

“The BID-CONICET Loan: A Case of Financial Dependency in the Science Policy of the Argentine Military Dictatorship (1976-1983)”

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Introduction

On March 24th, 1976, the Argentine Armed Forces perpetrated a coup d'état against the constitutional government, launching a violent takeover of state institutions at their different levels and the imprisonment, and even *disappearance*, of union leaders, political activists, journalists, and intellectuals who were considered “suspects.”

Up to that moment, scientific research was mostly concentrated in public universities and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET). During the dictatorship there were actions aimed at shrinking universities and selectively expanding other spaces of research within CONICET. In a short time, public universities were occupied by the military and their research activity was decimated. The military government implemented actions tending to shrink university enrollment and reduce teaching staff, accompanied by ideological persecution and mass layoffs. The result was the expulsion of thousands of teachers, a sudden reduction of the student body, and closure of research institutes/centers and undergraduate departments. There were also processes of purification/expulsion of researchers and internal reorganization at CONICET; there was a process of staff renewal after which the leadership of the institution fell in the hands of researchers who accumulated executive positions at different administrative levels.

However, once the entire field was disciplined, the Armed Forces sought to remove every line of research from higher education institutions and to channel it through CONICET. Our empirical and bibliographic survey has allowed us to show that there was a transference of resources from national universities to the Council, causing the shrinking of the former and the expansion of the latter (Bekerman, 2010; Bekerman, 2009). CONICET increased its staff, multiplied the number of institutes, and implemented a decentralization program based on the creation of Regional Centers of Scientific and Technological Research in the interior of the country.

This authoritarian scientific policy was supported, to a large extent, by a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) obtained in 1979. The general goal of this work is, therefore, to analyze the role played by foreign aid to consolidate the institutional expansion of CONICET to the detriment of public universities.

We argue that this policy of decentralization of the national scientific system was based upon a direct intervention on the scientific field implemented with funds received through foreign aid. This analysis inevitably brings us to discuss the endogenous capacity of academic fields from the periphery to determine their own science policy and, for this reason, the question about—financial—dependency will be the thread of this work.

We propose to explain the role of the loan by analyzing, from the perspective of critical political economy, the role of multilateral organizations during the dictatorships in the Southern Cone. According to Vivares (2010), IADB was the third pillar of the Inter-American system along with OAS and CEPAL—these organizations structured economic policy in the region. We will try to show that the Argentine military government, deeply rooted in its authoritarian foundations, promoted a *conservative modernization* of the science policy based on the expansion and decentralization of CONICET, which deepened the hiatus between the Council and public universities. We will argue that this kind of authoritarian developmentalism was possible because of the IADB loan.

Expansion and decentralization of the national science system as policy goal:

A priority of the Argentine military government

The economic model implemented by the Argentine dictatorship was characterized by a strong anti-industrial bias, foreign indebtedness, and liberal economic policies that ended in severe stagnation. Foreign investment was deregulated, giving equal rights to national and transnational capital, including companies with headquarters in Argentina. Unlike countries like Brazil, where it was used to complete the industrialization process, in Argentina the foreign debt was used “*to finance speculation, flight of capital, arms purchase, and consumer demand...*” (Rapoport, 2000: 814). This model was reinforced by a disciplining of the labor force, the dissolution of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), suppression of union activities and of the right to strike, etc. In early 1977 a financial reform was implemented that established the finance sector in a hegemonic position in terms of absorption and allocation of resources. The outcome of this new model was a stagnant economy; the GDP only grew 2.3% between 1975 and 1983 (800).

In spite of stagnation and deindustrialization, the national budget for science and technology witnessed a progressive increase during the dictatorship. In fact, 802 million pesos were destined to this purpose in 1976, rising to 1577 million pesos by 1981, and amounting to 1384 million pesos by 1983, at the end of the term. This increase was not distributed homogeneously, but rather several institutions witnessed a sudden reduction of their budget, as was the case of national universities, while others, such as CONICET, the National Atomic Energy Commission, or the Ministry of Defense, witnessed an increase of their budgets.

National universities endured a policy of “constraint” (Perez Lindo, 1985) that included the implementation of different strategies tending to reduce the system in size, such as budget cuts, mass layoffs, disappearance of teachers and students, imposition of an admission examination and a quota of students per degree courses and university that reduced by 24% the number of available places in relation to 1976 (Pallma, 1977: 68-69), imposition of a student fee,¹ among other measures.

