenario, renting is no longer a secondary form of tenure but has become a central means of income extraction. On this basis, tenants are emerging as a new class.

Tenancy as a New Emerging Class?

In the new rentier cycle, rent has become a central form of exploitation: a monthly transfer of wealth from those who produce value—workers—to those who own real estate assets—landlords, investment funds, and property owners. The difference from industrial capitalism is significant: exploitation is no longer concentrated solely in the workplace, but has colonised the sphere of everyday life. People work not only to pay for food, transport or supplies, but also to sustain the profitability of rentier capital.

This form of exploitation is particularly intense because it affects an essential commodity: housing is all but dispensable. As a result, the tenant generation experiences permanent vulnerabilities: instability, forced mobility, inability to save, dependence on landlords, and the constant threat of price increases. This precariousness has psychological, family, work, and demographic effects. The housing crisis permeates their entire lives.

The tenant generation was also socialised with middle-class expectations—university studies, social mobility, and economic stability. However, it finds itself trapped in an economic regime that prevents it from fulfilling those promises. The gap between the promised meritocratic horizon and a life organised around suffocating rent generates frustration and a sense of structural injustice.

For decades, home ownership functioned as a mechanism for integration and social mobility. Today, for the tenant generation, the lack of property ownership has become a structural obstacle to autonomy. The breakdown of the homeowner society also implies the breakdown of the middle-class society as we knew it. A growing part of the population is excluded from both the old Keynesian social protection mechanisms and the private wealth that offered security. The result is a new dual society. On the one hand, there are financial institutions, wealthy elites and the upper-middle classes who accumulate property and benefit from real estate. On the other hand, a structurally excluded majority of tenants who suffer the dark side of the same process, enriching new landlords.

Unlike older generations, the tenant generation does not benefit from rising house prices—it suffers from them. Each increase does not enrich them, but rather impoverishes them, making their lives more expensive and reducing their autonomy. This undermines the fiction that “everyone won” in the real estate appreciation. What was once perceived as a win-win game is now revealed to be a mechanism of permanent transfer: the profits of some are the misery of others.

In this context, tenancy ceases to be a simple descriptive category. It begins to take shape as a new emerging class—a social group defined by its structural position relative to property and rent-extraction mechanisms.

The Political Awakening of the Tenant Generation and the Resurgence of Tenant Unionism

If the homeowners' society organised the class structure of neoliberalism, the rise of tenantism points to a historic transformation of that social architecture. Tenants are not simply a demographic; they are a structural position within the contemporary regime of accumulation, defined by a material relationship to property and rent extraction. Tenants have no assets; they are subject to permanent material insecurity, brought together by shared vulnerabilities and experiences that facilitate collective organisation, and whose objective interests clash head-on with those of rentier capital.

From this perspective, the tenant generation constitutes a political powerhouse of the first order. Its strength lies not only in its size—in many cities it is already the most common form of housing—but also in the centrality of housing within

Photo_ **Anabella Salem**

Photo_ **Anabella Salem**

the contemporary accumulation regime. If housing is the primary vehicle for rent extraction, the subject who bears that extraction is in a strategic position to confront it. Where rent extraction is concentrated, resistance can be concentrated too.

In the last decade, the housing conflict has become a central axis of political dispute. The tenant generation is driving this politicisation by questioning the commodification of housing and challenging the forms of power that govern it: property speculation, the role of the rentier, the financialisation of land and the concentration of assets.

This process of politicisation takes many forms, reflecting a shift from reactive resistance to the proactive construction of alternatives. The tenant generation is not limited to denouncing the effects of the model; it is formulating horizons that involve a profound reorganisation of the economy and social life, displacing

profitability as the organising principle of the right to housing. In recent years, this politicisation has begun to crystallise into concrete initiatives that reveal the extent to which the housing conflict has become a central battleground for social and democratic disputes.

A prime example is the historic referendum in Berlin on 26 September 2021. Citizens voted on whether to expropriate the country's major landlords, those with more than 3,000 properties. The measure could affect some 260,000 homes, making it one of the most ambitious expropriation initiatives in recent history. After years of mobilisation, the campaign "Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen and other prominent real estate companies", promoted by the Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen movement, finally reached the ballot box. Its promoters denounced that Berlin was suffering a profound housing crisis, the result of the transformation of homes into financial assets, and pointed to large real estate corporations as the main culprits. This diagnosis could likely be extended to many other cities worldwide.

