The Different Meaning of Peronism to the Working Class

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Abstract

Peronism has been the most significant, unchallenged political movement in Argentina since its foundation in the 1940s. Whether the Peronist party has won the elections or whether it has been in the position capable of distributing any kind of benefits, the party has successfully secured loyalty of the workers for more than sixty years. Why have they chosen to support Peronism? What has Peronism meant for them? This article investigates how the Peronists were able to maintain popular support. Three different interpretations are discussed to explore Peronism's success. The traditional view argues that the workers supported the party because of material needs. The second argument emphasizes the ideological appeal and the value of working-class consciousness that the party created. The last argument focuses on the creation of a powerful political imagery to generate "the spiritual unity" that would unite its followers. These three arguments give readers a better understanding of Peronism from different perspectives.

บทคัดย่อ

ตั้งแต่ก่อตั้งพรรคจนถึงปัจจุบันพรรคเปรอนเป็นกลุ่มทางการเมืองที่สำคัญที่สุดที่ไม่มีใครท้าทายได้ในประเทศอาร์เจนตินา ไม่ว่าพรรคจะชนะการเลือกตั้งหรือไม่ หรือไม่ว่าพรรคจะอยู่ในสถานะที่สามารถแจกจ่ายผลประโยชน์ต่าง ๆ ได้มากน้อยเพียงใด พรรคเปรอนสามารถรักษาความจงรักภักดีของชนชั้นกรรมาชีพ

ได้อย่างเหนียวแน่นมานานกว่าหกสิบปี เพราะเหตุใดกรรมกรจึงเลือกที่จะสนับสนุนพรรคเปรอน พรรคมีความหมายต่อพวกเขาอย่างไร บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ว่าพรรคเปรอนสามารถรักษาความศรัทธาของชนชั้นกรรมาชีพที่มีต่อพรรคได้อย่างไรโดยจะอ้างถึงสามแนวคิดหลักดังต่อไปนี้ แนวคิดดั้งเดิมมักเชื่อว่ากรรมกรสนับสนุนพรรคเพราะพรรคสามารถให้ผลประโยชน์ในด้านวัตถุ แนวคิดที่สองมุ่งไปที่ประเด็นที่พรรคให้ความสำคัญกับบทบาทและการตระหนักถึงคุณค่าของชนชั้นกรรมาชีพ และแนวคิดสุดท้ายเน้นเรื่องการสร้างภาพลักษณ์ของพรรคและตัวผู้นำเพื่อสร้างความเป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกันทางจิตใจ ซึ่งจะยึดเหนี่ยวกลุ่มผู้สนับสนุนได้ในท้ายที่สุด ทั้งสามแนวคิดจะทำให้ผู้อ่านเข้าใจพรรคเปรอนในมุมมองที่แตกต่างกัน

Peronism has been the biggest and the most important political movement in Argentina's history. Its origin can be traced back to the military coup in 1943 in which Juan Perón quietly emerged as the most energetic, enthusiastic, and politically skilful of the revolutionary leaders though his figure was somewhat shadowy. Perón was formally recognized as the protector of workers on 17th October, 1945, the day when workers organized mass protests for Perón's release from confinement and his return to government. Peronism first appeared in the political arena in the 1946 presidential election, beating the Unión Democrática, a broad alliance of conservatives, Radicals, Socialists, and Communists. Until its collapse and proscription by the military coup in 1955, the Peronist Party won all national elections and controlled the majority in the Congress.

The Peronist Party has appealed to the working class. It entered politics in the 1940s by appealing to the rural sector and unionized urban workers. Juan Perón created emotional ties with the labor and gave workers a sense of dignity by respecting their political importance and recognizing them as party representatives

(Rock, 1987: 262; Collier and Collier, 1991: 338). After legalizing and incorporating unions into the party, he instituted the *tercio* system, which gave workers the right to nominate a third of Peronist candidates or leadership positions (Levitsky, 1999: 119; McGuire, 1995: 211). Unions could appoint a labor minister, determine labor policies, and set the wages of workers. When the party was in office, it needed to rely on unions to keep social peace. Peronism also built a loyalty by rewarding unions that supported him and by introducing social reforms to protect workers, such as protection against layoffs, paid vacations, and regulated working hours (Schuster, 1984: 24).

