

**The Politics of Emotion: The Case Study of *Peronismo*'s Enduring Legacy**

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### *Abstract*

This study analyzes the role that emotions played in initiating and continuing the politics of Juan Domingo Perón, an army General and three-time president of Argentina. The study utilizes framework principles of Friedrich Nietzsche's *ressentiment* and Max Weber's charismatic leadership to assert that emotions form political realities through mass recognition and promised opportunity. After presenting this framework, I discuss Perón's rise to power through his ability to address working class anxiety by promoting nationalized protections for workers. This created an enduring loyalty between Perón and his followers that became entrenched in mass consciousness by creating a more expansive definition of *Argentinidad*. The last part of this study analyzes the legacies of Perón, arguing that in times of crisis, Argentina returns to *Peronismo* due to its nostalgic call to the past.

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## I. Introduction

In studying Argentina, there are few topics as engrossing and intoxicating as the government and legacy of the Juan Domingo Perón. Surrounded in myth and melodrama, Perón controlled Argentina for two separate periods, from 1946-1952 and then again from 1973-1974, but his *Justicialista* party remains a dominant influencer in the country's government, as demonstrated by the Menem administration of the late 1980's and the Kirchner couple's policies and programs of the early 2000s. A notable part of Perón's political ethos centered on mobilizing mass working class support which allowed him to democratically win the presidency and begin his ascension to the status of myth. This feat, though impressive, is riddled with contradictions that can largely be explained through the lens of emotional connection between a leader and their followers. This frame can explain how a political moment gets extended into a decades-long phenomenon.

Perón himself represented ideological inconsistency and instability, a man democratically elected yet favoring authoritarian ant-intellectualism and censorship while openly supporting Axis-power style fascism and authoritarian tendencies. Perón stood for social hierarchy yet campaigned on the principles of social justice, hence the name for his *Justicialista* party. This raises the question as to how a man who embodied military rank and adamantly opposed liberal democracy's promise of equal rights could garner the support of the downtrodden and misrepresented? And, how could his party founded in the 1940s continue to construct Argentina's democratic experience, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The answer lies in how Juan Perón successfully captured and addressed the working class's firsthand experience with generational inequality to gain their electoral support. Through the means of emotional recognition, Perón and his wife Eva successfully served the interests of the urban working class by promising economic relief and job protections in industrial settings.

In this study, I assert that *Peronismo* gained support through its initial addressing of working class anxieties through the promotion of economic nationalism and political recognition through greater support for workers. After his initial election in 1946, Perón successfully constructed a form of inclusive national culture through the promotion of consumerist possibilities, development of melodramatic popular culture, and worker identification with Perón's second wife Eva. These three tools, I argue, promoted a sense of loyalty and emotional connection between Perón and the urban and rural lower classes. The final piece of my study discusses how this form of emotional connection served a nostalgic function within Argentina, providing a resonant idea that voters would turn to in times of economic distress and political chaos. Post-military dictatorship of 1976 and after the 2001 economic crisis, *Peronismo* served to alleviate working class anxiety due to its nostalgic association with Perón's promises to ease working class suffering. Comprehensively, this study contests the exclusion of emotions from mainstream political analysis and seeks to explore how emotions can incite and propel political movements that may be deemed irrational by elites. By focusing on the principle of *ressentiment* that made the Argentine receptive vulnerable to a Weberian style charismatic leader, this paper explains how mass emotions ignited Juan Perón's political career and continue to propel *Peronism* into the contemporary arena of Argentine politics.

## **II. Emotional Framework: Principles of *Ressentiment* and Charismatic Leadership**

As introduced by Enlightenment principles, the idea of human rationality serves as the cornerstone of understanding how the governed interact with the larger political system. For this reason, the role that emotions play in connecting leaders to followers is frequently left out or treated as secondary to other discussions of how voters chose whom to support in democratic

elections. As observed by Clarke, Hoggett, and Thompson, in “political analysis, we do not find philosophy’s nuanced understanding of the role of emotions in understanding and evaluation”, which means that “the academic study of politics is for the most part firmly attached to narrowly rationalist models of explanation and justification which split off head and mind from heart and body” (8). Thus, the idea that emotions and emotional connection impact the outcome of the political process is largely excluded from the dominant political narrative. It is often assumed that “the fundamental premise of our existing intellectual frameworks is the assumption that humans are essentially rational and motivated by the pursuit of their own interests; that they principally act to maximize personal happiness, rather than on the basis of fear, envy or resentment” (Mishra 2). But in many cases, emotions serve a key function in defining how people decide to support politicians.

Because emotions are subjective and experienced by individuals in a variety of ways, using them to construct the foundations of political analysis would seem precarious. Up until recently, social sciences have chosen not to focus on how personal sentiment impacts the overarching political experience. To further push emotions to the periphery, emotional politics have sometimes been attributed to the irrational masses. Barbaret discusses how, compared to the intellectual political elites who constructed the systems that ruled the masses, the popular classes were often depicted as being lesser and easily swayed to make decisions based on emotional appeal or connection (Barbaret 31). This stance created an enduring stigma around mass politics, as the political leanings and feelings of the elite were legitimized and those of the marginalized were demonized. With this establishment bias against the uneducated and marginalized, the notion that emotions play a role in politics remained largely unexplored.

A key piece to understanding how emotions work within the framework of politics is through the concept of *ressentiment*. Originally addressed by Friedrich Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is the “an unpleasant moral feeling without specific addresses, which operates as a chronic reliving of repressed and endless vindictiveness, hostility, envy, and indignation due to the impotence of the subject in expressing them, resulting, at the level of values, in the negation of what he unconsciously desires” (Demertzis 111). *Ressentiment* differs from resentment due to its possession of structural roots that citizens are unable to address. This feeling presents itself as increasing anxiety and helplessness due to the political system’s continued, whether it be perceived or actual, practice of ignoring of a marginalized group. Because the desires of an individual are invalidated by the state, an individual comes to feel unattached and unrepresented, thus creating an isolation that ultimately breeds bitterness and frustration towards the disenfranchising system. The separation between what one thinks they deserve and the reality of their material condition creates an enduring sense of loss that can be labeled as *ressentiment*.

In his discussion defining *ressentiment*, Demertzis points to the research of Max Scheler which highlighted three conditions that constitute *ressentiment* (108-109). The three necessary conditions are:

1. A gap between the perceived equality of social position and rights that emanate from citizenship;
2. The existence of comparison;
3. The irrevocable nature of the injustice to which one feels subjected.

Thus, *ressentiment* presents itself when someone feels that they lack the full societal rights that their state promises. As liberal democracies are predicated on the values of social equality among participants, a failure by the state to achieve these goals can often lead to the first condition

listed. And to understand this disparity, it is necessary for another group to exist that appears to be fully receiving the full liberties that the state promises. If within the same liberal democracy an elite class of capitalists or a group of landowning elites control more than the average citizen, those at the bottom of the hierarchy may compare themselves to those at the top and become upset with the lack of equality. And lastly, upon recognition of this injustice, the subject feels unable to change their position and circumstances due to societal structures or other outside forces. As those at the top of a supposedly liberal system control and regulate the government, those disenfranchised on the fringes experience a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that becomes overwhelming.

