

University of Wisconsin – Madison

LACIS/History

## **Interdepartmental 982 – Breaking the *Peronista* Prism: Work and Work Cultures in Argentina**

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David Sheinin  
dsheinin@trentu.ca

### ***Course Starting Point – Two Shifts/One Hypothesis***

#### ***Two Shifts***

In the past fifteen years, two dramatic and related social shifts have moved Argentina in new directions. First, and most important, during the 1990s, *peronismo* was decimated. According to some, the movement simply changed with the times, veering to the right after 1989, during Carlos Menem's first presidency. But in reality, *peronismo* as Argentines had known the movement in the 1950s and in the 1970s vanished in the 1990s. In part, this change can be attributed to the party hierarchy. Menem, a *peronista*, worked with political and economic allies to knock the legs out from under *peronismo*. Through dramatic legislative and related changes that opened Argentina to a torrent of foreign investment and tariff-free trade, the government upended a core traditional *peronista* base, the trade union movement. By the mid-1990s, for example, the four storey Buenos Aires headquarters of the once powerful clothing workers union sat all but empty. Menem's concentration of political power in the presidency over two presidential terms helped level a long tradition of popular, neighborhood based politics. Perhaps most important, as the centre-right government abandoned the longstanding *justicialista* social pact between worker and the state, what constituted a *peronista* identity in political, cultural, and social terms receded to near extinction in urban, working class neighborhoods that had once been unassailable *peronista* bulwarks. Polling data in the late 1990s began to show that these former

*peronista* strongholds had drifted away from *peronismo* at the polling booth and in other ways.

A second social shift began with the emergence at the time of the 2001 crisis of the factory recovery and *piquetero* movements. Reaching a peak of activity in 2002 and 2003, factory recovery was characterized by workers assuming control of factories and other businesses (including the famous Bauen Hotel in downtown Buenos Aires) that had either closed up shop, gone into bankruptcy, or been abandoned by owners unable or unwilling to continue making a go of it during the crisis. In contrast to factory recovery, where the key goal was always to keep production going, the *piquetero* movement had objectives and strategies that changed rapidly and were always more amorphous. At first, *piqueteros* represented loose agglomerations of unemployed or underemployed workers who marched in protest or blockaded thoroughfares in order to disrupt the contested normalcy of urban economic life. Over time, the movement adopted characteristics of permanency, including organizational and leadership forms that approximated political movements or parties, and more explicit long-term objectives, like a form of welfare payment for unemployed workers.

### ***One Hypothesis (the garden path?)***

**This course begins with a question** as yet unasked and unanswered in the scholarly (or in any other) literature: ***Can we understand the social movements represented in the second shift as a continuity of peronista politics and cultures?*** On first blush, the answer is an easy “no.” Both the *piqueteros* and the factory recovery movement have identified themselves in stark contrast to *peronismo* and what it had become in the 1990s. Unlike *zapatismo*, for example, in 1990s Mexico, neither evoked inspiration from past social movements. While each group viewed itself as representing working people and while each drew on communities that would, until the mid-1990s, have identified themselves as staunch *peronistas*, neither wanted anything to do with what movement members saw as the traditional *peronista* trade union organization, which they considered terminally corrupt. In addition, during the Nestor Kirchner presidency, *piquetero* leaders negotiating with the *peronista* administration routinely treated the government as

an adversary (a situation muddied further as far as *peronista* identities are concerned by Kirchner who, as president, avoided the *peronista* label like the plague, but as ex-president, has gone back to identifying himself with *peronismo*).

This course rejects the quick “no.” **It continues with the hypothesis that Argentina’s social movement shift must be understood as a continuation, reaffirmation, and reassertion of *peronista* cultures and politics in the face of the 1990s *menemista* assault on *peronismo* (which might in turn be viewed as a continuation of the *proceso* era assault on *peronismo*) and the 2001 crisis.**

I’ll come clean – I think the answer to the above question is “yes” and that the hypothesis is sustainable. But be careful; as someone who fancies he know something about Argentina -- and is always in search of the aesthetically pleasing historical explanation -- I *want* the answer to be “yes.” And as a historian chomping at the bit for the past to explain the present, I may have a tendency to grab too quickly at a “yes” on just such hypotheses. So don’t let me lead you down a garden path. As for any hypothesis, without research and thoughtful analysis, there is no immediate answer – and none can reasonably be assumed here. Moreover, at the end of the day, class members may reach a range of conclusions. The class may not find one right answer in regard to if or how *peronista* cultures, social norms, politics, or values have infused the shift movements. We might begin to address the hypothesis by considering the extent to which shift movement organization, language, strategies, neighborhood action, leadership, and cultures broadly conceived, owe their roots to at least three generations of *peronismo*.