In addition, import substitution industrialization, an economic model the Peronists employed during the 1940s and 1950s, gave extensive benefits to the lower classes. An increase in government intervention and expenditure created more jobs and social welfare programs. State support for industry expansion contributed to more employment and policies favoring higher wages for workers. The government sometimes permitted labor unions the right to strike and negotiate with employers (Collier and Collier, 1991: 332-333, 338). Perón also redistributed real income of urban workers. Since the state monopolized the purchase of agricultural commodities for export, it reduced prices of agricultural goods, which led to an increase in real wages (McComb and Zarazaga, 1997: 157-158). From 1946 to 1947 and from 1947 to 1948, workers' earnings rose 17.7 and 11.7 percent respectively. And after a new rise in 1949, wages stood 24.3 percent above those in 1945 (Corradi, 1985: 64).

Sticks were used along with the carrots. Union leaders who refused to join Peronist organizations were removed by the secretary of labor and replaced by new leaders loyal to Peronism. As a result,

the Peronist party was able to nearly control all organized labor, mobilize workers to vote for the party, and create strong ideological loyalty which has remained to this day (Coppedge, 1998: 190). Perón became the patron of workers and made the Peronist party the only party for the working class.

To understand Peronism's electoral achievement and its ability to maintain working-class support, scholars provide different interpretations explaining the relationship between workers, their organizations, the state, the Peronist movement, and Perón himself. This article is intended to discuss three different approaches focusing on the relationship between Perón and organized workers; Perón's political and ideological appeal; the creation of Peronist political imagery through myths, symbols, and political rituals.

The structuralist approach argues that workers supported Perón as a response to economic grievances and class exploitation.

> "Almost anyone enquiring of a Peronist worker why he supported Perón has been met by the significant gesture of tapping the back pocket where the money is kept, symbolizing a basic class pragmatism of monetary needs and their satisfaction." (James, 1988b: 13)

María Roldán, a unionist and Peronist Party activist in Berisso, a working-class, meat-packing town outside Buenos Aires, mentioned that

> "with Perón we discovered many things. A pair of nylons, a nice dress. Life changed. We could buy things like refrigerators. ...When Perón began to go into action things changed, it was as if all had been sterile land before and then everything turned green." (James, 2000: 71)

Within the structuralist approach, there is a debate on the relationship between the working class and the Peronist movement. Gino Germani argued that Peronist workers were irrational and anomic. Rapid industrialization and social changes produced masses,

mostly immigrants from the interior, easily manipulated and deceived by Perón who was demagogic, overpowerful and charismatic (De la Torre, 1992). These new migrant workers distanced themselves from the old ones who were mainly descended from European ancestors and remained loyal to foreign ideologies, particularly socialism, anarchism and syndicalism. The existing labor institutions were unable to attract the newcomers who instead were convinced by the nationalist rhetoric of Perón and relied on the state to provide for their needs (James, 1988a: 441-442).

On the other hand, the revisionists such as Miguel Murmis and Juan Carlos Portantiero challenged the notions of rationality and the rupture between the old and new working class. They argued that the development of Argentine labor could be traced back to the 1930s and early 1940s. The oligarchic governments neither responded to workers' demands for social security and labor law nor provided access to political power. They chose to support Perón who could fulfill their material needs (De la Torre, 1992). In addition, the traditional union movement, they believed, played a significant role in organizing support for Perón. There was no separation between the old and new workers.

Nevertheless, the explanation of Peronism as an expression of economic and social frustration left many questions unanswered. Why did workers choose to support Peronism while other political movements focused on the same material needs and offered solutions? Why did workers continue their support after the Peronist government unavoidably launched economic policies against their interests to placate economic situations in the beginning of the 1950s? Why did workers still maintain their loyalty to the Peronist movement when it

could no longer give them benefits after its proscription and Perón's exile? What did Peronism mean for workers? The cultural approaches of James and Plotkin may offer a better understanding.

