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*El milenio de los pueblos:
The Legacy of Juan and
Eva Perón*

Juan E. Corradi

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EL MILENIO DE LOS PUEBLOS: THE LEGACY OF JUAN AND EVA PERÓN*

By Juan E. Corradi

If millenarianism is the announcement of the end of an era, the prediction of catastrophe, the promise of a reckoning, and the arrival of redemption—all these articulated by prophetic leaders that appear in times of trial and exception—then much in the legacy of Peronism is indeed millenarian.¹

The physical presence of Juan and Eva Perón dominated Argentine politics and revolutionized Argentine society from 1943 through the 1950s. Their physical absence (she was dead in 1952 and he went into eighteen years of exile in 1955) continued to dominate Argentine politics through the mid 1970s. For three decades, Perón was the actual arbiter—the *magister ludi*—of any and all political arrangements. For more than four decades, the society built by Peronism, although non-viable, refused to die. What the great Argentine historian Tulio Halperin Donghi called “the long agony” of Peronist Argentina² lasted until the hyperinflation of 1989. Paradoxically, the electoral return of Peronism to power that year, gave that society its final *coup de grâce*.

True, one will look in vain for any signs of fanaticism or chiliastic frenzy in a military leader whose main concern was order and

obedience. Perón’s ideas were in fact, as another great Argentine historian—José Luis Romero—put it, “an ideology of high command (*estado mayor*).” Perón did not see himself as a Messiah, but rather as a clever politician who always managed to place himself *above* politics. He made his own Napoleon Bonaparte’s dictum, “Principles are fine; they don’t commit you to anything.”

Perón presided over the second largest wave of democratization in modern Argentina. He did not, however, make democracy the source of his legitimization as a ruler. His legitimacy was based on his conviction—shared by his numerous followers—that he possessed an innate and ineffable, hence irreplaceable, ability to interpret and lead what he and Eva called “the great mass of the people.” Democracy was only one means, among others, to attain power, and more important, the *ex post facto* confirmation of his charismatic superiority.³ This conception of the source and justification of power had roots in the caudillos and strongmen of the nineteenth century, and perhaps even more in remote Spanish origins as well. Its immediate antecedent was the equally char-

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ismatic leadership of the first caudillo of democratization, Hipólito Yrigoyen, who built a modern and unbeatable political machine, all while imbued with an extra-democratic sense of redemptive mission—a self-righteousness that led that caudillo, in his youth, to promote numerous coups, revolutions, and conspiracies when they suited his goals.

We touch here upon an important paradox of Argentina and Latin American politics. Democracy may be sponsored, promoted, expanded—all *within* a non-democratic culture. The people may be given a voice, even a strong voice, together with civil, political, and economic rights, provided that voice is cleverly orchestrated as a chorus. This worrisome possibility was not anticipated by the theorists and critics of democracy in the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville's foreboding about "the tyranny of the majority" still envisioned government by the people and for the people, inspired by the experience of the early American republic. The darker insight that modern democracy may become a technique of mass manipulation (in Jorge Luis Borges' words, "an abuse of statistics") was only available at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the lucid mind of the German sociologist Max Weber, who spoke clearly about the dangers of a "plebiscitarian Führer democracy." In the twentieth century, the tyranny of the majority would become the mobilization of the majority in the service of tyranny. Plebiscitarian leader democracies are not based on parties, but on movements. Because in those systems democracy is not the source or principle of legitimization, there is no capacity to confer respect to one's opponents.

A democracy subordinated to charisma is subject to the instability of charisma as a

form of authority. There are several reasons for the instability of charismatic authority, especially when compared to other (traditional or legal) forms of authority. First, charisma cannot be institutionalized very well, that is, it cannot be replicated, bestowed, or inherited with any degree of confidence or reliability. Second, charisma de-legitimizes other forms of authority. It appears as a break with tradition, since it condemns old practices to the dustbin of history, and it corrodes legal-rational authority of the modern democratic type by refusing to see in it anything more than a tool of seduction and an instrument of confirmation of its own superiority. Third, charismatic movements are all-inclusive, and as a result leave no legitimate role for opponents. Fourth and finally, charismatic leaders treat conflict as a danger, and confuse conflict with violence. Hence, charismatic leaders easily enter a cycle of provocation and retribution. When conflict is perceived as a threat, violence ensues. It confirms an old sociological theorem: "When men define things as real, they become real in their consequences." Instead of embracing and institutionalizing conflict, charismatic regimes tend to deny it, and often turn it into a clandestine form of violence. Conflict becomes a dirty secret and a dirty war between shadowy factions.⁴