What was truly significant was the result: more than 56% of voters supported the expropriation, compared to 39% who opposed it. A clear and resounding difference. The referendum marked a milestone in European urban policy. It showed that housing has become a major axis of contemporary social conflict and that a significant portion of the population is willing to question the foundations of the market in the name of social justice and the right to the city. The fact that the inhabitants of Berlin, the capital of Europe's leading economic power, voted overwhelmingly in favour of a measure that openly contradicts one of the core principles of contemporary neoliberalism is undoubtedly a political development of immense significance.

Barely two months later, in November 2021, the Madrid Tenants' Union achieved an unprecedented victory against the Blackstone hedge fund, the largest owner of rental properties in Spain and the world. It all began in 2019, when the fund initiated a systematic policy of abusive rent increases in its Madrid buildings. When the contracts expired, it notified tenants that, to remain in their homes, they had to accept increases that, in many cases, reached 100% of the previous rent.

Faced with this situation, dozens of families decided to organise with the Tenants' Union and launched the "We're staying" campaign, one of the movement's central tactics. Their reasoning was clear: they would reject both the rent increase and eviction from their homes, remaining in their dwellings and paying the original rental price, even if this meant being "off contract." In doing so, the tenants challenged an unjust law and the landlord's supposed right to speculate on an essential commodity.

When an entire building belongs to a single owner and several of its tenants join the initiative, the property is declared a "Block in Resistance". In such cases, all residents face the same dilemma. They must either accept an unaffordable rent increase or face the threat of eviction. Although the law usually protects the owner, the period between the filing of the lawsuit and any potential eviction allows the union to organise pressure campaigns and engage in collective bargaining.

Throughout 2019, a host of buildings in Madrid began to join in with this tactic, giving rise to the "Madrid vs. Blackstone" campaign, which quickly became a central front against the financialisation of housing in Spain. The campaign deployed a wide range of actions: demonstrations, public complaints, social media campaigns, institutional pressure and lawsuits against the fund. In addition, the union gained the support of local councils, parliamentarians, the Ombudsman and international organisations such as the United Nations. All of this contributed to Blackstone's status as a symbol of global rentier power.

The company responded with threats. It sent letters warning that those linked to the union would not have their contracts renewed and would be evicted. Initially,

it refused to negotiate collectively, accepting only individual agreements. Later, under social pressure, it agreed to negotiate on a building-by-building basis, but without recognising union representation. Finally, when the legal proceedings were well underway and evictions appeared imminent, the hedge fund yielded: it agreed to collective bargaining and renewed all contracts without rent increases. Despite having the law on its side, it understood that carrying out the evictions would have caused enormous political and reputational damage. Madrid had beaten Blackstone.

If financialisation and rent extraction are at the heart of rentier capitalism, the struggle for housing can become a strategic vector for imagining and building a different economic order.

The rise of housing as an asset has led to the emergence of a new generation of tenants' unions. Although these organisations have existed for more than a century, the current context has renewed their role as a central tool in combating property rentierism. The first major wave of tenant unionisation and mass rent strikes occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the decades leading up to the First and Second World Wars. At that time, tenant unions were a clear expression of working-class organisation, playing a decisive role in urban social struggles.

Today, tenant organising is making a strong comeback. Unions are forming in multiple cities in the Global North, organising tenants to resist evictions, reject abusive rent increases and defend the right to housing. They also challenge the media narrative, identify those responsible and promote mobilisation. They directly blame the state for turning housing into a financial asset and argue that if the new cycle of speculation was conceived in parliaments, it can also be reversed there. That is why their action has moved beyond the streets and into the institutions, where they are demanding policies to curb speculation and end the housing crisis.

However, despite growing social support, these unions face institutional obstruction. Rentier governance prevents the approval of reforms that would put an end to the exploitation and precariousness of the tenant generation. In this scenario, it seems unfeasible to resolve the housing crisis from within parliaments. There is not enough social momentum to drive legislative change.