At the same time, CONICET experienced a progressive expansion. In 1976 it had 747 researchers and 1389 in 1982. This amounts to a growth of 85% in that period. In 1976 there were 569 support staff, and 1887 in 1982, that is, a growth of 231%. Internal scholarship holders were 233 in 1976, while their number in 1982 amounted to 1414, a growth of 506%. Finally, there were 13 external scholarship holders in 1976 and 118 in 1982, an 807% increase during that period (CONICET, 1983: 77). The creation of institutes gradually increased during the period, with 55 in 1976 and 147 by 1983, which meant a 167% growth.

This expansion aimed at the decentralization of the national science system, as evidenced by the launch of the Program for the Creation of Regional Centers in 1976, which we will analyze in detail later, and the implementation of other decentralizing measures, such as “up to 30% wage supplement for Priority Development Zones (excluding the Metropolitan Zone), up to 30% wage supplement for priority disciplines, applicable mainly to centers and institutes in the interior of the country that work on technology issues or have ties to the region, up to 42% wage increase for remote, inhospitable, or desert zones, moving expenses for family members, up to 36 months of rent—all for those researchers willing to leave the Metropolitan Region (CONICET, 1978: 21).

As a result of these measures, the percentage of researchers living in the interior went from 17% in 1971 to 29% in 1981 (CONICET, 1980b: 7). Similarly, there was a significant increase of institutes in the interior of the country; there were 15% in 1970, reaching 30% in 1981 (CONICET, 1983: 66).

Origin, evolution, and corollaries of the role of the IADB in the hemispheric context:

In general, the IADB grants loans to national, provincial, and municipal governments; to public and private institutions. From the purpose of this work, we are interested in highlighting specifically that, in the area of education and innovation, the IADB promotes social policies and programs to support regional development in science and technology. This agenda was born with the institution more than 50 years ago. We are going to review—albeit briefly—the historical configuration of the IADB to shed light on the role of foreign aid on the consolidation of the institutional expansion policy of CONICET.

¹ Art. 39° - Law N° 22.207 and Art. 3° - Decree N° 279.

The genesis and consolidation of the IADB took place between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s. The first initiative to create it can be traced to 1958, when the President of Brazil at that time submitted a proposal that was well received in the Southern hemisphere. But the Constitutive Agreement of the IDB was written by the OAS (Organization of American States). It was ratified by 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries plus the United States and was officially founded on December 30th, 1959, with headquarters in Washington D.C.

In the first decade, the president of the Bank was Felipe Herrera (1960-1971). It must be pointed out that during this administration “the IADB acquired the nickname “Integration Bank” and promoted a series of activities to support integration through commerce, investment in infrastructure, and technical assistance” (Bouzas & Knaack, 2009: 18). It is worth noting that the fundamental influence of the United States on this multilateral institution was reinforced in the sixties by the implementation of Alliance for Progress. This country defined the Bank’s mandate as far as funding for development was concerned, particularly in the first years, clearly aiming at the reduction of social tensions and the promotion of political stability during the height of the Cold War, which in the end meant restricting the Bank’s role to financing ‘military assistance’ for the defense of those countries ‘under the threat of subversion’. Thus, “in agreement with the ideal of modern economic development—which in the end meant something different from the imposition of strategies of authoritarian modernization and hegemonic models of development, the IADB was conceived as a mechanism for containing the communist, socialist, and progressive pressures that characterized Latin America in the second postwar (...) and sought, at the same time, to maintain American domination in the region” (Estrada Álvarez, 2009: 12).

Ernesto Vivares (2010) also points out that the IADB supported the processes of hegemonic consolidation of the United States in the region, becoming the third pillar of the Inter-American system, along with the OAS—whose main missions were security matters—and CEPAL—then primarily in charge of giving technical support to national processes of adoption of economic policies. Nonetheless, the influence of the United States on the IADB has not only been mediated by its links to those organizations, but rather by the privileged position of this country inside the institution. Each member of the IADB names a governor whose voting power is proportional to the shares subscribed for the Bank. While borrowing governments own almost 50% of the capital and votes at the Bank, the United States enjoy an important share of control, with a third of the total voting power.