Of course, Perón did not invent charismatic domination. Neither was Peronism the first political movement to introduce it to Argentina. Perón rather continued and magnified a long series of charismatic movements, and it left as its sequel, a host of ever wilder charismatic experiments, the paroxysm of which was reached in the '70s and '80s, with terrorism, the dirty war, and state terror. The specificity of Peronism lies in

pant, and the party of democratic principle was democratically, but unceremoniously, booted out in favor of what seemed, initially, a re-edition of old Peronist populism.

What was the aftermath of the fitful republic inherited from Peronism? Hyperinflation was more than Alfonsín's nemesis, it was also the death pang of the entire old order. What followed is well known. Much to everyone's surprise, the Peronist President, Carlos Saúl Menem, jettisoned the old trappings of demagogic, state-directed economics in favor of monetary stability, wholesale privatization, lower tariffs, and integration into the global economy. He tinkered with various economic teams until he found Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo, the man for the job.

The story of Argentina's economic revival, the reelection of her President, and the country's more recent difficulties are fresh in our memory. So are some of the human costs, which Argentina shares with other Latin American countries: unemployment, disparities in income and chances, and poverty.⁷

The picturesque style of the administration, and the degraded quality of Argentine democracy under today's Peronists also received coverage in the world press. Less well understood however are the social, psychological, and political dynamics that undergird Argentina's transformation in this post-millennial millennium.

The first point is simple, and by no means limited to Argentina. Responsible economic reforms deliver political rewards. From this perspective, capitalism and democracy seem to march hand in hand. The killing of the dragon of inflation, the combination of stability with growth, gave Menem the opportunity to be reelected for a shorter second

presidential term, under a constitution that was amended to partially suit his whim. The point is true but superficial. In the light of what I have explained about Peronism before, the underlying reality is not so simple.

Since the restoration of democracy in the '80s, economic reforms have been forced on Argentina by the severity of crises—above all by the generally recognized need to put an end to runaway inflation. But whereas the consolidation of democracy implied the increased participation of citizens, the economic emergencies required the concentration of power so that authorities could act swiftly. Under such circumstances, any freely elected administration must navigate in a narrow channel flanked by democratic commitment on one side and authoritarian temptation on the other. When the administration is Peronist, the old charismatic reflexes of Caesarism come into play again.

When Menem was first elected, the democratic process put once more at the center of public life a peculiar political culture that is, in my opinion, ill suited—as I proposed in the first part of this lecture—to respect the self-limitations of a pluralist system. Menem's exercise of power, while sometimes justified by economic emergencies, has not been exemplary in terms of republican virtue. It is however in line with the Peronist tradition of "leadership"—personal, charismatic, and hierarchical. And that tradition is a version of a wider culture of leadership in Latin America. Such *Führerprinzip* permeates Peronist behavior at all levels of politics—from labor unions, local and provincial government, and congress, all the way to the presidency. There has been in fact a trade off between the liberal-democratic and the Peronist components of the political culture.

correct terms, a war of all interest-groups against each other. In such a Hobbesian realm, irrationality, charismatic pretensions, and new millenarian fantasies were rampant. The whole was a cacophony of voices that often became hallucinatory. And, as in all Hobbesian situations, the Argentinean combination of stuck society and wild politics gave birth in the end to a strong demand for order and quiet.

In this perspective, from 1946 through 1989, Argentina can be said to have suffered from a surfeit of millenarian adventures. Politics became a pseudo-sacred domain of violence, passion, redemption. Only a Leviathan rising from the sea could shake this frenzied society into submission, and thus satiate its ever less secret desire for peace and normality, even for humdrum mediocrity.