Today's generation of tenants is experiencing a situation similar to that faced by the labour movement during the rise of industrial capitalism. At that time, the working class was stripped of its means of livelihood and turned into a target for exploitation, but through organisation, disobedience and awareness, it managed to transform itself into a political player. The establishment of the labour movement as a counterpower enabled it to conquer rights, improve living conditions and transform the system. Its strength came to represent a real threat to capitalism, raising the prospect of an alternative society.

Today, the struggle for housing can advance only if the tenant generation establishes itself as a political force, organises itself as a power to be reckoned with, and activates mechanisms of class consolidation. Only then will it be possible to challenge capital's dominance over housing and move toward structural transformation.

The decisive question is whether the tenant generation can become a political force capable of challenging the power of rentier capitalism. The structural conditions for this are not only present, but are intensifying year after year. Among them are a common experience of injustice linked to housing access, an objective conflict with the interests of financial and rentier capital, a daily experience of precariousness acting as a driving force for organising, a growing concentration of the population in the rental system, and an established social movement with the capacity for territorial and ideological articulation.

The transformative potential of tenant activism stems from a central fact: housing is now at the heart of the accumulation regime. If financialisation and rent extraction are at the heart of rentier capitalism, the struggle for housing can become a strategic vector for imagining and building a different economic order. By placing the

decommodification of housing at the centre of their demands, the tenant generation challenges not only a specific market, but the foundations of the current economic regime—the idea that private ownership of assets should organise social life.

This challenge holds the potential for tenants to cease being merely a vulnerable group and become the seed of a political movement capable of formulating a historic alternative to rentier capitalism. Housing, which has become the cornerstone of the system of exploitation, is at the same time a strategic bulwark from which to contest the meaning of wealth, well-being and democracy in the 21st century.

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[1] This article is an adapted version of the author's research: Gil, Javier (2025) *De la burbuja inmobiliaria a la generación inquilina: Propiedad, alquiler y rentismo tras la crisis de 2008* [From the housing bubble to the rentier generation: property, renting and rentierism after the 2008 financial crisis]. Papers. Revista de Sociologia, 2025, vol. 110, no 4, p. e3372-e3372. Available here: https://papers.uab.cat/article/download/v110-n4-gil/pdf-es/16764

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Photo_ **Uma Nielsen**

06.

YOUTH IN HANDCUFFS: A TALE OF CRIMINALISATION IN THE SLUMS

Tatiana Delgado

Dec, 2025

I want to strike a blow against the past,
kick the present and embrace the future
("Explosive Poetry", Maximiliano Castillo).

An Adolescence with Rights?

In the neighbourhood I grew up in, Santa Rosa, in the province of Buenos Aires, the streets were unpaved, with a ditch of stagnant, foul-smelling water that flooded every block, since there were no sewers. Nor did it have a reliable electricity grid or safe drinking water. The house, made of exposed brick, had little more than some sheets of metal for a roof. In summer, it would heat up like an oven, whilst every time it rained, water would seep through and drip into pots and buckets, making it impossible to sleep. There was no school, no community health centre, nor any kind of public service to meet the basic needs of these humble, almost destitute families. This remains the reality of the country's slums and shanty towns: a lack of even the most basic rights.

In our country, the National Registry of Popular Neighbourhoods (ReNaBap) currently lists 6,467 neighbourhoods living in precarious conditions. In many of these, a large number of people face challenges in obtaining the Family Housing Certificate. This is a legal instrument that recognises the family living there as the rightful occupants of the property and, consequently, allows them access to basic utilities such as electricity, water and gas—to the extent that these services are being rolled out in their neighbourhood.

The latest management report from the National Ombudsman's Office (2024) revealed, however, that these procedures have been suspended. Furthermore, a simple tour of the country's shantytowns and settlements reveals a lack of public projects to guarantee the aforementioned services.

In this context, children and teenagers grow up facing serious difficulties in developing a lifestyle in line with the rights recognised under the Argentine Constitution, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and various related regulations, which merely enshrine the minimum standard of what a child or adolescent should be able to access simply by virtue of being a person.