However, those historical circumstances that in some way urged the United States to confront the growing “Latin Americanism,”² were gradually replaced by a new cycle of regional policies that could be characterized as “authoritarian developmentalism.” “The crisis of the Fordist regime of accumulation, the growing strength of the international financial sector, and the violence of emerging dictatorial regimes in the region—and it is impossible to ignore the complicity of the IADB and of other international financial institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) that financed them—took advantage of the exhaustion of the model of industrialization by import substitution and (...) would function as catalysts for the movement toward a historical “revolutionary” process that would reach its climax with the debt crisis of 1982 and the blessing of the neoliberal policy prescriptions condensed in the Washington Consensus of 1989” (Estrada Álvarez, 2009: 13).

In a context characterized by regional economies that suffered the consequences of the exhaustion of industrialization by import substitution and the integration processes that accompanied it, as well as by the advent of cruel military dictatorships in the región, the presidency of the Bank was handed to Antonio Ortiz Mena, elected as president of the IADB from 1971 to 1988, the year when he resigned. During his tenure he “faced deep changes in the international and regional contexts. One of its consequences was the loss of prominence of multilateral financing...” (Bouzas & Knaack, 2009: 20).

In the 1970s, the role of the IADB in funding development was obscured by the massive emergence of private sources of capital, whose role in financing regional development was by then marginal. Nonetheless, the Bank’s operations experienced a favorable shift toward the infrastructure sector. Its actions were restricted to providing long-term funding in that sector to promote less-developed national capital markets, thus seeking to close the gap with industrialized nations: on average, for the whole period (1970-1982), most of the loans were aimed at the energy sector (28%), followed by agriculture (23%); industry and mining, as well as transport and telecommunications, had a similar average, 14% and 15% respectively, followed by health care (8%), education (3%), and urban development (3%) (Marshall, 1989: 86).

The work of the IADB, during the critical situation of the peripheral context of Latin America in the seventies gradually changed, as the institution became the catalyzer of a new economic model in the region because of its connections to authoritarian military governments. For, as Tussie (2000) points out, multilateral development banks are not merely sources of funding for infrastructure projects, but also “designers” of the societies of borrower countries.

² “It arose in the context of the Cuban revolution, processes of industrialization and import substitution, the diffusion of liberation theology, the events of May 1968 in France, the American defeat at the Vietnam War, and the political diffusion of communism in the region” (Estrada Álvarez, 2009: 12).

It was in this context, when the region could count on abundant private financing, that the IADB embarked on loans for infrastructure mega-projects. “In 1972, the Bank gave “the largest loan in the history of the IADB” at the time, when it granted Argentina and Uruguay a total of USD \$80 million to build the Salto Grande hydroelectric dam. This loan was widely surpassed three years later when it funded the creation of the Paraguayan-Brazilian dam Itaipú, the world’s largest hydroelectric plant at the moment. Between 1975 and 1989, the construction of the Yaciretá dam on the border between Paraguay and Argentina also received funding for more than USD \$ 500 million” (Bouzas & Knaack, 2009: 21).

The IADB-CONICET loan: Weights and counterweights of a case of financial dependency

In 1976, CONICET founded the “Program for the Creation of Regional Centers of Scientific and Technological Research,” by Resolution N° 217 of November 25th, 1976, with the purpose of “organizing Regional Centers for promoting, coordinating, and conducting basic and applied research and development of natural resources and regional problems, with the goal of making possible socioeconomic growth in an organized and sustained way.”

In March 1977, the Ministry of Culture and Education presented before an IADB mission the guidelines of the program. In September of that year it submitted the formal application for the loan, that is, the detailed description of the Program, written according to IADB guidelines, with the participation of research project directors, coordinated by a team of experts hired to that effect and a special mission of the Bank that arrived in the country in March 1977. Finally, on May 26th, 1979, the loan contract³ was subscribed between the Finance Minister, Dr. Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, and the IADB President, Dr. Antonio Ortiz Mena.