Because of this dynamic, *ressentiment* is best understood as an emotional phenomenon. It is a function of longtime disappointment and systemic misunderstanding, which means this phenomenon impacts politics from a direction that traditional political theorists may deem irrational. As Demertzis discusses, *ressentiment* further forms a coping mechanism to change a person's values by stating that "at first I admire the handsome, the aristocrat, the educated, the famous and so. But since I cannot become like them or compete with them, there is a silent hostility growing in me, a repressed vindictiveness for something that was unrightfully taken away from me" (Demertzis 108). This protectionary change in values can also explain why those experiencing *ressentiment* may elect leaders who may misrepresent their best interest or not serve the best interest of the state in the long-term. By denying the root causes of the system that led to their suppression, *ressentiment* communities may be likely to support temporary fixes that fail to address underlying conditions that have created their anxieties.

Mass politics can fall into this category of "irrational" decision making, and opportunistic leaders can successfully champion those experiencing *ressentiment* to win elections. As

politicians capably speak to groups experiencing a continued disparity between the system's promises and reality, citizens can come to support politicians who may lack ideological consistency or durable policy. Those experiencing *ressentiment* can then be susceptible to sway of populist leaders or movements such as fascism that rely on emotional reactions to propel them forward.

This paper would thus argue that those most capable of resolving these feelings of systemic exclusion are Weberian charismatic leaders. German sociologist Max Weber outlined three modes of legitimate leadership, which are rational, traditional, and charismatic. Election of a politician on rational grounds means that a person's legitimacy is "resting on a belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands". Election on traditional grounds, on the other hand, relies upon "resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority over them" (46). Different from these is the idea of a charismatic politician, who presents themselves as a revolutionary alternative to the first two forms of legitimacy.

This form of leadership is contingent upon personalism and the connection that constituencies feel toward the politician. Weber writes that charismatic leadership can be understood as legitimacy "resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (46). Thus, authority derives not from the law or tradition but on a leader who is "obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual's belief in charisma" (Weber 46). Charismatic leadership is more connected to the politics of the masses as opposed to



winning over the elites, as a charismatic leader's "position is derived from the favour of the person whose actions he controls. Hence he is likely to be little interested in the prompt and strict observance of discipline which would be likely to win the favour of superior" (64). The public, thus, supports charismatic politicians not because of the practicality of their policy promises or their reasoned ideas to better their lives, instead it chooses to support them because of the way that they feel when listening to their politicians. Whether it be a sense of vindication or acceptance, the masses are drawn to a charismatic politician because of an emotional connection that develops between them and a leader.

In her book *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* Ann Ruth Willner explains how charismatic leadership differs from a general leadership that is more often experienced in contemporary society. She underscores four differences which are: "1) the leader-image dimension, 2) the idea-acceptance dimension, 3) the compliance dimension, and 4) the emotional dimension" (Willner 5). The fourth characteristic is the most pertinent to this paper because it underscores the importance of a political follower's emotional connection to a potential leader. Willner writes that "the emotional dimension relates to the type and intensity of the emotional connection of followers to a leader" and that "in the charismatic relationship, however, the emotions aroused are not only more intense in degree, but they are also of a somewhat different order. Followers respond to their leader with devotion, awe, reverence, and blind faith, in short, with emotions close to religious worship" (7). A strong sense of emotional fanaticism demonstrates how powerful emotions can be in shaping the political experience.

When *ressentiment* and a charismatic leadership style combine, an "irrational" form of leadership may take root where the immediate promises that are made to the public eclipse the long-term benefit or stability of the system. Though elites may see this as shortsightedness on the

part of the masses, for those experiencing *ressentiment* the immediacy of resolving their own anxiety or helplessness takes precedence over the continued stability of the political system. By addressing certain grievances that previous political systems ignored, charismatic leaders successfully gain power. By understanding how certain leaders capably appeal to the emotional needs of *ressentiment* communities, it becomes clearer that emotional experiences of the masses are legitimate and can empower social movements.

### **III. The Rise of Perón: Emotional Marginalization and Charisma**

The case study of Juan Perón's *Justicialista* party demonstrates the effectiveness of a leader that resolves *ressentiment* through a charismatic style of leadership, even if the politics that are being promoted may be detrimental to the public in the long run. Juan Perón's rise represents the power of emotion in creating a political movement as well as continuing its momentum. In June 4, 1943, Argentina experienced a military coup that served as the spark to cause Perón's entrance into the world of politics (Hodges). In the same year, he was appointed Secretary of Labor, and by 1944, he was officially named Vice President. Due to his work as the Secretary of Labor, Perón quickly connected to the country's urban laboring masses and their cause. This time was one of immense change as "a snowballing of labor grievances, which the trade unions had endeavored to satisfy without success during the 1930s, encouraged a revival of labor militancy in the 1940s calling for drastic reform" (Hodges 20). Unemployment was high due to the Depression which led to migration increases in the "new industrial cities of Córdoba, Rosario, and the capital of Buenos Aires" (Hodges 21).

This increased number of urban laborers lacked a political coalition that succinctly met and understood the needs that stemmed from industrialization. And as this community grew in

number, so did their desire to be represented. Argentina prided itself on achieving greater levels of capitalist expansion and industry due to the Post-War boom (Elena 2011), yet its workers felt excluded from the benefits of capitalist expansion. This further exacerbated Argentina's historical "Great Divide" between those in positions of power, the urban intellectuals and the elite landowners who dictated policy, and the masses who were subject to the rules of distant government (Crassweller). In the time before Perón, Argentine politics were mainly controlled by the conservative party, which represented wealthy landowners and the foreign elites, the Socialist party and the Radical party, both of which split support of middle and lower class communities. The socialist party gained most of its support from the newly developing labor movement while the Radical party found its support amongst the middle class and rural small plot farmers (Lupu and Stokes 59). Thus, the party structure at the time had not fully developed enough to fully represent Argentine workers.

Thus "the disparities between classes, once tolerable, had become more offensive with the economic and sociological changes of the last sixty years, and nothing had been done, or even proposed, to mitigate them" (Crassweller 93). As Secretary of Labor, Perón had the political opportunity to enact change to benefit the working class. He "developed a system of redistribution in favor of the working class" and "strengthened and unified organized labor through the mass unionization of unorganized workers, the intervention of the Socialist and Communist dominated unions, the creation in certain instances of a parallel union, and the hierarchical restructuring of old unions" (Hodges 24).

His initial policies, intended to favor the growing urban working class, became profoundly unpopular among the elite and middle-class intellectuals. On October 9, 1945, these sectors demanded that Perón step down from all his government roles, which ultimately led to his

military imprisonment. But “mass rallies called by Eva Duarte in Plaza de Mayo on October 17, brought about his release” (Hodges 25-26). Returning to power, the mobilization effort led by Eva gave Perón the momentum to win the 1946 election. His initial election was a multi-class movement that centered mainly around the support of the urban working class. As discussed by Lupu and Stokes, “from the outset, Perón had close links with unions in the General Confederation of Labor (Confederación General de Trabajo), forged during his tenure as minister of labor in the 1943–1946 military regime” (75). The year 1946 marked an important time for Argentine politics, as the country’s previous party system, in which each party represented some variation of class amongst supporters, shifted to represent parties more heavily influenced by class hierarchy. Lower income populations who originally supported the Socialist party or the Radical Party came to support the Peronist party from the mid-1940s into the present (Lupu and Stokes 81).