According to the latest UNICEF report (2025), around a third of households with children and teenagers in Argentina are unable to cover their day-to-day expenses, resulting in high levels of food insecurity and unmet basic needs.

Likewise, in terms of education, the evidence shows that school dropout rates rise with age. In other words, the highest proportion of adolescents dropping out of

school is those aged 16 and 17. This is due to early entry into the labour market and the need to care for younger siblings, resulting from the precarious economic situation these families face and the household's need for additional income.

In this regard, the social policy on educational achievement, which includes the provision of a grant known as PROGRESAR—created in 2014—, is proving to be a valuable tool in helping these young people cover the costs of their studies. This programme was expanded in 2022 to include 16- and 17-year-olds, responding to a latent demand that had not been addressed by any public policy until then. The data show how a programme of this kind is helping to strengthen the social conditions that enable these young people to complete secondary school.

The programme's greatest challenge was keeping the grant up to date with the rising inflation in the local economy. Consequently, the National Ombudsman's Office for Children and Adolescents repeatedly urged the Executive to establish an automatic adjustment mechanism. Nevertheless, this has not come to pass, and fixed increases have been implemented at intervals determined on a discretionary basis. Furthermore, there have recently been serious difficulties in establishing the latest enrolment periods, which effectively prevent the coverage of this social policy from being expanded.

Regarding the right to health, young people have fared no better. According to the latest annual report from the NOOCA, covering the year 2024, the majority of complaints received related to difficulties in accessing healthcare services and medicines for girls and boys with disabilities, followed by young people with problematic substance use and/or mental health issues.

On these last two issues, the report highlights the lack of clear and sustained intervention strategies backed by sufficient material and human resources: of the 4.1% of the national health budget, only 0.4% is allocated to policies targeting children and adolescents.

In short, there has been a serious deterioration in the living conditions of adolescents from low-income backgrounds. State intervention must not be limited to describing the context; it must also develop its strategies in consultation with this group.

Mapping Crime: Working-Class Neighbourhoods and Safety

The fact that working-class neighbourhoods are the hardest hit by insecurity in the country comes as no surprise. To cite one example, in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, the neighbourhoods that in 2025 accounted for the highest percentage of homicides are those located in the south of the city—along with the Mugica neighbourhood in Retiro—according to the City Government's Crime Map. Similar trends have been recorded year after year, leading to the deployment of massive police operations with a constant presence in every neighbourhood.

Thus, over the past decade, the Southern Belt Operational Command (2011–2017) was in operation, deploying federal security forces—specifically, the National Gendarmerie and the Argentine Naval Prefecture. This intervention involved setting up security posts in different areas of each neighbourhood and, in turn, constant surveillance by officers patrolling each sector in three-man teams. However, over time, it also led to an increase in police violence, reflected in cases of arbitrary arrests, abuse, torture and even instances of extreme violence known as "trigger-happy" incidents. That is to say, homicides carried out by law enforcement officers.

Subsequently, in 2017, Mauricio Macri's Minister of Security, Patricia Bullrich, disbanded this operation and transferred security responsibilities to the Buenos Aires City Police. The situation, however, did not change significantly: the crime map for this jurisdiction continued to show that neighbourhoods with the highest levels of

poverty account for the highest percentage of homicides, whilst, from the accounts of the residents themselves, it is clear that police violence has not decreased either.

So we find ourselves before a paradox: despite being areas with a large number of police officers deployed on the ground, these remain the neighbourhoods that suffer most from insecurity. In this regard, community organisations have denounced that the State not only appears to ignore this situation, but even becomes a participant in a wide variety of crimes that increase levels of everyday violence.

In other words, it is precisely in those places where there is a lack of state control and the stigma of being a "*villa*" [1] that the security forces allow crime to occur. Otherwise, there is no explanation for why so many homicides are committed in areas "liberated" from the police presence, as they are popularly known.

