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Revisiting Argentine History: Politics and Ideology in the Interwar Years

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The following is a report on the panel "Revisiting Argentine History: Politics and Ideology in the Interwar Years," that took place at the Latin American Studies Association meeting in Montreal, Canada, in September 2007. Yet it represents more than a simple account of these proceedings. Few North American specialists in Argentine history are able to attend scholarly meetings in Argentina, nor do Argentine historians frequent conferences in North America. This article, then, is an attempt to open lines of communication. Hopefully it will stimulate a flow of information in both directions, with scholars of each region regularly reporting on their *jornadas* for the benefit of their colleagues north and south.

Argentine historiography on the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s moved in new directions after 1983, with the opening of the local political climate. The creation of new archives and the expansion of existing collections permitted scholars to ask pioneering questions about the recent Argentine past, including ones related to liberal, leftist, and anti-fascist movements. So, too, did the rise of the new cultural history.[1] There also was another factor that promoted a shift in

historical perspectives. In preceding years the prevalent notion had been that workers' struggles had culminated in Peronism, a view that seemed to suggest that labor and leftist movements in the interwar period were unimportant, if not irrelevant. Furthermore, largely because of the anti-fascists' opposition to Peronism, many authors regarded their activities, even those before 1945, as elitist and imperialistic. These views tended to erase these labor, leftist, and anti-fascist groups and stifle research on them.[2] The widespread desire to understand local forms of authoritarianism -- as well as the movements that opposed them -- that accompanied the end of the Proceso led historians to pursue these fields of inquiry and critically examine Peronism as well.[3]

This panel reflected these historiographical currents, particularly in the use of cultural history and the willingness to scrutinize liberalism, antifascism, and Peronism. In "Reassessing Argentina's 'Great Liberal Press': La Prensa, 1930-1946," Jorge Nállim analyzed the content of this newspaper, noting that it did not automatically support the Concordancia, as many have believed. The Junta de la Victoria bridged class, ethnic, political, and religious differences among women in an attempt to revitalize Argentine democracy, according to Sandra McGee Deutsch, in "Argentine Women Against Fascism: The Junta de la Victoria, 1941-1943." Revisiting the relationship between

"Peronismo y Fascismo," Federico Finchelstein found that the latter played an important role in the development of the former. In "Fascism and Antifascism in Argentina," the commentator, Eduardo Zimmerman, offered valuable suggestions to each presenter and useful observations for future work in the field.

Nállim's study of La Prensa forms part of his larger research project on Argentine liberalism from the 1930s to the 1950s. This standpoint enabled him to discern the nuances of the newspaper's ideology. It also helped him situate it within the complex and shifting body of liberal thought of the period.

Between 1930 and 1946 La Prensa's conservative liberal commentaries centered on several general topics. One was the vicissitudes of Argentine politics. Arguing that President Hipólito Yrigoyen's partisan and domineering rule had undermined the constitution, the newspaper initially supported the Revolution of 1930. It believed that General José F. Uriburu would return the country to the type of democracy it favored: a narrow one identified with positivism and the rule of the "most qualified," which La Prensa set apart from the unruly mass democracy tied to Radical Personalists. When Uriburu's corporatist designs became apparent, however, La Prensa lambasted them. Unlike the *nacionalistas*, La Prensa did not blame the electoral system per se for Argentina's political difficulties,

but rather the corrupt and irresponsible practices of political parties. Nor did it exempt conservatives from this indictment; it criticized those who favored Uriburu's anti-liberal proposals and others who simply engaged in electoral fraud. Indeed, La Prensa held a nuanced position regarding the Concordancia. While the newspaper supported its anti-leftist measures and limited view of women's suffrage, it strongly opposed its repressive electoral practices. Surprisingly, at least to the author of this review, it reported approvingly on opposition parties after 1935 and the attempt to create an anti-fascist, pro-democratic Popular Front. Consistent with its liberalism, it also disapproved of Uriburu's and President Agustín P. Justo's censorship policies and concessions to the Catholic Church.