In assessing the impact of Perón’s relations with the urban working class leading up to his election, the concept of *ressentiment* allows one to understand how Perón gained their overwhelming support in 1946. As the number of industrial urban workers increased in Argentina during the time leading up to Perón’s rule (Crassweller), a significant portion of the population was anxious, which made them particularly receptive to Perón’s style of rhetoric and promise for changes in their places of work. Federico Finchelstein argues that Peronism “gave a totalitarian answer to the crisis that modernity had provoked in the public perception of laws, the economy, and the legitimacy of the state” (72). As the modern world brought different challenges to the new urban dwellers of the cities in Argentina, a new type of politics was necessary to bring about the changes the masses desired. And as urban populations continued to grow, a large portion of the population became exposed to this form of agitation. As Elena

writes, “attracted in part by the booming factories and commercial enterprises, migrants added to the already large populations in cities” (27). With immigrants arriving from outside of Argentine and from within it, and settled into the country’s urban centers, it can be stated that “the swelling ranks of new workers as industrialization accelerated, created a natural constituency for a charismatic leader like Perón” (Adelman 244). The central emotional need of Perón’s constituencies was recognition and liberation, as “en los centros urbanos el peronismo representaba la liberación de los obreros de la opresión del capitalismo liberal<sup>1</sup>” (Salomán 69).

Juan Perón successfully recognized the masses’ frustration with their lack of political and social representation and by capitalizing on these feelings, he won the election in 1946. The key to this mobilization was Perón’s ability to capture the feelings of class division and exclusion by framing society’s segmentation as “national versus antinational, *pueblo* versus *antipueblo*, workers versus oligarchs” (Karush 23), thus aligning himself with the working class and positing those against him as the “other” or the “enemy of the nation”. By claiming to understand the struggles of the working class and vowing to stop the elites from exploiting the masses, the workers came to feel seen and understood by Perón. Seeing their needs reflected in political discourse allowed the working class to seek refuge in Perón’s promises.

The emotions of the public pushed him towards his election as he redefined citizenship for the working class on the premise of recognition. The emotional importance of this recognition separates Perón’s politics from that of his democratic opponents. As James notes, Peronism “premised its political appeal to workers on a recognition of the working class as a distinct social force which demanded recognition and representation as such in the political life of the nation” (18). This meant that Perón stressed the collective importance of class over the rights of a single

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “in the urban centers Peronism represented the worker’s liberation over liberal capitalism.”

individual and saw to the strengthening of organized labor to achieve this goal. As liberal democracy stressed individual equality, a promise that liberal democracy failed to fulfill due to the elite's inability to address inequality, Perón promised a class-based means for individuals to advance their position and receive greater benefits for their work by way of unionization. Thus, Perón connected with and filled the emotional void that liberal democracy had left vacant by advocating a class-based system where individuals could use their strengthened class ties to advocate to the state for greater recognition and benefit. This system offered emotional validation and opportunity, resolving the feelings of helplessness and anxiety caused by previous liberal systems that excluded the masses due to their perceived lack of education and intellect.

Another key feature in Perón's definition of citizenship was his shaping of a new nationalist identity of Argentina<sup>2</sup>. Finchelstein writes that "Perón wanted to establish a national movement that gave him a populist means with which to create a strong homeland with an equitable state" (70). Through stressing the idea of a homeland and the creation of a conceptualized enemy, Perón expanded the definition of citizenship to include the marginalized while also mobilizing people to visualize themselves as having an active role in the state. His use of nationalist promises expanded opportunities for citizens and allowed for their participation in the system. For many people "besides enjoying the economic and social benefits of the first years of the regime, the Peronist base actively experienced the appropriation of an ideology that granted them a principal role in the life of the country" (Finchelstein 81). Thus, Perón's nationalism introduced new opportunities for the marginalized while offering means for

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<sup>2</sup> This paper distinguishes between nationalism and *nacionalismo*, the former representing a universal political concept and the latter signifying the specific Argentine movement with origins in the early twentieth century. *Nacionalismo* is a right-wing movement that was heavily linked to fascism and can be defined as being staunchly Catholic, anti-imperialist, anti-liberal while stressing the importance of the Argentine homeland. Nationalism, in contrast, refers to the political phenomenon that stresses national loyalty and promotion of national interests over all others.

recognition through the organized Argentine state. Perón himself became heavily tied to Argentina and though he differentiated himself from *nacionalistas*, “Perón’s own nationalism was sufficiently powerful to make it very difficult for future generations to draw on nationalism without also declaring oneself a Peronist” (Goebel 67). Nationalism served as a successful tool for Perón, yet it has presented significant challenges to the long-term democratic stability of the country.

Perón could sell his political vision of recognition through his charismatic personalism. Perón “was a first-rate example of Max Weber’s charismatic leader, one who in an epoch of unrest stands at the beginning of a revolutionary, emotional, sectarian movement” (Craig 707-708). His powerful and dramatic oratory connected his message to his followers and created a bond that led to his democratic election and to the subsequent transformation of Argentina’s electoral politics. Perón was “an attractive figure and he knew it. He was for an example a greatly admired sportsman when he was only a captain” and “his direct appeal was a highly conscious exploitation of his – and later Eva’s – attractive features” (Craig 707). Perón was famous for his speeches and his use of the radio, all of which contributed to his overwhelming sense of personalism that allowed him to enter the hearts and minds of the working class who searched for a sense of recognition. This sense of relatability through charismatic leadership combined with resolving working class anxiety successfully brought Perón to power.

#### **IV. Embedding a National Culture: Consumerism, Mass Media, and Eva Perón’s Role in Defining What It Means to Be Argentine (1946-1955)**

As Juan Perón successfully mobilized the masses to win the election of 1946, his role of president from 1946-1955 entrenched his legacy and ultimately allowed it to continue forming

the contemporary political landscape of Argentina. Through increasing wages, guaranteeing vacation days, and limiting working hours, Perón served in a lot of ways to provide for the economic needs of his constituencies. But, the present study focuses more on how these economic opportunities created relational and emotional ties that helped forge a connection between Perón and his followers. As quoted by Karush, “the movement’s transformative impact on Argentine politics as well as its impressive longevity reflect the fact that it provided workers with much more than a higher standard of living; it offered them both an identity and a convincing interpretation of the society in which they lived” (21). While there is considerable consensus among Argentinians and scholars that Perón economically empowered the working class, this paper focuses on how monetary opportunities led to the formation of an enduring mutuality between Perón, his ideals, and the working class.

Perón’s policies, thus, created a political space for the working class to feel a sense of recognition while easing the anxiety that arose from their industrialized realities. This space, originally created through Perón’s campaign promises and charisma, became a longstanding political culture that continues into the modern day. Through the employment of three tools, Perón solidified an overarching nationalist culture that centered on the recognition and appreciation for the working class. The three methods by Perón and discussed in this study are the development of a mass consumerist culture, the utilization of mass entertainment, and the usage of his wife Eva’s natural political inclinations. These methods and their subsequent nationalist culture led the lower classes to experience a newer sense of emotional recognition and vindication that propelled Perón’s political moment further, as to construct a key ideology within Argentine politics.



One key argument as to why Perón achieved such strong support from the working-class points to the economic benefits workers experienced from his role as President. Within the earliest period of Perón's presidency, an enormous shift in Argentina's consumerist culture occurred. Before Perón's election and "between 1937 and 1939, an Argentine worker earned half the income of an English laborer and one-third of the salary paid to his American counterpart . . . [and] low wages prevented the working class from reaching the same consumption levels as workers in England and the United States," (Milanesio 1). But by the early 1940s, this had all started to change. Due to increased industrialization and an economic boom caused by World War II, the country's consumerist possibilities exploded. Soon, "the country was much more than a breadbasket and butcher to the world. Its reinsertion into the global economy after decades of post-independence turmoil unleashed a host of modernizing forces at the domestic level" (Elena 23). The rise of Perón largely coincides with this increase in consumerist opportunities for working Argentines. But, these new opportunities also presented increased anxieties. Social scientists of the time observed the precarious position of newly industrialized workers due to "the unpredictability of modern times: all it took was a sudden accident, layoff, or other mundane twist of fate to send most families hurtling into indigence" (Elena). The recent industrialization brought newer and more modern anxieties that previous systems offered no means to resolve.