The Argentine experience in that long period belies the conventional interpretations of charisma and millenarianism that one finds in the social sciences. The available scholarship on millenarianism and charisma suffers, I find, from a romantic bias. No one is perhaps more responsible for this than Max Weber himself, for whom charismatic leadership held the promise of delivery from the tedium of bureaucracy, from social routines that had become for him all too predictable. Weber never considered the reverse situation, in which too many charismatic experiences leave people so alienated and exhausted that even the banality of ordinary life appears as a panacea. Such people want delivery from the exceptional, the magical, the enchanted, the sublime, and the uncanny. They want to be saved from salvation, and from saviors of any stripe.

The profound quest for normalcy made Argentines bear the burden of a military re-

gime (the one installed in 1976) in the hope that it would prove to be the long awaited Leviathan. But, as we know, and as I have analyzed elsewhere, they got Behemoth instead. They got one more dose of perverse chaos—not a strong and stern state but a form of state terror that ran out of control and was more frequently than not used to mask the most banal and petty, i.e., common, criminal behavior. The Leviathan would arrive ten years later, in the wave of hyperinflation. Only then, the old Argentina finally gave up. The strange coincidence of the Argentine hyperinflation with the end of the Cold War made 1989 the watershed year of the twentieth century, also for this remote country.

With the end of the Cold War, political democracy and free market economics became the only game in town. In South America, Argentina pioneered the exit from authoritarianism to free elections in 1983. A two-party system emerged, under which the Radicals held power for six years, followed by the Peronists in 1989. The historic task of restoring long tattered democratic principles fell on the Radicals. On the Peronists fell the equally daunting challenge of economic renewal. That the civic-minded Radicals would embody democratic aspirations after the disasters of the '70s and early '80s was not surprising. Nor was it a surprise that, once in power, they suffered the sedition of displaced authoritarians. They compromised, the fledgling democracy survived. But the Radicals—like so many before them—also inherited the unwieldy society and economy bequeathed by Peronism. Like many before them, they could neither dismantle it nor manage it. As in a badly restored Victorian house, the makeshifts collapsed. The economy unraveled, hyperinflation ran ram-

pant, and the party of democratic principle was democratically, but unceremoniously, booted out in favor of what seemed, initially, a re-edition of old Peronist populism.

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When it was the opposition party, Peronism learned to adapt to the rules of the pluralistic game. Since Peronism returned to power and brought back a measure of economic confidence, democracy has lost much of the moral high ground and republican pride that millions of Argentines occupied and displayed a decade ago.

While the Peronists have had no scruples to dismantle the society once built by Juan and Eva Perón, they have not shed the political habits introduced by Perón and masterfully exposed in the general's book *Conducción política*.⁸ When we keep in mind this distinction, then the expression "free market Peronism" is no longer an oxymoron.

You may recall how, a few months into his first administration, Menem forced a dramatic rupture with the old Argentine conventional wisdom in public policy—the welfare programs, the state intervention, and the tariff protections that Juan Perón once sponsored. After decades of isolation, Argentina joined the free world—not as a bastion of dour anti-communism as it once pretended to be, but as an open, if disarticulated, society.

Menem's economic about-face then, and his union about-face now, is unorthodox for a Peronist, but it is not unprecedented in our days. We could name similar about-faces throughout the world, from Madrid to Paris to Washington, and we could even name some significant ones in the political biography of Perón as well. With the end of the Cold War and unfettered globalization, the "spirit of the times" is stronger than ideology in central and peripheral countries alike. No political leader today writes her or his own economic script. The forces of free trade, the Internet, the almost simultaneous movement of ideas, funds, and information,

have made politicians' promises seem empty or irrelevant. The nature, source, and direction of leadership are therefore in crisis the world over. Substance is replaced by style, and polls and market studies "show the way" to those who should have the vision.

