

Review/Reseña

Eduardo Elena. *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Consumerism and Peronism in Midcentury Argentina

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Midcentury Argentines clamoring for a *vida digna* (dignified life) turned to Juan Perón and his wife Eva to provide them with material comforts. By studying the intersection between “culture and economics,” Eduardo Elena’s beautifully written text explores how Argentines sought material goods to confirm their rights as citizens of a modernizing state (3). Elena postulates that the Peronist government’s actions in “domestic spaces and marketplaces” made everyday objects “symbols of elite selfishness and social justice, populist excess and national progress” (4).

Through the vilification of shopkeepers—believed to be the cause of so many economic woes—Peronist rhetoric, as explained by Elena, gave hope to many of Argentina’s poor and middle classes that if they worked with the regime they would have access to more material goods. Encouraged to report unscrupulous merchants and track prices, housewives were invited to join in the struggle for a *vida digna*. This line of research clearly models how propaganda in Peronist Argentina sought the collaboration of the population in its quest for material security for vast numbers of Argentines.

In the late 1940s the dream of an Argentina full of modern comforts appeared to be coming true. For example, domestic workers found ease and comfort in the luxurious Hogar de Empleadas where they enjoyed access to shopping and a few leisurely days off. For the first time, many working class Argentines were able to afford much deserved vacations to the many tourist destinations throughout the nation that were modernized with hotels and restaurants. Even the simple floor rag was a symbol of economic and political success as Peronist regulations made this common, but necessary, commodity less expensive.

However, as explained by Elena, letters directed to the Ministry of Technical Affairs (MAT) demonstrate a much more complicated relationship between poor Argentines and the Peronist bureaucracy. In attempts to win coveted government posts, petitioners to MAT composed “narratives of despair,” where they begged those in power to help them. Specifically, letter writers outlined their humble conditions in contrast “with acclaim for the Peronist movement and its leading couple” (146). Using letters written to both MAT and a rich treasure trove of letters written by ordinary Argentines to Perón during the “Peron Wants to Know” campaign of 1952, Elena is able to document how Argentines throughout the country were moved to hope for a better life under the leadership of Juan Perón and his charismatic wife. As Elena recounts, people in Córdoba, El Chaco, Mendoza and other far flung areas of the country, demanded that their needs be satisfied. Internalizing language familiar to Peronists, these individuals hoped that Perón would lift them out of their misery into a life with more material comforts.

Elena's narrative eloquently navigates the complicated minefield of Peronist history by tackling questions of how Peronism shaped lives and politics in the provinces. In the past few years, histories about Peronism have begun to unravel how Justicialismo—the Peronist philosophy of Social Justice—was interpreted in the areas outside of Buenos Aires.¹ While clearly limited in source material, Elena still creatively manages to decentralize Peronism. This refreshing image of Peronism outside of the capital city allows for new actors in midcentury Argentine history to come to the fore. How the residents of small provincial capitals and poor rural Argentines were clearly influenced by the rhetoric of Peronism, the details of their daily struggles and their hopes for a better future under Peronist rule are highlighted. Elena, using propaganda films and feature films that the poor and middle classes throughout the nation watched, finds that letter writers clearly hoped that they too could live in the well-built homes filled with material comforts often portrayed on the silver screen. Importantly, Elena explains that it was not only workers who hoped to benefit from the new social order. By studying material culture Elena recounts that housewives, rural dwellers and the elderly all hoped to benefit under Peronism. Studied through this lens of consumerism the appeal of Peronism to Argentines become much clearer. Nonetheless, it does leave us with this nagging question: why did so many continue to support Peronism even when it was clear that the vast majority of letter writers received stock responses or, more commonly, no response at all? It is possible, therefore, that the letters tell us less about the individuals writing the letters and more about the success of the Peronist propaganda machine. By following the “narrative of despair” Argentines shared a rhetorical style, one clearly given to them by Juan and Eva themselves. However, as Elena notes, government officials were overwhelmed with the number of requests and, in the end, paid little attention to the requests of the populace and, sadly, on occasion mocked them, showing little of the compassion the first couple evoked when interacting publicly with the masses.

¹ See Mark A. Healey, *The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of the San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Studying populism through the perspective of consumerism, Elena is able to shed light on issues of gender and race in midcentury Argentina. While studies of gender and Peronism are more common, race and Peronism are less so.² He explores the tension between the largely Peronist and darker-skinned new arrivals into Argentina's larger cities and the wealthier and whiter anti-Peronists. The anti-Peronists viewed these masses with disdain, calling them *cabecitas negras*—or “little black heads.” This is one of the areas where Elena’s work shines. Although this is far from the central theme of the text, Elena does not simply gloss over the harsh realities of race in an increasingly urban midcentury Argentina. Dissecting the racial tensions in Argentina is never simple; nevertheless, Elena does not hesitate to investigate these tensions in a country that has sold itself to the world as almost exclusively white.

By the early 1950s it was increasingly clear that a downturn in the Argentine economy was causing considerable hardship for Argentina’s working households. Real economic decline endangered the promises of a *vida digna* in Peronist Argentina. Government bureaucrats, increasingly realizing the vulnerability of the regime, implored poor and middle class families to cut expenses, increase savings and use commodities efficiently. But, as Elena points out, bureaucrats not only expected households to cut back, they made sure that this would occur by limiting domestic beef sales, in an effort to increase revenue from sales abroad. As a result, Elena concludes, the Peronist economic plans were successful in keeping Argentina from falling into a deep economic crisis. In the end, salaries and economic purchasing power for unskilled workers was the same in 1947 as it was in 1955. As pointed out by Elena, it was not the economy that doomed Perón’s second term in office. It was political turmoil.

What can we learn from this study of everyday Argentines and their interactions with Justicialismo? Elena clearly shows that the promise of Peronism was much more important than its realities. The hope of a better future, expressed in the letter writers to MAT and the “Perón Wants to

² See Daniel James, *Doña Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Carolina Barry, *La Fundación Eva Perón y Las Mujeres: Entre la Provocación y la Inclusión* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2008).

Know” campaign gave many the hope for jobs, education, vacation, access to health care and more simply, better food and clothing. While clearly few of those goals were achieved and the political squabbles with the Catholic Church and the military certainly led more directly to Perón’s downfall, the power and memory of these days when material goods were within sight of an increasingly large number of Argentines resonated throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

With its focus on material goods, Elena’s text will find an enthusiastic audience for those trying to understand material culture, the economic realities of Peronism and those seeking to understand the appeal of populism. Because of the approachability of the narrative, the text will be of great value in both advanced undergraduate and graduate classrooms.