During his time in office, Perón stressed the concept of "*la vida digna*", or dignified life, for each working-class citizen (Elena 67). This improvement for one's life quality had the "policy goals of his '*politica social*': a minimum wage, social insurance, unionization, work regulations, and assistance programs" (Elena 68). Though traditional political theory may assert that constituencies were drawn to Perón because of his promises of greater economic

independence and opportunity through the creation of greater protections, the real power of these promises lay in the concept of recognition. Perón offered an emotional means to calm the anxieties that came to define the working-class way of life. For *familias obreras*, Perón's recognition of their search for solutions to resolve their anxieties created an enduring loyalty. As economic standards began to improve, the working class began to feel a greater connection to Perón as he validated their citizenship and their ability to contribute positively to a promised sense of Argentine progress. These economic advantages contributed largely to a growing consumerist culture within Argentina as was typical of most post-World War II economies. Within his first years in office, "Perón's economic policymakers placed unexpected importance on domestic consumption in the postwar transition," (Elena 76) which ultimately led to the introduction of Perón's first five-year plan. This program stressed increasing consumerist opportunities and the role of the state in protecting citizen's and their economic endeavors.

Mass consumerism became "the Peronist policymakers' response to multiple problems at once, addressing the needs to consolidate popular support, shore up wartime industrialization, pursue a vision of national independence, and deliver on higher standards of living" (Elena 80). These principles offer greater recognition to the working class, giving the impression that increased consumerism would ultimately offer greater opportunities and economic independence. And as the buying power of the working class began to increase, so did their overall sense of connection to Perón. For many citizens, the increase of consumerist policies equated to a higher standard of living that offered more stability and societal status.

Milanesio's *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* recounts the personal experience of a working-class worker whose world view expanded once presented with consumerist possibilities that became possible due to Perón. Milanesio writes that

“María Roldán, a meatpacking worker in those years, adhered to this view when she recalled many decades later: ‘With Perón we discovered many things. A pair of nylons, a nice dress. Life changed. We could buy things like refrigerators. I bought mine in 1947.’” (Milanesio 21). These types of anecdotes were common amongst the working class in Argentina. Inherent to the improving standards of living was the entrenched work of Perón in improving worker’s lives. As people could buy more and experience a higher level of comfort, the politics of Perón were inextricably linked to the working class’s feelings of being fully supported and cared for by a system that considered and eased their daily struggle and anxieties.

Besides improving the consumerist opportunities for the working class, Perón also crafted a successful media culture that catered particularly to the interests of the working poor. Known for his charismatic presentations and speeches, Perón’s utilization of accepted popular culture norms and mass media tools allowed him to directly access the working class’s collective subconscious that allowed them to more easily connect to him. As Karush notes, “Perón was able to appropriate discursive elements that circulated in mass culture and refashion them into a powerful political appeal” (23). The hallmark of mass culture at the time was melodrama, a deeply moralistic and emotionally heightened type of rhetoric where “poverty was a guarantor of virtue and authenticity, and wealth a moral flaw.” This division was demonstrated by “hundreds of songs, radio plays, and films [that] presented Argentina as a nation irreconcilably divided between rich and poor” (Karush 25).

Here, Perón’s vision found the moralistic precedent and willing audiences which offered him the chance to connect with a public already accustomed to this type of narrative. Much of this moralism became visible in the pre-Perón era in the early 1930s when Argentina first began

developing a more modern sense of mass culture. From tango<sup>3</sup> to cinema, the idea that wealth negated morality and created frivolity became an accepted notion in typical forms of popular media. “The prototypical tango plot, revisited in dozens of songs, describes the tragic demise of the *milongueta* – the poor, innocent girl from the *barrios* who is tempted by the bright lights and wild life of downtown” (Karush 26). Thus, these already present cultural notions and forms of art created an audience already susceptible to the moralistic claims that would be put to work by Perón.

The utilization of tango culture became a key piece to Juan Perón’s mass culture strategy due to its ties to both a sense of nostalgia and the notion of *Argentinidad*. Confronted with the need to distinguish this art form from the American counterpart of jazz, *tango* became “an expression of certain essential qualities of Argentine national identity” while the “discourse of tango authenticity involved three claims: tango was located in the past, it was melancholy, and it was rooted in popular rather than elite culture” (Karush 35). The art form was specific to Argentina and, due to its relation to the working class, the music came to be a hallmark of urban workers living in Argentina’s cities. Thus, *tango* was co-opted into the political world as a manifestation of past glory and nationalist tendencies, two key elements of the initial beliefs of Juan Perón.

Around the early 1940’s, “the entertainment offered on the radio and in the movie theater had by this time become a significant part of the everyday lives of Argentines of all classes”

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<sup>3</sup> The tango finds its origins in popular culture in Buenos Aires urban between 1880s-1890s. As mentioned by Collier, “The tango was born during this hectic rush of urbanization, at a time when the ephemeral culture of the outer barrios reflected both native/immigrant and city/countryside contrasts and tension” (94). Thus, its rise correlates to the dramatic and popular culture tendencies of Perón’s constituents. Because it was widely associated with working poor, Perón’s use of its powerful folklore roots proved a highly successful tool in furthering his political legacy.

(Karush 43). One of the key element to Perón's ability to captivate audiences with his message was his talent to combine the contradictory pieces of mass culture into a more sanitized narrative for the masses. "Given Perón's obvious interest in the political utility of mass culture, the echoes of mass cultural melodrama in his rhetoric reflect purposeful borrowing" (Karush 31). In this sense, Perón was fully aware of how his melodramatic rhetoric could further his interests and connect to the public that was largely vulnerable to this discourse. Perón's use of melodrama continued throughout his time in office and represents how the mass media became a tool for him to advance his ideology and legacy into the minds of the Argentina public.

One of the most powerful tools for Perón was the radio, which allowed him to easily connect to his constituencies in a way that politicians before him never could. By giving speeches on the radio, Perón's voice entered the homes of the working poor, which allowed his message to spread quickly and efficiently. Besides radio, many different types of folk music were also created to further the legacy and myth of Perón. Art represents a different type of engagement with the political, thus demonstrating the strength of ties between the Peronists and their Colonel. To a considerable degree, "commercial folklore expanded considerably under Peronism, while the urban tango was censored by removing lyrics that questioned the social mobility of the working class" (Guy 8). Both the creation and censorship of existing works demonstrate the power of Perón's party and his continued desire to solidify his legacy amongst the working class while promoting his agenda.

Further, Perón worked to control media in such a way as to embed his constructed national culture into and perpetuate his nationalized economic policies throughout the fabric of Argentine life. Perón's bureaucracy further served to control all aspects of the media as "newspapers were incorporated within a Peronist-controlled media conglomerate known as Alea,

nominally a private company but staffed by propagandists for the government and Peronist party alike” (Elena 127). This demonstrates the power of Perón’s media structures and patronage systems that functioned to further his message and eliminate dissident opinions. Through radio, newsreels, and music of the time, popular culture centered on promoting the Peronist agenda. Perón also used his media power to demonstrate his hegemony over consumerist opportunities and to show how his increased focus on alleviating working class poverty allowed for greater opportunity for marginalized communities. The propaganda overall served to further convey Perón’s role in bettering the lives of Argentina’s citizens while ensuring that the public understood the sources of their economic and social improvements. Thus, the propaganda machine that Perón created forged a greater connection between the public and Perón himself.