### ***Course Mechanics – Two parallel labours***

The class meets weekly. We work backward chronologically, starting with the 2001 crisis and recent political/social change in Argentina, then moving on to consider what the sociologist Alejandro Horowicz has called “*los cuatro (mas tarde `los cinco’) peronismos.*” There will be a core reading each week on which students will

present, discuss, and analyze. Absences from or silences during class meetings are not an option. We work with the “go hard or go home” philosophy; students will come always with their “A” game, having read and processed the assigned material, ready to engage dynamically with the readings and with colleagues. The nature of the course demands that students be constantly rethinking and integrating into discussion material read for previous classes.

Immediately (if not sooner), I would ask students to identify a parallel labour. There is one written assignment for the course – a 5,000 to 8,000 word essay. I would like to meet very early in the term with each student to help them think through an essay topic and identify research direction, methodology, and analysis. I am willing to consider your individual suggestions for essay format/topic (theoretical emphasis, historiography, primary and/or secondary research, among others). I have three larger suggestions on topic (none is preferable). *There is no reason you cannot produce an original piece of research and analysis.*

- a) The essay might be on an aspect of work and work cultures in Argentina, directly or marginally related to the working hypothesis.
- b) You might use our class work as a template to work specifically on the historical origins of a current/recent social or political movement. It would be reasonable to work on the *piqueteros*, the factory recovery movement, or even *menemismo* or the *proceso* (in these latter cases, as examples perhaps of a cultural, political, or social *anti-peronismo*).
- c) There is no reason you might not take the class work template as a starting point from which to think through the historical origins of a social or political movement in another Latin American country. For example, while there is a great deal written on *indigenismo* in the revolution led by Evo Morales in Bolivia, would it not make sense to ask about the links between earlier movements on the left and their connections to Evo? Such questions might be especially relevant bearing in mind, first, the communal links between many of those coca working families who backed Evo early on and the nation’s politically

militant mining regions and, second, the possible bridge role culturally, intellectually or otherwise of the *Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)* between the current Bolivian Revolution and leftist politics of the 1960s-1980s. Alternatively, can we understand *chavismo* by thinking through the language, politics, and cultures of Rómulo Betancourt's programs and the modernization efforts of the city of Caracas in the 1950s and 1960s?

## **Grading Structure**

Essay – Due 5 December 2008 – 70%

Class Participation including presentations – 30%

## **Weekly Schedule**

There are no assigned supplementary readings. In conjunction with essay research I would gladly recommend supplementary readings for those interested (and with time).

Week I – Introduction/Essays/Presentations/Discussion

Week II – Steven Levitsky and Victoria Murillo, eds., ***Argentine Democracy: The Politics of Institutional Weakness***

Week III – Edward Epstein and David Pion-Berlin, eds., ***Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy***

Week IV – Javier Auyero, ***Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power***

Week V – Javier Auyero, ***Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita***

Week VI – Lavaca Collective. ***Sin Patrón: Stories from Argentina's Worker Run Factories***

Week VII – Daniel James, ***Doña María's Story: Life, History, and Political Identity***

Week VIII – Mariano Ben Plotkin, ***Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina***

Week IX – James Brennan, ed., ***Peronism and Argentina***

Week X – James Brennan, ***Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955-1976***

Week XI – Daniel James, ***Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class***

Week XII – Essay Presentations

Week XIII – Essay Presentations

### ***Advance Work***

If this outline finds you before the first week of September and you would like to work ahead, beyond reading the works listed above you might consider:

- a) Identifying an essay topic.
- b) Reading more broadly on *peronismo* and/or related course themes. To be sure, the above reading list barely scratches the surface (in English) of the strong scholarly literature. You might start with *Los cuatro peronismos*.
- c) I recommend four good films.
  - i) ***Luna de Avellaneda*** (Juan José Campanella, 2004) explores the destruction of *peronista* community in the 1990s through the decline of a neighborhood sports and social club (and the accompanying economic and social turmoil) in

Avellaneda, once a working class *peronista* stronghold across the Riachuelo River from La Boca (Buenos Aires). There is also a curious melding of working and middle class cultures in this nostalgic look backward. The opening scene, showing the club fifty years ago, is a wonderful, cloying fantasy of what *peronismo* brought (should have brought?) to Argentina.

- ii) ***Memoria del Saqueo*** (Pino Solanas, 2004) is simply the best analysis I know of the destruction wrought by *menemismo*.
- iii) ***The Take*** (Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein, 2004) is a romanticized view of social change in Argentina by two prominent Canadian film makers.
- iv) ***Evita Capitana*** (Nicolás Malowiki, 2000) is a brilliant documentary exploring a key moment in *peronista* cultural history.