At the same time, the issue of institutional violence—understood in this context as violence perpetrated by police officers against the civilian population—prevails in each of these neighbourhoods, particularly against teenagers and young men. This is evidenced in the latest report by the Public Prosecutor's Office of the City of Buenos Aires (2025), which states that 79.1% of the victims of this type of violence were male, with physical assault being the predominant form (75%). The xenophobia prevalent in police conduct is also evident, given that, of the total of 2,670 incidents of institutional violence, 83.7% involved foreign nationals. Finally, a consistent pattern emerges: both Commune 1—where the Mugica neighbourhood is located—and the neighbourhoods situated to the south of the City of Buenos Aires record the highest number of incidents of police violence.

The neighbourhoods with a higher number of police officers deployed are the ones that suffer most from insecurity.

Thus, neighbourhoods experiencing extreme vulnerability suffer from insecurity in two seemingly opposing ways: firstly, in the form of traditional street crime—robberies, thefts, homicides, etc.—and secondly, through the violent actions of the security forces.

Some accounts from local residents accurately describe what happens beneath the media's silence and the judgemental gaze of the rest of society: "when they have to pretend they're going to *catch drug dealers*, they raid the house of the neighbour next door whom they know is dealing, and obviously they find nothing but they smash everything up"; "they see the queues of destitute people waiting to buy drugs just metres from the security checkpoints and do nothing"; "they wait for them to leave the neighbourhood to arrest the ones who went to buy drugs, and often they don't even register what they seize—they keep it for themselves".

On the flip side, the voices of the boys and girls growing up in this context of extreme violence and marginalisation: "I was 13 and they took me to the checkpoint, burned cigarettes on my back and beat me"; "they locked me in a patrol car for hours, in summer, handcuffed, with the windows closed and the heating turned up to the max"; "they handcuffed me, threw me to the ground, kicked me and sprayed pepper spray in my face."

In line with these testimonies, a video went viral months ago of a *YouTuber* being taught how to shoot by someone, shooting into the air in a passageway in the Mugica neighbourhood. Those images raised a logical question with a controversial answer: where were the police? They weren't there, but from that day on, they were. A permanent police presence was established in that corridor thanks to the necessary social pressure sparked by the video. However, with the police's presence came the mistreatment of local residents.

Lilian Andrade, a resident of the Mugica neighbourhood, recounts: "Although this has been going on for many years, what has changed is the level of cruelty; now there are far more children living on the streets and using drugs, many of whom are not from the neighbourhood—people get off nearby trains or buses and come here to buy drugs."

She adds that "In these areas, it would be *detrimental* if anything were to happen, which is why the police patrol the area to ensure that *nothing happens*. But once the kids venture into other streets, they're *fair game* for the police: that's where the officers meet their daily arrest quotas. Another problem is that checks on cars and motorbikes aren't carried out in accordance with the law: they seize your motorbike on a whim, even if you have all your paperwork in order."

The deliberate omission of police duties is also a form of institutional violence.

We must also highlight what happens to teenage girls and women in these neighbourhoods. In these "liberated" areas, many women aged between 20 and 30, with children, find themselves in a state of extreme vulnerability. When they are unable to pay the rent, it is common for the landlord to offer them payment in dollars in exchange for transporting drugs to other countries. With the promise of "a better life for their children", these women end up imprisoned for drug trafficking and, ironically, are also subject to social judgment: "She didn't think of her children", people often say. In this case, gender acts as an aggravating factor, for when it is men who are imprisoned for drug trafficking, they are once again valued when they return to the community. This is not the case for women.

Another difficulty faced particularly by girls and women in these kinds of neighbourhoods is that, when they are victims of gender-based violence and restraining orders are issued, they do not receive the necessary police intervention to ensure compliance. And there is little point in granting such orders if the perpetrator can flout them with impunity because of the absence of police in these neighbourhoods.

It is also the case that many do not want to go to police stations to file a report because they know they will not be treated properly and that much of their account will be omitted from the police record. This deliberate omission on the part of the police is also a form of institutional violence and results in women ultimately choosing to seek help from other women in the community or from an organisation rather than reporting the incident.