The final and critical piece for understanding the enduring legacy of the *Justicialista* party is Eva Perón. For organizational purposes, this discussion of Eva has been placed under the section detailing Perón’s “tools” for first constructing and later continuing the emotional legacies of his presidency. This placement, though, is not done to minimize the work of Eva Perón or the connections that developed between her and the working class. Eva Perón’s style of politics and her charitable contributions successfully embedded her figure into the memory of Argentines. Though this was largely due to her position as granted through Perón’s presidency, her efforts largely came to define the Argentinian concepts of motherhood and the female’s role in the Argentinian society. An enigma and a great political force, Eva represents a contradictory and confusing personality that rose to prominence during this time. Regardless of whether one supports or denounces her role, it would be impossible to ignore her impact in recognizing the emotional needs of working class and her ability to capitalize on these feelings to provide a sense of protection and security for the vulnerable popular masses.

For many scholars, the “historical emergence of Eva Perón on the public scene and the symbolic power of her myth relate directly to the formation of mass culture” (De Grandis 126). Born as what the general public of the time would call an illegitimate child to Juan Duarte and María Eva Duarte in Los Toldos on May 7, 1919, the idea that Evita would rise to the cultural level of icon seemed improbable, if not impossible (Blanksten). Eva found fame through mass culture by moving to Buenos Aires to become a movie star. Through the radio and on screen, she was introduced to the political circles of the time. Yet, the important part of these formative years before her relationship with Juan Perón was her introduction into the political circles of the time. Known to have dined with President General Ramírez, Eva’s knack for connecting to powerful men demonstrated her political and charismatic abilities even before her collaboration with Perón. When the two met in October 1943, “Perón and Evita found much to admire in each other. The actress captivated and fascinated the colonel, as she had many another before him; and Evita said that the colonel was a man of destiny” (Blanksten 90). As Juan moved Evita into an apartment in the same building as his, it became public knowledge that the two were romantically connected. The start, though, to Eva’s political career is best demonstrated by her efforts to free Perón after his removal from power in 1945. On the day that Perón’s freedom was achieved through protest, “the principal figures in the Argentine drama realized that Evita has a valid claim to recognition as something more than Perón’s beautiful mistress” (Blanksten 92). From these early actions, it is possible to see how Evita embodied the political melodrama that Perón promoted through his public celebrity and policies for social advancement. Her rise denotes how emotion plays into politics and how the public at the time came to view their representatives.

Post 1946, Eva solidified her position as a political force by using charity to associate herself with the working class and their struggle. The greatest example of this is the Eva Perón Foundation, which offered direct support and opportunities to the most vulnerable communities in Argentina. As Perón's policies offered greater economic support and opportunities for the working class, the charitable actions of Eva served as the mechanism for providing relief and resolving working class anxiety. Evita's programs offered hope and opportunity to a wide portion of the population as "by the 1950s, this 'private' foundation rivaled federal agencies as the main force in administering new health-care, tourism, and public housing facilities" (Elena 123). The Foundation expanded significantly under Eva Perón's supervision and provided a variety of services to all sections of the population. Even though the Foundation had at its peak 25,000 employees, Evita was a personal fixture at these foundation centers as she "heard personal stories and dispensed immediate relief; giving one supplicant money, securing scarce medicines for another, or placing individuals in public housing apartments" (Elena 124). Because of this, Eva became the face of this charity. By assigning a single face to the relief that the government provided, a deep attachment formed between the working poor and their perceived savior, Eva Perón.

Because of Eva's connection and physical presence at the Foundation, she and Perón began to create a specific legacy that defined them as the mother and father of the Argentine nation. As quoted by Finchestein, between 1946 and 1955, "Perón and Evita were the actual parental figures of the nation for students and state employees alike" as demonstrated by when "children learned to read and write their first words in primary school with sentences such as 'Evita me ama' or 'Perón loves the children'" (Finchelstein 80-81). Evita and her husband took on a role larger than politics throughout their time in power. As Eva expanded her social politics



through the Eva Perón Foundation and continued to define the household role of the Argentine woman, her glamour and voice came to define her enduring legacy as Argentina's "mother". Especially among poor populations, Eva was treated as the defender and provider who offered relief. During this time "the poorest rancho, no matter how isolated, had a photo of Evita illuminated by candles. In the daytime as in the nighttime, millions of altars were lit for the mythical mother who nourished her children even after her death" (Ortiz 296). The connection that people had to the charitable work of Evita and her efforts to alleviate their poverty created an enduring sense of loyalty that translated into political support. As the emotional needs of the public were met, Eva became the face of the welfare state and broadcast its ability to care for those in need.

Those critical of her efforts would point to the disorganization of the Foundation and its lack of records as "an inevitable consequence of the number of agencies involved, the frenetic pace at which they advanced" (Elena 124). Yet for many people, the anecdotal experience of receiving aid from Evita overshadowed the systemic issues that plagued the foundation. This phenomenon demonstrates the power of personal charity and emotions in political movements. Though this tendency to idealize the work of a faulty organization may be deemed irrational, it further points to how important emotions are in the shaping of political perceptions and social movements, and in building long-lasting connections.

Eva's politics further served to define gender roles in Argentine society and convey what was expected of women at the time. From her first public speech in July 25, 1946, Evita "showed her early interest in women's issues, but not feminist issues, and her willingness to be a liaison between workers, women, and the future president" (Guy 19). This early history shows the gendered nature of Evita's speech. Similarly, to her husband, Eva never sought equality in a

liberal democratic sense. Instead, she embodied how a wife should act based upon hierarchical gendered roles. For many women, she became an example of the perfect Argentine woman who pushed against injustice while still maintaining her domain within the home by looking after her husband and children. This served to further Peron's masculine politics. As Elena notes, "her approach at once contested and reinforced conventional patriarchal relations: women were presented as politically equal to men but still relegated to a place as supporters and nurturers" (111). Though it may seem that Evita's politics served to liberate women, as with the 1947 enfranchisement of women, it can be argued that a key focus of her political activism was to embolden the policies of Juan. Still, her assertion that the women's job was to maintain the home did allow her the grounds on which to become Argentina's mythic "mother".

The emotional ties between the Peróns and the public are best demonstrated through the letters that poured into their offices during their time in power. Though Perón received many correspondences, it was the letters that Evita received that indicated how powerful the bond was that had formed between the First Lady and the public. Typically, "the nature of the initial letters to Eva emphasized personal difficulties and the belief that Eva would understand the plight of the desperate" (Guy 20). To many, Eva Perón was known as Santa Evita, a name which demonstrates the connection that formed between Eva and the *descamisados*<sup>4</sup> who viewed her as a religious savior who would end their struggles. Most people wrote to Eva directly hoping for her to utilize the Foundation's channels to address their variety of needs. In her novel *Building Charismatic Bonds in Argentina*, Donna J. Guy relates several primary sources that demonstrate how the public understood Evita as someone who would hear their anxieties and offer support. In

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<sup>4</sup> The literal translation of *descamisados* is the shirtless ones, which refers to Argentina's working poor at the time.

one letter, an elderly woman named Gerónima Leto wrote to Eva and asked for support through raising her pension. The woman wrote to the Foundation that:

“I have dedicated my entire life to my grandchildren. It is my greatest disappointment to be unable to complete my mission to raise and educate them with the product of my labor. But I have confidence that with the aid of the Fundación María Eva Duarte de Perón I shall be able to achieve my tasks and end my days blessing that cause of General Perón and the soul of his companion ‘Evita’” (Guy 62).