Contrary to the structuralist approach, James suggests that only material needs could not distinguish Peronism from other political forces also addressing the same social issues. To understand its distinctiveness and success, its political and ideological appeal should be examined. The Peronist government broke with the conservative regime and denounced a formal democratic system that had no real content of democracy. The elite rule during the *década infame* was characterized by fraud, corruption, and repression. Even the traditional parties that formally opposed the fraud of the 1930s were alleged to have compromised themselves with the conservative regime. Pre-Perón political situations generated crisis of confidence and legitimacy and helped reinforce the image of Perón. In addition, Perón redefined the issue of citizenship and established access to full political rights for workers. Peronism challenged the liberal notion of democracy which limited itself to the political realm and extended it to take care of economic and social life of the country. The government incorporated workers into the process of national development, recognizing their national values and promising social justice (1988b: 14-18).

James also argues that Perón emphasized class identity in his political discourse since he needed strong working-class organization to strengthen his movement. The state for Perón was not only the powerful distributor of resources to passive individuals but also the space for workers to act politically and socially as class and to establish their corporate rights. Recognizing the social presence of workers, the Peronist state legitimized working-class activities and

institutions (1988b: 18-19).

Peronism's success, James adds, also stemmed from its ability to affirm the values of the working-class consciousness and made them accepted publicly. The movement created the language of Peronism, using terms that expressed notions of social justice. It took the terms previously symbolic of working-class humiliation, inverted their meanings, and reaffirmed workers' dignity. The most renowned example is the word *descamisado*. Originally used to refer to political and moral inferiority, this term was redefined to reinforce class identity (1988b: 30-31).

Another issue significant for understanding Peron's accomplishment was the credibility and concreteness of his political discourse. In contrast to socialists and anarchists who usually addressed audiences with language of abstraction, used didactic and moralizing tone, and considered them morally and intellectually inferior, Perón gave his workers a superior role and employed popular political style--simple, straightforward, and with working-class sensibilities-- which facilitated him to communicate and establish a tie with his people. "In this sense Peronism's political appeal was radically plebeian; it eschewed the need for a peculiarly enlightened political elite and reflected and inculcated a profound anti-intellectualism" (James, 1988b: 22).

James' analysis of the popular mobilization on October 17th, 1945 provides better understanding of the meaning of Peronism for the working class. The seventeenth of October symbolized the emergence of the working class as an authentic and legitimate force within national politics and society. Workers went out on the streets to show their genuine action and power. The festive and carnivalesque atmosphere on that day was considered a form of "secular iconoclasm"

to break up with traditional norms of working class and to destroy sacred symbols of institutions. They attacked elite institutions, symbols, and norms that represented wealth and prestige of elite and transmitted their social subordination. Through the attack, they humiliated elites, demonstrated their powerlessness, and denied their authority and power. In addition, the mobilization challenged the notion of spatial hierarchy and territorial proprieties. The city and the periphery were said to be different politically, socially, and culturally. The city was the aristocratic area where political power, educational institutions and cultural centers concentrated whereas the suburbs and their residents were considered insignificant and inferior. The invasion of the suburbs toward the center violated this convention and broke up the rule of elite domination (1988a: 449-456).

James shows in his article that on October 17th, workers organized mass protests not only for demanding Perón's release but also affirmed their own pride of being workers and objected their exclusion from the society. Obviously, they fought for Perón in order to maintain their benefits that he previously provided. However, they also struggled to defend their ideology and class consciousness since maintaining Peronism meant preserving their pride and dignity.

In summing up James' analysis, before the emergence of Peronism, the working class was not fully formed and did not have strong class consciousness. It was Perón who generated the working class and identified it as a social and political force in the society. Workers did not just join the Peronist movement for material benefits but they trusted in its political discourse which successfully constituted the Peronist working class, provided them dignity, and inserted them into the society (1988b: 38).

Mariano Plotkin agrees with James that material benefits were not the only factor that could explain Peronism's accomplishment. Unlike James who focuses on political and ideological appeal, Plotkin studies the creation of a powerful political imagery and an efficient system of symbolic interchange between Perón and his followers (2003: xi). The Peronist regime, Plotkin argues, attempted to generate the image of "spiritual unity" by excluding the opposition from the political sphere and by creating a new unifying myth served as the base for the Peronist political imagery that would reinforce and unite its heterogeneous constituency. The creation of myth was done through machinery, including redefining and creating political rituals and manipulating educational system, in order to create Perón's charisma and to organize the masses along his lines (2003: 30).