In addition to this "violence by omission", women in these neighbourhoods are often victims of direct violence at the hands of law enforcement. Andrade herself recounts that, when she was around 23 years old, the same police officer would intercept her every night as she arrived home, pin her against the wall and search her. She insisted that they monitor the queues of shoppers and pursue those selling drugs, but one day the officers entered her home, pinned her to the floor, handcuffed her and pointed guns at her, from the early hours until two in the afternoon. The search warrant they showed her did not even list her address.
Young women in these neighbourhoods are also exposed to arbitrary arrests. When these occur, it is common for police officers not to provide any information as to why they are being detained or where they are being taken. With greater access to mobile phones and means of recording, the most serious acts of violence are committed inside police vans, where the girls are most vulnerable to beatings or inappropriate touching. Gender continues to act as an aggravating factor in this regard, just as sexual orientation, skin colour or nationality exacerbate the discrimination already suffered by anyone living in one of these vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Segregation by area is so clear that, even within the same neighbourhood, some bus stops have greater protection than others. This is the case, for example, in the Mugica neighbourhood, where the City's Ministry of Education is located. In that part of the neighbourhood, there are bus stops with security—those used by people going to work at the Ministry—whilst others are completely neglected. The entire police deployment is strategically controlled so that, in areas where drugs are sold or where people who do not live in the neighbourhood are present, robberies or criminal acts are not committed; whilst in the rest of the neighbourhood, there is no active police presence.

Another form of institutional violence against women concerns access to housing. In the Mugica neighbourhood, rental signs openly state "for single people or men", as there is a prejudice that women with children will end up squatting the property. For this reason, there are many cases where, faced with a delay in payment, the landlord calls the police, and they forcibly evict a woman and her family, leaving them on the street without even a court order.

Women pay higher rents due to this gender bias, and in many cases end up indebted and resort to local loan sharks, ultimately becoming victims of threats and abuse at their behest. There have been cases where, when rent payments are late, women have been beaten by these extortionists, left unconscious in their homes with their children left alone.

Thus, in these vulnerable communities, residents often do not know whether it is better to have a permanent police presence to defend them against certain forms of abuse or whether, on the contrary, and in the face of inaction or abuse by the officers themselves, this presence constitutes yet another threat. The fact is that, in a way, the neighbourhood's inhabitants end up being held hostage by the very police forces they, in a sense, require.

Crime Prevention or Persecution of Adolescents?

When examining the profiles of those arrested, it is clear that "criminal policy", specifically aimed at tackling street criminality, primarily affects young men under the age of 34 (according to official statistics from the National System of Statistics on the Enforcement of Sentences, 2024).

A similar pattern is observed among adolescents: the General Database on Children and Adolescents of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (2024) indicates that the majority of those entering the juvenile justice system are boys, a pattern that is consistent across the country.

These figures take on particular significance in a context where legislation to lower the age of criminal responsibility for adolescents has been debated repeatedly. The latest bill, presented by Javier Milei's government, was passed in March and will take effect in September 2026.

This represents a serious setback in the promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents—particularly the latter—and disregards the repeated observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which urged our leaders not to lower the age. Not only because, once the new law comes into force, police action will be directed—under the conditions already mentioned—against 14- and 15-year-old boys and girls to subject them to punitive measures, but also because attempting to tackle youth crime or drug use through security and criminal justice policies is not in line with the root causes of these issues. These originate in the violations of rights experienced by these young people and should be addressed at the administrative level through social services and public policies focused on prevention and support.

This law, No. 27.081, raises many contentious questions at the constitutional and international level; however, the underlying problem remains that criminal law seeks to resolve issues that should be addressed within the sphere of the promotion and protection of rights.

Furthermore, the guiding principles of the juvenile criminal justice system have been revised, moving beyond the paradigm of social integration, resocialisation and the education of adolescents, and now also encompassing the concepts of "overcoming social risk" and the "conflictual behaviour evidenced in the commission of the

Behind the logic of mass incarceration, lies the desire to lock up and remove from "respectable society" anything considered a nuisance.

Photo_ **Uma Nielsen**

offence". In other words, the focus has shifted away from the adolescent as a subject of rights to be protected, towards also emphasising the concept of social order promoted by the current government, based on punitive policies.

As for the reasons for the arrests, the majority are linked to robbery and theft. What must be borne in mind, however, is that these offences often conceal situations involving drug or alcohol use, or debts linked to gambling and betting—the latter being a growing problem. Instead of trying to solve everything through more incarceration, the government should recognise the complexity of these issues and find appropriate, effective solutions. The sad reality is that, behind the logic of mass incarceration, lies the desire to lock up and remove from 'respectable society' anything considered a nuisance.