Here, it is possible to see how the public approached Evita and asked for her assistance to fulfill their societal duties to Perón. This letter demonstrates how the public saw Eva as an access point to the regime and how Perón’s redefinition of citizenship came to impact how Argentines viewed the relationship between them and their government. Through the direct correspondence, it is possible to see that citizens saw their government as interested in and capable of responding to their needs and wishes. Further, the language represents the gendered norms that came to dominate Argentine society due to the application of Evita’s divided gender roles onto society. This letter demonstrates how Eva came to reinforce and entrench *Justicialismo* principles into a cultural phenomenon by responding to and providing for the needs of the working class. This unshakeable loyalty served to carry Peronism into Argentina’s contemporary politics.

In sum, the increase in consumerist options, the perpetuation of mass media culture, and the powerful ethos of Evita Perón shaped *Peronismo* into a cultural, and not just political, phenomenon. Under the Peróns, a new definition of what it meant to be Argentine became an internalized ideal vision that extended far past the deaths of both Juan and Eva. Perón utilized these values “in his effort to link urban popular culture to his political goals” (Goebel 84), as demonstrated by his frequent references to great Argentine writers such as Sarmiento and his co-

opting of tango, thus connecting historic nostalgia to present conceptions of identity. Following this line of thought, “Peronism emerges as the product not only of a give and take between official ideology and popular consciousness but of a larger cultural process shaped by attitudes and values disseminated in commercial culture” (Karush, Chamosa 15). Thus, Peronism transcended the political and became a cultural phenomenon due to its ability to resolve working class anxiety and needs. As the status of workers began to increase due to their commercial possibilities and the rise of a mass media centered around the tastes of the working classes, the promise of representation led to a fanatical devotion to the Peróns. To many Argentines, it felt for the first time their positions was not just tolerated but celebrated. The political system came to recognize them and their possibilities, all while creating personal connections, that spoke to their experiences and daily lives. The culture of Peronism meant that “besides enjoying the economic and social benefits of the first years of the regime, the Peronist base actively experienced the appropriation of an ideology that granted them a principal role in the life of the country” (Finchelstein 81). For the first time, those previously marginalized *felt* Argentine, a transformative experience that can explain how Peronist politics continue to shape the country’s politics well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **V. Legacies of *Peronismo*: *Nacionalismo* and Seeking Stability**

The legacies of *Peronismo* and its compelling emotional importance demonstrate how politics of recognition create a discursive space where individuals can interact with and construct their own realities and interpretations, for better or for worse. This section focuses on two specific legacies of Peronism: the solidifying of far-right Peronist factions, specifically the Triple A, and the continued habit of Argentinians turning to Peronism in times of crisis.

After Perón was ousted from power in 1955, his movement began to take a new shape as those who felt recognized and legitimized by his political leanings sought new forms of political power. That phenomenon is best represented by the extreme fragmentation that occurred within the *Justicialista* party. Split between a variety of left-wing and right-wing forms of Peronism, populist rhetoric created the opportunity for personal interpretation and political action<sup>5</sup>. An example of this is how the nationalist leanings of Perón created space for violent *nacionalista* movements which further destabilized the country and influenced the military governments that rose to power in the time between Peronist governments. In the period between 1955-1973, “Peronism became the prime vehicle of the partisan style of nationalism” (Goebel 109). Though Perón’s history with the Argentina’s *nacionalistas* was complicated, as by the mid-1940s “the extreme right deemed his actions too left-leaning, as demonstrated by him moving away from aligning with the Church and the military” (Finchelstein 94), the underlying nationalist politics of Perón offered cover to more extreme forms of *nacionalismo*.

After Perón’s death, new organizations were formed that better fit into the *nacionalista* framework while also serving to further their fascist principles. Ultimately, these organizations aided in the militarization of the country, which influenced the violent form of terror that emerged under the military junta. With “the Peronist regime was gone, the partisan configurations of two irreconcilable Argentinas that Perón had helped to shape presented some *nacionalistas* with a new political opportunity” (Finchlestein 95). Even though Perón had distanced himself from the strongest principles of *nacionalismo* to save political face, his tolerance of their politics allowed their ideology to continue into later decades. Of these

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<sup>5</sup> This paper focuses on the right-wing form of Peronism without detailing the left-wing Montonero guerillas who became active during this time. Their existence, though, further speaks to Perón’s rhetoric offering recognition to political ideas which then leads to the civilian creation of organizations.

organizations, the Triple A represent how Perón's nationalist rhetoric tolerated and legitimized violence into the Argentine far-right through divisive fascism.

The formation of the *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance), or the Triple A which "had the implicit blessing of Juan Perón and Isabel Perón and was directed by Perón's personal secretary, José López Rega" (Finchelstein 113), represents the extension of Perón's ability to influence the development of dangerous nationalism even after his death. The Triple A was markedly violent, executing attacks on the Peronist left and civilians alike. As quoted by Hodges, the organization "acquired notoriety in January 1974 when it announced its first death list – a long one including political and trade union leaders, a bishop in the Catholic Church, and a colonel in the regular military" (121), though they continued to operate with impunity due to their close workings with the Federal Police (123). The Triple A represents just one violent faction that derived inspiration from Perón's rhetoric and committed acts of violence even after his death. Remarkably when Isabel Perón took over as president after the death of her husband in 1974, she was serving as "the formal leader of the Triple A and in that sense, became the world's first female leader of a fascist organization" (Finchelstein 117). It was Isabel, too, who handed the government over to the most violent Argentine dictatorship, which lasted between 1976-1983.

Since Perón's death, organized parties invoked Peronist themes to gain support from previous Peronist constituencies. And "since the return of democracy, Peronist politicians have continued to invoke Juan and Eva in an attempt to transfer the couple's charisma to themselves" (Guy 145) in order to win elections. There has also been a consistent failure of oppositional parties to address needs in the successfully succinct way that would allow them to compete with Peronism. And both the election of Carlos Menem in 1989 and the election of Nestor Kirchner in

2003 reflect the Argentine shift towards the familiar in times of uncertainty and continued unrest. For Menem, this existed in the mounting pressures due to unresolved stress caused by the state terrorism experienced in the country from 1976-1983. For the Kirchner couple, their election was a response to the economic trauma experienced during the financial crisis of 2001 that stemmed from restructuring programs and neoliberal policies implemented during Menem's times.

After the dictatorship ended in 1983, Argentina experienced the precariousness of the democratic transition process. Confronted with the need to construct new systems as well as address the trauma caused by state-sponsored violence, the country found itself in need of leadership that could capably confront these challenges. "The democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín, the candidate of the Radical Party who took power in 1983, inaugurated a period of great disappointments— from a declining commitment to justice for the victims of human rights violations committed in the previous decade to the hyperinflation that submerged the country into chaos" (Milanesio 178-179).

For many, the rhetoric and persona of Menem filled the void that had remained open since Perón's brief return to power in 1973, as he openly declared himself a Peronist through his charismatic and *caudillo* style. His 1989 win was characterized as "a campaign that tried to imitate Juan's sex appeal. Menem portrayed himself as a star in leather pants with sideburns that changed according to his political message. He had his picture published in a US magazine on his bed with a poodle, one of the symbols that identified Juan's domestic side" (Guy 145). Menem's political style followed the melodramatic nature customary of the Peróns and provided a sense of nostalgia that contrasted heavily with the militaristic severity of the dictatorship. As quoted by Celia Szusterman, "in the midst of hyperinflation and with a Radical Party

government helplessly ineffective, the electorate took a gamble and heard Menem's appeal to “follow him” (199).