Unlike James who studies the social meaning of mass mobilization on October 17th, 1945, Plotkin analyzes the process of Peronization of the seventeenth of October and May Day. As we already know, October 17th was the day people organized a spontaneous mass mobilization against Perón's detention. However, the Peronist regime redefined the spontaneity and turned a day of protest into a celebration. In other words, Perón appropriated the meaning of the event to indicate that his *descamisados* mobilized on October 17th not to demand his liberation but to celebrate his freedom. He also successfully pushed to promulgate a bill declaring this day a national holiday, transforming the Peronist festivity into a state one (2003: ch.3, ch.4).

In addition, the Peronist Party transformed May Day to serve its own benefit. Originally, peaceful May Day was a Socialist celebration. By 1943, it was modified and became a semipatriotic and

national celebration in which various political forces including the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the UCR, and the bourgeois organizations participated. After the emergence of Peronism, May Day's history was rewritten, depicting the day as a previously violent and revolutionary event in which workers threatened social order and opposed the oligarchic and repressive regime. Perón began to Peronize May Day by monopolizing the festivity through the state despite the opposition from those who wanted to maintain labor's autonomy. Workers, according to Peronism, were no longer needed to be represented by the Socialist Party or other political groups. May Day was no more a festival in which different political sectors could exercise their power or the oppositions could express their grievances. It was now the moment when the state could have a direct contact with its people and let them know the social benefits they would receive (Plotkin, 2003: ch.3, ch.4).

The new traditions of the seventeenth of October and May Day, Plotkin suggests, helped construct Peronist imagery, place the figure of Perón in the prominent position, and strengthen his charismatic leadership. These rituals also allowed Peronism to dominate the political sphere and close all space available for other alternatives. They also assured workers' loyalty to their leader and his regime. By elevating these two celebrations to national character, the Peronist regime also identified itself as a national character (2003: 78).

In addition to Peronization of the political rituals, the regime used education as a tool to promote Peronist political culture and generate loyalty. During his first years, Perón followed the educational policies of the military regime to maintain Catholic and nationalist curriculum. By 1950, as the government centralized and controlled the

educational system, the Peronist regime modified the educational materials to fit its doctrine (Plotkin, 2003: ch.5). Comparing two sets of textbooks, Plotkin believes that the contents of the Peronist textbooks were highly propagandistic and in some cases lacked pedagogical value. He also argues that the Peronist texts tried to break away from the liberal discourse, introduced a new social actor, particularly the working class, and reformulated the role of the state in the society. The state was responsible for dealing with social problems and promoting progress. The texts also emphasized the importance of collective over the individual and affirmed the state as an indispensable actor in the Argentine society. Another important feature of the textbooks was the ubiquitous presence of Perón and Evita (2003: ch.6). In this sense, the idea of importance of the state was transformed into the importance of Peronism and Perón for the nation.

The Peronist regime, Plotkin maintains, also established semiofficial institutions to politicize certain aspects of everyday life and popular culture. A private beneficent institution, the Fundación Eva Perón was initiated to provide direct social services and generate the mythology of Eva. Through its work, the FEP created undisputed loyalty and the feeling of gratitude among people receiving benefits towards the regime. Turning the social services into gracious gifts rather than basic rights, the FEP reinforced Eva's charisma.

> "According to official propaganda, the medical material would bring health and relief, and what is even more important, the confidence of knowing that one is taken care by the woman who has become the guardian angel of all the dispossessed" (Plotkin, 2003: 155).

In addition, realizing the ability of women to take the Peronist doctrine into Argentine homes, Perón founded the Partido Peronista

Femenino to incorporate women into political life. The Campeonatos Evita and the Peronist children's magazine were also launched to incorporate and indoctrinate younger generations. All of these state-sponsored activities–FEP, PPF, CE, and the magazine–did not require active participation but attempted to secure what Plotkin calls, after Renzo De Felice, "passive consensus" (2003: ch.7, ch.8).

In summarizing Plotkin's analysis, Peronism monopolized the public symbolic space and deligitimized other alternative symbols. Perón's era left behind not only the labor law and any bills favorable to workers but also the modified relationship between the state and society and Peronist culture within the working class.