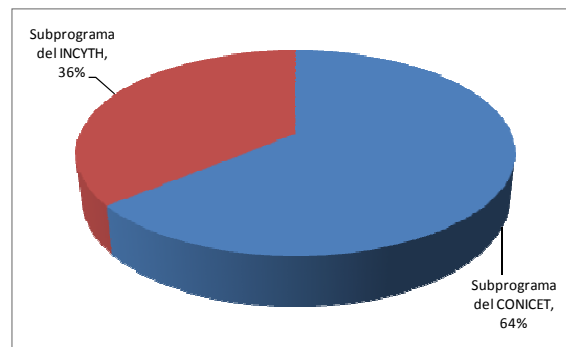
The total amount of the loan was 66 million US dollars for the implementation of a Global Science and Technology Program,⁴ composed of two subprograms. One of them to be implemented by the National Institute of Water Science and Technology (INCYTH), which would receive 36% of the loan. The other, for CONICET, would receive the remaining 64% (that is, 42 million USD) and was aimed at the implementation of the Program for the Creation of Regional Centers. In both cases local matching funds were expected.⁵

³ Loan agreement N°348/OC-AR.

⁴ Approved by Decree N° 1175, March 24th, 1979.

⁵ The total amount of the Program for the Creation of Regional Centers was 127.6 million US dollars, of which 33% came from IADB funds and 67% from the national treasury, as matching contribution.

Figure N° 1: Global program of science and technology financed by the IADB. 1979



Source: CONICET, 1980b: 3

[INCYTH subprogram, 36%; CONICET subprogram, 64%]

The funds received by the CONICET subprogram were aimed at establishing four Regional Centers, which were selected by the State Secretary for Science and Technology (SECyT) following its own criterion on science policy. Institutes in Buenos Aires city and the Pampa Region were excluded from the loan. The Regional Centers included in the Program were:

- CRIBABB-Bahía Blanca Regional Center for Basic and Applied Research, created by an agreement with the National University of the South. Its institutes were: IADO (Argentine Oceanography Institute), created in 1969; PLAPIQUI (Pilot Plant for Chemical Engineering); INIBIBB (Bahía Blanca Institute for Biochemical Research) and INMABB (Bahía Blanca Institute of Mathematics), created in 1973.
- CRICYT-Mendoza Regional Center for Scientific and Technological Research, founded by an agreement between the provincial government and the National University of Cuyo. Its institutes were: IADIZA (Argentine Institute for Research on Arid Regions); IANIGLA (Argentine Institute for Glaciology and Snow Studies), created in 1972; CEIFAR (Interdisciplinary Center on Argentine Borders), created in 1973, and LARLAC (Reproduction and Lactation Laboratory), created in 1976.
- CERIDE-Santa Fe Regional Center of Research and Development, created by an agreement with the National University of the Littoral. INTEC (Institute for Technological Development for the Chemical Industry) opened in 1975.
- CNP-Puerto Madryn Patagonia National Center. This Center already existed, but depended from the National Commission for Geoheliophysical studies. It began to be controlled by CONICET in 1978.

Figure N° 2: Regional Centers of the BID-CONICET Program, 1980



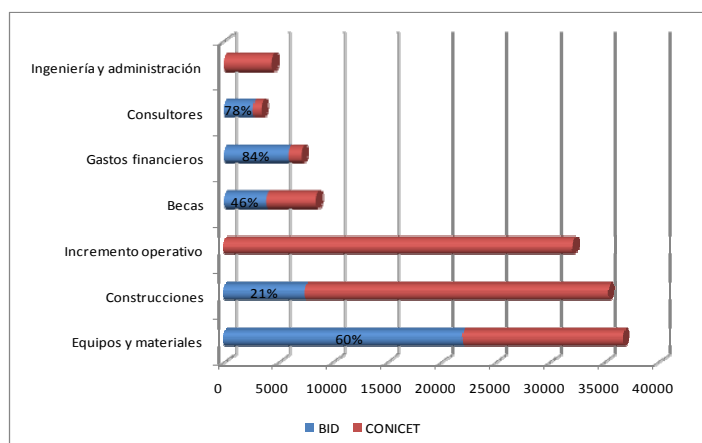
Source: CONICET, 1980b: 15.

One of the prerequisites established in the contract before the initial outlay of funds was the creation of an Implementation Office of the Program, equipped with staff capable of carrying out their assignment. CONICET had already created the Implementation Office (Res. 645/77), whose main task consisted in the preparation of the paperwork required by the IADB for considering the loan application. In order to adapt it to the new functions, the Council established, on Res. 556 of Oct. 5th, 1979, its organizational structure, mission, functions, and basic staff. Another condition for the following outlays was the organization of the Regional Centers that were already in operation, which was sped up after the contract was signed. The processes of hiring research and support staff, awarding internal and external scholarships, and hiring scientific advisors had already started before the contract was signed. The IADB approved the expenditures incurred by CONICET since 1977 as matching funds for its loan.