Menem ran on the Peronist platform, but his ideological beliefs and programs strayed far from Perón's economic nationalism. Though originally campaigning on the promise of an increased salary for the working class and greater protections, Menem launched a series of neoliberal reforms that he deemed necessary for Argentina's successful democratic transition. Though originally “glossing his platform with the cherished Peronist ideals of social justice and economic independence, Menem finished what the military dictatorship had started in the 1970s” (Milanesio 179). The initial campaign promises, compared to the reforms enacted under Menem, demonstrate the power of nostalgia as a political strategy in Argentina. Menem utilized the visuals of Peronism and the promise of working class recognition to gain support from the lower-class populations that still looked to the old forms of Peronism for a sense of recognition and economic opportunity.

As Menem's “Peronist leadership oversaw an economic restructuring in line with the global turn toward neoliberalism” (Elena 258), the cultural value of *Peronismo* explains how popular support remained for Menem's two terms, even when the movement's original economic promises were ignored. Peronism's strength lies not in its ideological value, but in its ability to connect previously ignored populations with a charismatic leader. The revival of the *justicialista* party in 1989 can be seen as a function of “the flexibility of the Peronist set of ideas, its lack of a homogeneous ideology and a leadership style marked by pragmatism” (Szusterman 198). Menem's neoliberalism shows the adaptability of Peronist rhetoric that allows it to still capture attention and constituencies into the modern day. The reforms of Menem's time in office brought significant harm and led to one of the worst economic crises experienced by Argentina.



By 1999, “it was evident that ‘the consumer paradise’ was a mirage and official discourses of bonanza were nothing more than a façade to hide the cataclysmic consequences of the economic reforms. The foreign debt almost doubled between 1992 and 1996, sales taxes grew exponentially, export prices fell, and the country underwent a profound recession” (Milanesio 180). The new administration of Fernando De La Rúa was largely incapable of addressing the economic crisis and alleviating public anxieties. The country approached economic desperation as unemployment continued to rise and the previous currency reform of the Menem era created an unstable economic environment on a crash course towards economic disaster. The *piquetero* (picketers) movement took off as unemployed protestors shut down roads and created blockades to demand better state-sponsored jobs and benefits. The crisis forced De La Rúa to resign. As stated by Milanesio in the *Workers Go Shopping in Argentine*, “the 2001 crisis crystallized the profound transformation of social identities and ways of life that had been fermenting in the last decade. The social function, cultural meanings, and rights of wage earners were shaken to the core since workers became unemployed or joined an informal economy” (181). Menem’s neoliberal allegiance to the IMF and World Bank devastated the economy, yet the response to the 2001 crisis took the form of yet another reiteration of Peronism.

With the election of Nestor Kirchner in 2003, Argentina’s Peronism appeared to return to its left-wing roots while depending on individual charisma. Unlike Menem, Kirchner’s policies highly resembled that of the first Perón era. To get elected, Néstor leaned heavily into Peronist nostalgia to win the trust of the unemployed workers and those traumatized by crisis. In his campaign, Néstor Kirchner “used Photoshop techniques to create the illusion that he had been photographed with Juan and Eva” (Guy 145). Further, his rhetoric demonstrated how he positioned himself as a member of the *pueblo* as opposed to being an elitist, a key feature of

classic Peronist rhetoric that served to connect Peronist emotionally to the traditionally disenfranchised. As quoted in an article titled “Del ‘Peronismo Puro’ Al ‘Kirchnerismo Puro’”<sup>6</sup>, Ana Soledad Montero and Lucía Vincent write that “con una vestimenta desalineada, un discurso informal y un intenso contacto físico con los seguidores, la imagen que construyó Kirchner era la del hombre del pueblo al que le tocaba ‘circunstancialmente’ llegar al poder pero que se mantenía como ‘uno más’”<sup>7</sup>. This image was different than the image projected by Perón, one of military decor and pure charisma, yet still demonstrates the flexibility of Peronism’s legacy that allows for politicians to utilize *Peronismo* as a political mechanism while still benefitting from the support of its traditional constituencies looking for political recognition.

This is further demonstrated by the distinctiveness of Menem and Kirchner’s respective *Justicialismo*. In his time in office “Kirchner’s government expanded social programs and public infrastructure, nationalized previously privatized enterprises, and reversed amnesty laws, allowing prosecutors to charge former military officers for human rights violations” (Milanesio 184). These economic reforms are highly reminiscent of the campaign promises of Juan Perón as they demonstrate a political desire to alleviate working class struggle caused by economic inequality. This is a stark contrast from the policies of Menem that asserted neoliberalist principles while attempting to globalize the Argentine market to meet IMF and World Bank mandates. After the death of Néstor, his wife continued his political legacy as she became Argentina’s first elected woman president in 2007. Serving two consecutive terms, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner represents a redefinition of left-wing Peronism that demonstrates how the party machine continued to form Argentine political realities into the present.

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: “From ‘Pure Peronism’ to ‘Pure Kirchnerism’”

<sup>7</sup> Translation: “with mismatched clothes, an informal speech and intense physical contact with the followers, the image that Kirchner built was that of the man of the town who “circumstantially” came to power but remained as one of them.

The policies of the Kirchners, lauded by some and denounced by others, represents a partisan divide in Argentine politics. Many have praised Kirchner's successful handling of the human rights violations that occurred from 1976-1983 while continuing to offer opportunities for social mobility for the middle and working class. Finchelstein writes that with "the passing of exculpatory laws for the military in 1986 and 1987 during the Alfonsín administration, and the presidential amnesties given by Peronist President Carlos Menem in 1989 and 1990, the reemergence of investigations and indictments of the perpetrators in the 2000s have been complemented by new laws for gender and sexual equality in the 2000s and early 2010s under the Peronist Kirchner administrations" (155). This overall represents a bend towards advancing causes of social justice and equality, an unequivocally beneficial move for the betterment of society. Yet, others have criticized Fernandez de Kirchner for economic mishandlings that have increased inflation and debt. Reid states that in 2015, "Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner bequeathed to Mauricio Macri, her center-right successor, a host of problems which she had stubbornly ignored," which included "phony inflation numbers, a gaping fiscal hole, indiscriminate subsidies for energy consumption and public transport, an artificial exchange rate, and a festering dispute with bond holders" (161). This assessment, in all its harshness, represents the discordant sides to the debate surrounding Kirchner's legacy. Regardless of personal feelings towards her politics, her political career represents the continued legacy of Peronism on Argentine democracy and the power of emotional recognition.

The legacies of Perón's time in office are still being defined by politicians in Argentina who evoke his message to gain political momentum. This thesis mainly focuses on how the initial rise to power and first two presidential terms of Perón created a political culture centered around recognition for people generally left out of traditionally liberal political spheres. Thus,

the legacies of cultural recognition, as discussed here, demonstrate how Peronist rhetoric served to both legitimize the nationalist ideals and provide mechanisms for political organizations and politicians to further their own agendas. Peronism's ideological flexibility coupled with its powerful nostalgic promise of economic opportunity for the traditionally marginalized served to further the movement and forge it into the political force that continues to shape Argentina's political experience. By analyzing how right-wing nationalist groups co-opted Perón's validation of *nacionalista* principles, Menem utilized Peronist nostalgia to advance a neoliberalist reform of a traditionally nationalized economy. The Kirchners, in turn, used Peronist protectionist policies to define Argentine politics in the decade following economic crisis. Analyzing both right and left-wing forms fosters understanding of how Peronism outlived its founder. Because Peronist rhetoric allowed for followers to each feel a sense of connection to its promises, democratic participants across the spectrum within Argentina found within it a possible political arena where their needs were seen and fulfilled.