But the policy innovations introduced by Menem had only minor effects on the political behavior of hard-core supporters. Over the past ten years Peronist voters have remained remarkably steady—36 to 38% of the total. Until recently, they were loyal to Menem. Changes in support came from non-Peronist voters, who alternately lend or withdraw their allegiance to the governing Peronist party. The lesson is clear: despite novel policies and alliances, many Peronists continue to consider someone like President Menem one of their own. This means that the political identity of Peronism is not based on programs and measures, or on conventional pork, but on the intangibles of collective memory, leadership style, and popular culture. The marriage of deep loyalty and pragmatism, of charisma and expediency, was a feature of the Peronist movement from the beginning. Perón acknowledged it, extolled it, and wrote about it at some length. The legacy lives on. The question that remains is: can this legacy provide something beyond political support to this or that administration—something like an adequate response to the social challenges of globalization, a new path to development after structural adjustments?

The reforms implemented in Argentina over the past seven years have three distinct dimensions—macro-economic success, social adjustment pain, and fiscal anxiety. First, there was the glitter of stability, low inflation, and high growth. Between 1991 and

1994 the country attained stunning cumulative rates of growth. Yet parallel to this success story was another sad life of hardship and pain, which is most visible in the interior. The local adjustments to the touted structural policies opened vistas of unemployment, insolvency, destitution, and sharp regional inequality. Many an old structure that depended for survival on a closed economy, high inflation, state subsidies, and avoidance of taxation collapsed, leaving quite a few victims in the rubble and strewing the provincial landscape with ghost towns. And then there is a third, more abstract life in Argentina: the world of national accounts—a world in which financial commitments grow but revenues fail to keep up. This abstract world of fiscal issues can also be one of clenched teeth and white knuckles. After the first wave of privatizations and stock market boom, things become more difficult. To balance the budget, the central government would have to become leaner and say no to such constituencies as pensioners, provincial governments, and state employees, including the pared-down military. Macro-economic success, adjustment pain, and fiscal anxiety are then the three contradictory experiences of the recent reforms. The room left for experiment is small, and Argentines face the following questions: Can Argentina move forward past this contradictory situation? If not, will the ghosts of the past stalk the country once again? The elements of an answer will have to be provided, of course, by Argentines themselves, but we can nonetheless gather some of them here.

The initial Argentine “miracle” was an amalgam of good performance statistics, with only an occasional glance at the collat-

eral damage. The miracle, if there was one, was in the unique combination of modern economic policies with populist politics, efficiency with *caudillismo*. Like other Latin American leaders, at the end of his first term, Menem was not sure whether his reforms were irreversible or not. Between that uncertainty and great ambition he, like others in similar predicaments, wanted reelection very badly. That required a change in the Constitution, which was achieved in a rather tortuous series of deals with the opposition. That caused more confusion in an already confused society. Does this type of leadership consolidate democracy, or has democracy been customized for a leader? The ambiguity, which is familiar in Peronist Argentina, goes nevertheless well beyond its borders. It goes to the core of reforms in most of Latin America. Are recent macro-structural reforms primarily an insurance policy for politicians, or do they signal a serious commitment to a new social and economic order?

Reforms are sometimes invoked as a pretext for curtailing rather than strengthening democracy. Two overlapping imperatives hang over Argentina, and over many other countries of the region as well. The first is to make sure that reforms are sufficiently immune from the pressures of a premature distribution of dividends, and that democratic alternation of governments does not set the reform clock back. The second is to trust the political craftsmanship to responsible statesmen, and not leave it to the whimsical ways of caudillos within strange political structures—half populist movements, half modern parties.

Thirteen years of democracy in Argentina have not yet produced a mature political system. The three presidential elections that have taken place during this period did put

in power the two major parties. This may have impressed outsiders as the country's final arrival at modern, bipartisan democracy. But such is not the case. On every occasion the election was treated more as the triumph of a leader and a movement than as the victory of a party and a program. On every occasion the victor, once in office, entertained fantasies of remaining there indefinitely, and succumbed to the temptation to occupy the entire political space.

The most important political fact in Argentina is that Peronism has consistently won in national elections—in 1987, 1989, 1991, 1994, and 1995. Today, Peronism is the dominant force in a competitive system of several parties. Nevertheless, since in the past Peronism was something more—a hegemonic political movement—it still tends to behave in government as if it were an entire political system unto itself. As long as the other parties or coalitions are weak and fractious, this belief is reinforced. But this also means that political conflict, far from ceasing, migrates to explode within Peronism itself. The struggles over the control of the Peronist movement and party apparatus become crucial for the political future of the country. This situation raises deep concern, because of Peronism's poor record in peacefully solving its internal disputes.