The distribution of the Program resources was done on the basis of different investment categories, whose result was the following: 28% of the total funds went to the purchase of equipment and materials, 28% went to construction of the regional centers, 25% to operational expansion (which corresponded to cost increases caused by staff hiring and operational costs that appeared as the implementation of the program progressed), 7% went to internal and external scholarships, 6% to financial expenditures that emerged from paying the IADB for the credit commission and interests, 3% went to engineering and administration expenses, and an equal percentage went to national or foreign consultants who were temporarily hired to advice on research issues connected to the program.

The source of money to finance each of these categories can be seen on Figure N° 3, which shows that the funds contributed by the IADB were aimed, primarily, at covering the purchase of equipment and materials, financial expenses, and the costs of hiring consultants. While the money provided by the national treasury essentially went to funding operational growth, program engineering and administration, scholarships, and construction.

Figure N° 3: Distribution of resources according to investment category and source.

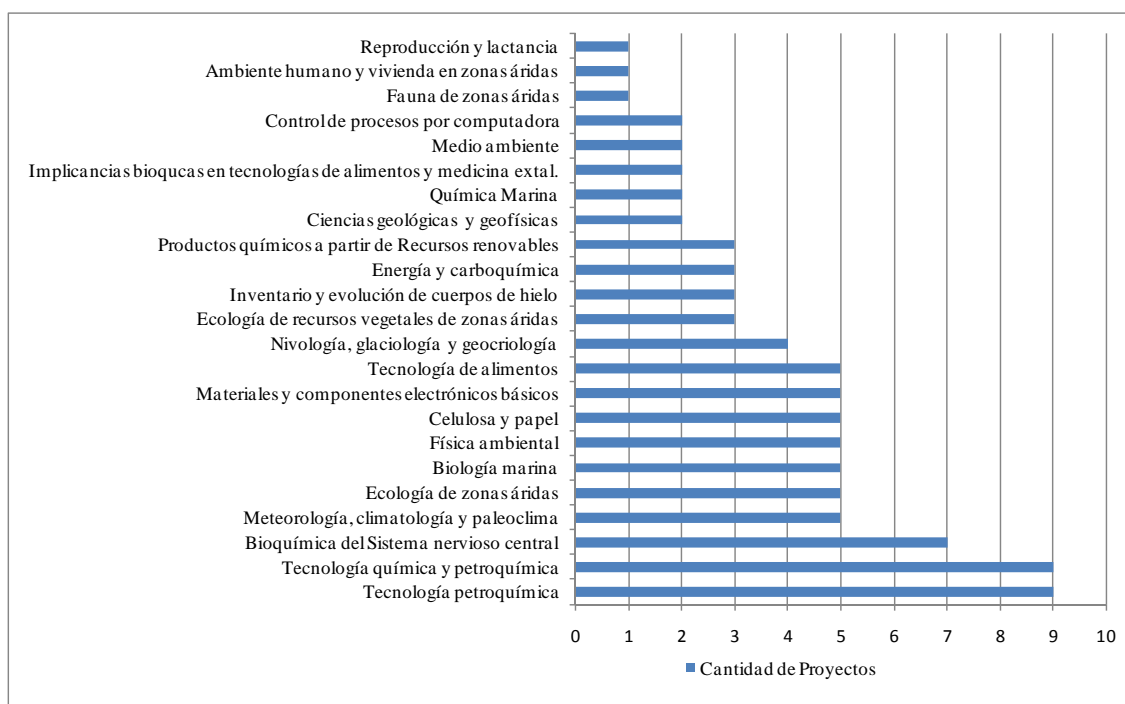


Source: CONICET, 1980b: 47

[from top: Engineering and administration; Consultants; Financial expenses; Scholarships; Operational expansion; Construction; Equipment and materials]

The selection of the streams of research and projects that would be developed in each Regional Center was done on the basis of criteria defined as macroeconomic by CONICET itself (CONICET, 1980b: 21-23). The following figure shows the 24 research streams that were part of the program and the 89 projects in each of them.