## **VI. Conclusions**

*Peronismo* represents a malleable, durable, and ultimately powerful ideology within the context of Argentine politics that demonstrates the power of emotions in fueling political experiences. Perón's rise to power was propelled in part through working class *ressentiment* that stemmed from the liberal elite's discrediting of what the working-class experienced. Though Peronism was a multi-class experience in its initial phases, for the working class its power derived from its ability to economically meet their growing needs while offering a solution to their anxiety that stemmed from a lack of political representation and opportunities. Perón offered a different political style than previous politicians because he, as well as Eva, directly

campaigning to the working class and made promises to improve their overall quality of life. Here, the deep story unfolds as it explains the feelings of misrepresentation and division experienced by the working class. Perón filled a void amongst the public who viewed their societal contributions as ignored and unappreciated even though they continued to contribute significantly to economic improvements. By offering a political space for representation through his charismatic style of leadership, working-class Argentina found its savior who promised them a better life.

After rising to power, Perón rode the wave of emotional connection and utilized several tools to entrench his patronage system into the consciousness of the working class. Through the increasing of people's consumerist opportunities, the use of melodrama, and the workings of his wife Eva, *Peronismo* was transformed into a cultural phenomenon through its definition of *Argentinidad*. These three elements worked to create a sense of loyalty between workers and Perón's government. This sense of loyalty has proven to be enduring as the party continues to impact the country's democratic experience. This level of comfort and relief that workers have come to experience through Peronist patronage has led to the repeated election of Peronist politicians in times of trauma or national distress.

The emotional ties of Peronism have impacted the development of Argentine nationalism as well the continuation of Peronist policies that have not always served the best interests of the public. The Triple A normalized and nationalized violence against communities it deemed outside of the country's limited definition of what it meant to be Argentine. This normalization can further be traced to the state-sponsored violence that came to define the military dictatorship of the 1970s. Another enduring legacy of the Perón regime is that the party continues to impact politics of the country even though it lacks ideological consistency and stability. Because

presidential administrations have introduced neoliberal reforms and nationalized policies under the same guise of *Peronismo*, explaining its enduring legacy strictly by its policy promises falls short. The nostalgic promise of political recognition and opportunities comes to define why the *Justicialista* party continues to impact Argentina's contemporary political landscape. Though this may seem irrational by Western social science standards, the emotional response of returning to the familiarity of the Peronist party in the face of continued political trauma can be seen as logical.

From an outside perspective, Perón's policies seemed populist and idealistic, failing to provide stability for the working class. Yet, the experience of *Peronismo* within Argentina is markedly different, as lower income groups came to experience greater social mobility and political opportunities. This divide in understanding demonstrates the power of emotions in explaining the validity of a political experience. From a political analysis perspective that centers on rationality, *Peronismo* should have faded into oblivion after the coup that removed Perón from the presidency. With the death of Eva in 1952, the end of the post-War II boom, and Perón's deposing in 1955, social science would have typically predicted that Peronism would have lost its political momentum. Yet, that expected outcome failed to materialize. Here, we confront a puzzle: how did *Peronism* persist despite its inability to provide consistent stability to its followers? Through understanding Perón's focus on resolving working-class anxieties it becomes possible to explain how Peronism continues to be a political force onto the present. Even after his removal from power, Perón remained a fixture within the minds and hearts of constituencies which demonstrates the powerful sense of loyalty that developed between him and his followers. Overall, the emotional recognition of Peronism forged a more inclusive national culture that explains the ideology's continued ability to shape Argentine politics.

For many, Peronism may seem irrational or contradictory in its promises. Perón strategically introduced programs and practices that would offer the working class a better life to develop feelings of loyalty. These feelings can explain how Perón's rejection liberal democracy was not an issue for lower class populations. Federico Finchelstein argues that his goal was to "create a strong homeland" yet "Perón thought that this was impossible in a liberal democracy" as he stressed a citizen's "obligations to state, leader, and movement" (70). As a military strongman, Perón constructed a society where the collective mattered more than an individual's right to equality. Within the Peronist framework, Elena asserts that "actors envisioned citizenship in terms of social rights, entitlements, and protections" yet "officials favored a hierarchical conception of modernist development, in which state benefactors would care for the needs of the nation's workers in exchange for unwavering loyalty behind the regime and its supreme 'Conductor'" (83). On the surface, the working class could see the promise of their basic needs being met but on a deeper level, little was done to guarantee individual advancement or opportunities.

Thus, it can be argued that Perón never sought to form a truly democratic system. Perón's use of propaganda and censorship demonstrate his intolerance towards opposition. And though the Peróns offered greater social opportunity and dignity to the working class, Juan and Eva largely used patronage to maintain power instead of using it upend hierarchy. Their ability to mask these intentions further points to their talent of creating emotional bonds and connections between their government and the public. The emotional foundation of *Peronismo* further explains how the movement continued into the modern political arena of Argentina even as its ideology has shifted across decades. The original Peronist principles of a nationalized economy differed greatly from the neoliberal reforms of the Menem era, yet both vastly different sets of

policies represent the same party. This ideological inconsistency is a function of the personal ties that carry Peronist politics across years and circumstances because its representatives function to promote nostalgia by invoking an aching desire to return to better times. As crisis hit Argentina in the post dictatorship period after 1983 and the economic crisis of 2001, it makes sense that the electoral results indicated a turn towards political familiarity and charismatic personalities that are a hallmark of Peronist politics.

This sense of nostalgia has become an important piece of contemporary political experiences. From President Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again" to the conservative party in England's desire to return the United Kingdom to its pre-European Union standing, politics have taken a turn towards the past and an idealized return to simpler, uncomplicated ways. The case study of Peronism demonstrates the power of this phenomenon and how emotions transform a political moment into a full-fledged phenomenon. As Argentina continues to grapple with Peronist politics, the question remains as to how long emotional ties to the past can carry a movement. Regardless of the answer to that question, it remains incredibly important to evaluate how relationships are constructed between the public and their government. No longer should emotions be deemed irrational or unimportant to understanding the full political experience.

As demonstrated by the case of Peronism, emotions play a central role in shaping how citizens engage with the government. With elections coming this fall, it will be interesting to see what choices the Argentine public makes in deciding its next government. The choice between re-electing Mauricio Macri, a president whose policies have left many disappointed, and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, the previous president who represents a return to nostalgia and nationalist policies, will be a difficult one. For many, this upcoming decision represents a system



incapable of addressing its issues while instead pursuing politics of emotion and kneejerk responses. In an op-ed for the New York Times, Martín Caparrós writes that “en las últimas décadas, la Argentina se ha especializado en innovar: busca incansable —y encuentra, solvente— formas nuevas de la degradación. Esta, la de un país que se resigna a reelegir a uno de dos fracasados porque no tiene la audacia o la imaginación o la consecuencia necesarias para buscar otras salidas, es una nueva cumbre: la promesa de otros cuatro años perdidos”<sup>8</sup> For Argentina, *Peronism* represents one of these forms of failures that continues to challenge its democratic processes.

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<sup>8</sup> "In recent decades, Argentina has specialized in innovating: it searches tirelessly - and finds, solvent - new forms of degradation. This, the one of a country that resigns itself to reelect one of two failures because it does not have the audacity or the imagination or the necessary consequence to look for other exits, is a new summit: the promise of another four lost years."

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