The related literature has amply demonstrated that increased incarceration and harsher sentences only exacerbate the problems they aim to eradicate, whilst also creating new ones. Imprisonment entails not only the loss of personal liberty but also the severing of family ties and emotional bonds for adolescents. One must also take into account the psychological impact: it triggers problems linked to the development of mental health disorders, which, in turn, can lead to self-harming behaviour or situations that put young people's physical safety at risk.

All of this completely deprives adolescents of any possibility of developing a life project in line with their interests and of reintegrating into society. In this regard, testimonies such as Maximiliano Castillo's are telling. He has been arrested on numerous occasions since the age of 13, and since the age of 16 has been held in detention centres for adolescents—only to be eventually transferred to an adult prison unit run by the Federal Prison Service: "I was just a few months old when my mum was arrested; my great-grandparents kept their distance, so I grew up differently. As a child, I had a passion for art and music. I used to sing. At 13, I started to give up music, and that's when my rebellious phase began; I started stealing and taking drugs."

Maxi was known in his neighbourhood as a *pibe* [2] who "got up to no good"—in other words, who stole. Neighbours said he terrorised the neighbourhood. "I was on the wrong track," he says. He explains that in places like his, kids start fending for themselves from a very young age, because their mums, dads or carers work long hours to earn the few pesos needed to feed them and keep them going. So, he started hanging out on the streets, taking drugs and stealing. He spent six years and two months in detention, first at the Manuel Belgrano Institute and then at the Ezeiza Federal Prison Complex. Whilst housed at the former, he published his first book, which he wrote at the age of 18 and presented at 19, in 2023, about his journey through the youth justice system.

The book, a collection of poems entitled "Little Feelings in a Yellow World", is a living testimony to the effects of directing punitive power against impoverished youth. It is also a testimony to police violence and a juvenile justice system which, far from supporting adolescents, traps them in a cycle of abuse, harassment and neglect. A clear demonstration of the need to design public policies that are genuinely sustainable, backed by resources but also with a humane approach, enabling young people to overcome the circumstances that led them to commit offences.

Maxi reflects all this in his poem "Questions", which he himself describes as "a summary of my life in a poem". It was inspired by an interview he had in one of the detention centres he passed through, where a psychologist, to whom he had confessed that he wrote poems and was going to publish a book, looked at him with disdain and reproached him: "He who grasps at too much loses everything." Two years later, he published the collection of poems.

The piece, which serves as the conclusion to this article, includes a term from prison and street slang that speaks for itself: “tumberos”, as prisoners are called, as prisoners call themselves. Tumberos, as in “grave dwellers”. Because the confinement and marginalisation with which the system excludes them are like being dead before one’s time.

Tatiana Delgado

Tatiana Delgado is an Argentinian lawyer specialising in criminal law. She is currently pursuing a master’s degree in Human Rights at the National University of Lanús and another in Evidence and Criminal Litigation at the University of San Andrés, while working at the Office for Institutional Violence within the Office of the Attorney General. With extensive experience in the Public Prosecutor’s Office, she teaches at the National Committee for the Prevention of Torture and at the University of Buenos Aires. She has worked in various civil society organisations defending the most vulnerable groups, particularly adolescents and young people. She has recently been shortlisted for the post of National Ombudswoman.

Questions

What’s your name?
Maximiliano
How old are you?
Nineteen
What do you do?
I steal
Why?
For my family
Where is your family?
In the graves
What do you mean?
Yes, in the graves
Some dead, and others, in prison
Why?
For my family
And what did your family do?
The same as everyone else
And what would that be, the same as everyone else?
Surviving and trying to be happy
And did you do the same?
I think so
Why?
For my little family
And where is your little family?
I’m creating it

[1] In Argentina, the term “*villa*” most commonly refers to an informal settlement, shantytown, or slum—often historically called a *villa miseria*. These are high-density, unplanned neighborhoods characterized by precarious housing and often lacking basic infrastructure.

[2] A colloquial term used to refer to young lads.

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