Figure N° 4: Streams of research and number of projects in each of them



Source: CONICET, 1980b: 29-33

[from top: Reproduction and lactancy; Human environment and housing in arid regions; Fauna of arid regions; Computerized process control; Environment; Biochemical implications in food technologies; Marine chemistry; Geological and geophysical sciences; Chemical products from natural resources; Energy and carbochemistry; Inventory and evolution of ice bodies; Ecology of plants of arid regions; Snow science, glaciology, and geocryology; Food technology; Electronic materials and basic components; Cellulose and paper; Environmental physics; Marine biology; Ecology of arid regions; Meteorology, climatology, and paleoclimatology; Biochemistry of the central nervous system; Chemical and petrochemical technology; Petrochemical technology]

The main streams of research coincide, at the national level, with parts (companies) connected to what Castellani called the ‘public-private economic complex’, which benefited from the promotion it received and which were concentrated in three areas of activity: industry, construction, and the oil business (Castellani, 2008: 155). Specifically, the most favored activities in the IADB-CONICET Program were paper, chemistry and petrochemistry, construction, the steel industry, and the cement industry.

It must be emphasized that conflicts were not absent from the loan application process. Among them it is relevant to highlight those related to the political context at that moment. In relation to this, the Secretary of Science and Technology, who was also the Auditor of CONICET, argued in a speech that in order to sign the loan agreement “...it was necessary to overcome problems of different types—technical, management related, language barriers between scientists and economists, as well as political—because the subversion’s international campaign against Argentina tried to interfere with the negotiation, arguing that Argentina did not respect the academic freedom and human rights of scientists and that the project’s level was not

adequate...” (CONICET, 1980c: 13). The secretary refers to reports on an “anti-Argentina campaign” during 1978 against the military government. In this regard, Franco argues that “beginning on 1978 and in the following years, the center of military concern began to be the international pressure for human rights violations inside the Organization of American State (OAS) and the United Nations, and the charges by Argentine and international human rights organizations (Franco, 2010: 6). Likewise, he attributes those pressures to the relentless denunciation by different groups of Argentine exiles in different countries and the offensive by the United States government for this issue during the Carter administration. The charge of an “anti-Argentina campaign” had already started in 1976, as soon as the first reports by exiles were known abroad, both in Europe and Latin America. From then on, the government began to claim that there was a campaign against the country orchestrated abroad.

Final Remarks

In this work we try to show that, during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, science and technology policy and higher education policy were closely linked, developing as two faces of a same process. The growth and expansion experienced by CONICET took place at the same time as national universities shrank. In this way, research was concentrated in CONICET, but was divested of the knowledge stored at universities, while teaching and research at the universities was decimated and subordinated to processes of reorientation, discipline, and exodus of professors. In consequence, a profound rupture took place in the scientific-academic field, rooted in the weakening and separation of the bonds between both institutions.

This policy was immersed in a regional context characterized by the presence of multilateral financial institutions, such as the IADB. As we said, this Bank awarded substantial loans to the Argentine government, aimed primarily at infrastructure, and the IADB-CONICET loan is precisely part of this context. However, in the context of crisis and stagnation of the national economy that the country was going through, it would not have been possible to implement the Program for the Creation of Regional Centers of Scientific and Technological research without that loan.

In this way, the restructuring of the science system was possible because of the relationship of *financial dependency* between the Argentine government and the Bank. Notwithstanding the moment of decline and loss of relevance the IADB was going through and the fact that CONICET assisted in both the loan application process and the preparation of the Program, there was some imposition of the strategic guidelines and priority areas. Even though the national government had to answer these constraints in order to receive the loan and launch the program, those in charge of implementing it had spaces of autonomy regarding the selection of

streams of research, specific projects, staff hiring, allocation of resources, etc. Such decisions were taken by the Implementation Office, created and staffed by members of CONICET.

The IADB granted the loan, one among many, to the Argentine government in order to support a modernization and innovation program in the field of science. But, by doing this, it legitimated and strengthened the deeply authoritarian and conservative features that characterized military policy on scientific research. The national government and the auditor of CONICET implemented the expansion of the Council as part of a global policy on science and technology, but the other side of this process was the dismantling of public universities, slowing the expansion that had been taking place since the 1950s. This was accompanied by a transference of resources from universities to CONICET, steep budget cuts to the former, and sustained increase of funds for the latter. We might think that these two processes—constraints to research within the university system and strengthening/decentralization of CONICET—were both part of a same goal of dismantling political activity in the Buenos Aires region (the core of which took place par excellence at national universities).

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