As for the opposition parties and coalitions, Radicales, Frontists, and anti-Menem Peronists have challenged the present government policies. None of them have produced credible alternatives. Yet in the stridency of opposition, all have, at one point or another, revived the themes of old-time Peronism.

Today, the Peronist administration leads a nation that is growing weary of the human

costs of adjustment. It is a government riddled with corruption, and not especially motivated to clean house. And it represents a party in turmoil over the president's succession, and prone to reactivate its ever latent irrationality.

Juan and Eva Perón once built a system of social support. Peronism has destroyed it. The movement that took the Peróns to the heights of power and filled the squares and the streets of Buenos Aires with frenzied masses of hopeful nurses, mechanics, and meat workers⁹ is but a distant echo in an era of fragmentation and mediated communication. Peronism survives as a flexible myth¹⁰ and a somewhat confused popular culture, in which the smile of Juan Perón has been cosmeticized as the grin—also heavily made up—of Menem, and the face of Eva is now Madonna's.

The legacy of Juan and Eva Perón persists today not in society, since the institutional edifice they once erected has fallen down, but in the bad habits of politics, even under a democratic regime. Another, more positive part of their legacy, awaits vindication. This is the legacy of social justice. Peronism could revive itself and mature into a modern party if it sponsored not just a modern economy, but also a just society—the only condition that would make economic development sustainable. A new commitment to social inclusion would mark the shedding of the last remnants of the old millenarianism and the assumption of the responsibilities of the real millennium that is upon us.



ENDNOTES

¹ See the classic by Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961; also James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977; and the more analytic text by Enrica Tedeschi, *Per una sociologia del millennio*, Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1989.

² Tulio Haperin Donghi, *La larga agonía de la Argentina Peronista*, Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994.

³ The classic position of Max Weber on charisma as a type of authority appears in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1947, pp. 324–36.

⁴ I analyzed this phenomenon in “The Mode of Destruction: Terror in Argentina,” *Telos*, No 54, Winter 1982.

⁵ See Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1965.

⁶ See Juan E. Corradi, *The Fitful Republic. Economy, Society and Politics in Argentina*, Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985.

⁷ I have analyzed these developments in “Menem’s Argentina, Act II,” *Current History*, Vol. 94, No. 589, February 1995. Some of the remarks in this section are borrowed from that text.

⁸ Juan Domingo Perón, *Conducción política*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Megafon, 1982.

⁹ See Juan Carlos Torre, ed., *El 17 de octubre de 1945*, Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1995.

¹⁰ For the remarkable survival of the myth and the renewed interest in its characters, see Tomás Eloy Martínez, *Santa Evita; novela*, Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1996, and also his *Las memorias del General*, Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1996. For a recent biography of Eva, see Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, *Eva Perón, la biografía*, Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1995.

Juan E. Corradi was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1943. He received his B.A. (1965), M.A. (1967) and Ph.D. (1974) in Sociology, all at Brandeis University in New York. He began teaching Sociology at New York University in 1971, and after visiting teaching assignments at Memorial University in Canada (1976, 1979 and 1984), the Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (1978–79, 1993), the University of California at Santa Cruz (1982), and the Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad in Argentina (1985), he returned to New York University where he currently teaches Sociology and is Acting Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

From 1974–1977 he directed the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University, where, from 1981–1988, he was Coordinator of Mini-Seminars in European Sociology. Currently he is on the Board of Directors of the Rainforest Alliance, is Vice-President of the South/North Development Initiative, and is an advisor to the United Nations Development Program.

He is the author of numerous articles, contributed chapters, book reviews and conferences. His books include *Ideology and Social Change in Latin America* (with June Nash and Hobart Spalding, Jr.). New York and London: Gordon Breach Science Publishers, 1977; *The Fitful Republic: Economy, Society, and Politics in Argentina*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985; *La Repubblica In Bilico*. Milano: UNICOLPI, 1988; *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America* (co-edited with P.W. Fagan and M.A. Garretton). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. Currently he is working on a book titled *Imaginary Mimicries: Buenos Aires and Paris in the Belle Epoque*.

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