Though both Plotkin and James agree that Peronism's success was more than the explanation of material benefits, they reach different conclusions about the culture of Peronism. Plotkin views Peronism as another political doctrine that attempted to occupy public space. The Peronist culture, the myths and symbols, was created to maintain the appearance of spiritual unity, to eliminate other political alternatives, to assure the undisputed loyalty of its followers, and to bond the heterogeneous constituency together. The main objective of its culture was to impose on the nation the consensus that would stay beyond class line and creating only one society, that is, the Peronist society. Although material benefits were not the only explanation for Peronism's success, they played a crucial role in the creation of its myth. The social assistance the movement provided was not directly used to attract workers as the structuralist approach suggests but to generate the political imagery such in the case of FEP and PPF of Evita. The Peronist culture was based on illusion and propaganda. Plotkin does not see its culture as an end but a means to maximize power and achieve political victory.

James believes that Peronism was not primarily viewed as a political doctrine or a sectarian political party. Its vision went beyond the political strife to recognize workers' rights and achieve social justice. Its culture meant pride, self-respect, and dignity. Although material needs were inevitable, they played a minimal role in the movement. What Peronism cared about was "an expanded notion of the meaning of citizenship and the workers' relations with the state, and a heretical social component which spoke to working-class claims to greater social status, dignity within the workplace and beyond, and a denial of the elite's social and cultural pretensions" (1988b: 263). The culture that Perón indoctrinated among workers deepened the class cleavage and generated the rupture between elite and the working class. It was a movement of political and social opposition and a denial of the dominant elite's power. Unlike Plotkin, the Peronists did not see electoral victory as an end but a means to attain political, economic, and social reforms for greater benefits of all *pueblo.*

In addition, Plotkin and James depict two different Peróns. Plotkin presents a negative picture of Perón and his movement in his book. Perón, according to Plotkin, was opportunist who attempted to appeal to any constituency left available. His original model of social organization was conservative and tended to deepen the tendencies of the previous regime rather than breaking with the past. Nevertheless, as soon as the conservatives, the business groups, and the middle class rejected his program, he changed his political discourse and incorporated the working class, the only sector left (2003: 196). Perón was also totalitarian who saw his opponents as enemies, established a semicorporative state, and wanted the state to occupy all spaces of social life (2003: 198). The image of Perón

and Evita, Plotkin believes, resulted from Peronist propaganda rather than the real feeling of the people. People were not proud to be Peronist but were required to be.

On the contrary, James portrays a positive picture of Perón. He was a populist leader who initiated policies and political ideology that responded to workers' needs. He gave them pride, self-respect, and dignity. His credible and nationalist rhetoric reached at the heart of workers who were proud to be Peronist.

The weakness of Plotkin's work, which he himself recognizes, lies on his inability to analyze the scope and limitations of messages conveyed by the Peronist regime. Readers are unable to learn to what extent the propaganda was consumed and how effective it was. Plotkin mainly relies on secondary literature, local newspapers, documents published by the Peronist movement, and public speeches but he ignores the popular voice. Interviews with old Peronist militants and workers would have allowed him to gather popular opinions and respond to the propaganda. On the other hand, the strength of James' book is his sources. He used archival resources in Argentina such as national newspapers, magazines from the period, trade union newspapers, and documents from government agencies. He also had access to unofficial Peronist newspapers, pamphlets, and barrio broadsheets. The most important sources that he relied on are interviews and conversations with Peronist activists during the period discussed in the book.

Although these two scholars have provided different explanations about the Peronist culture, their cultural approach has transformed the direction of studies of Peronism. Studies of populist movements are no longer limited to the relationship between the

movement and workers, class conflicts, labor incorporation, or charismatic leadership. Plotkin's and James' works have treated populism not only as politics but also as culture that have an impact on thinking and judgmental attitudes of nearly all sectors in the society including such marginalized groups as women, youth, and children. Their approach presents the cultural uniqueness of Peronism, distinguishing it from other political forces. It also provides a convincing answer explaining why the working class still maintained their support after the Peronist government began to launch economic policies against their interests or during the exile of their leaders. Peronism was their culture, identity, and belief. It ran in their blood and was not easily changed within a short period. Their works also clarify why Argentine politics was divided between Peronists and anti-Peronists.

Throughout this article, the different approaches to study Peronism's success have been stressed. Particular emphasis has been placed on the cultural analysis by James and Plotkin. These approaches shed light on the nature and political achievement of the Peronist movement. They take political ideology, political discourse, and the creations of myth and symbols into account. They also help to explain why Peronism could survive after the proscription and severe repression and why it could maintain long-time loyalty among its followers.

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