Another topic that received much attention from La Prensa was the increasing state intervention in the economy that took place under all the governments of this period. Again in accord with its classical liberalism, the daily defended free trade and the agricultural export economy. It saw higher tariffs and the creation of "artificial" industries as detrimental to consumers. Only industries based on local needs and raw materials should receive state aid, in its view. During the dictatorship of 1943-45, La Prensa criticized the military policy of promoting national defense-related industries. Even subsidies and other measures designed to help agricultural producers received its

condemnation. The newspaper identified statist policies, such as those of Federico Pinedo, with fascist and Communist dictatorships. It also went to the extreme of condemning U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

Regarding labor policies in the 1940s, La Prensa initially placed itself on the side of the military regime. It approved of this administration's repression of Communist union activity, although it demurred at restrictions on the right to participate in professional groups. Yet when the government, under Colonel Juan Perón's influence, shifted toward wage and benefits policies that favored workers, the newspaper attacked it.

Some of La Prensa's stands contrasted with those of the groups restored to power by the coup of 1930, as well as those of its competitor, La Nación.[4] It did not always represent the views held by the oligarchy, which in turn was hardly a monolithic group. While the newspaper's opposition to leftism and mass democracy resembled that of the political elite, its support for secularism, the Argentine liberal tradition, and certain individual freedoms pushed it toward the political opposition. Nevertheless, while Radical and Socialist leaders generally agreed with La Prensa's free-market stance, economic nationalism was gaining support within these parties. Although their political views were similar, La Nación differed from its rival by generally favoring

statist economic policies, at least until 1945, and taking a more conciliatory attitude toward the Church.

Another area of concern for La Prensa was the rise of fascism abroad and the apparent strength of its sympathizers within Argentina. President Ramón Castillo's neutrality in World War II, as well as his growing authoritarianism, repelled the newspaper, as it did Socialists, Progressive Democrats, Radicals, and anti-fascist writers and activists. Thus La Prensa moved closer to these opposition groups. Like other anti-fascist forces, the daily censured Castillo's policies and identified Argentina's liberal tradition with support for democracy at home and the Allies overseas. These positions led the newspaper to support anti-fascist groups like Acción Argentina and denounce *nacionalistas*, revisionist historians, and rightist Catholics.

La Prensa also criticized the military dictatorship of the mid-1940s. It openly opposed the continuation of neutrality, imposition of religious education, restrictions on freedom of the press and speech, and *nacionalista* interventions in the universities. Its attacks led the government to suspend its publication for several days in 1944. Identifying the regime and Perón with "Nazi-fascism," the newspaper approvingly reported on local demonstrations celebrating the fall of fascism in Europe and supporting the Unión Democrática. Apparently

the struggle against "Nazi-fascism" outweighed the perils of working with Communists in this anti-Peronist coalition.

La Prensa's anti-Peronist stance was predictable and is well-known. Still, Nállim demonstrated that from 1930 to 1946, by consistently defending its rigid interpretation of liberalism, this newspaper did not always act in the way one might have expected. La Prensa and Argentine liberalism as a whole were more heterogeneous and fluid than many historians have believed.

Given this heterogeneity, I am curious about debates and conflicts within liberal circles. Did La Prensa ever engage more progressive liberal voices? Did the latter openly disagree with La Prensa?

Zimmerman combined praise for Nállim's paper with questions designed to stimulate further study. He commended its thorough examination of the newspaper's ideological positions. The fact that La Prensa centered its criticism on political parties rather than other faults of the political system, such as *caudillismo* and the deficiencies of federal institutions, caught his attention. Zimmerman suggested two possible avenues of research. One was La Prensa's image of itself as a cultural and political actor. Did it see itself as part of liberalism? If so, how did it evaluate the role of the liberal press? Another is whether the newspaper envisioned a particular image of Argentine society. Did

it think that a return to an oligarchical-led society was feasible? Did it allow any room for an egalitarian transformation?

La Prensa may not have favored such a transformation, but the Junta de la Victoria, as studied by Sandra McGee Deutsch, did. The all-female Junta was the largest women's political group before Peronism, with about 45,000 members throughout the nation. Her previous research on *las derechas* and women in politics led McGee Deutsch to examine this organization's strategies for fighting fascism overseas and *nacionalismo* at home.

The paper focused on the following questions: How did the Junta spread anti-fascism and resist *nacionalismo*? Who joined it and why? How did it reflect the Communist party's (PCA) strategies? Finally, as seen through the Junta, what were women's specific contributions to anti-fascism?

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Cora Ratto and María Rosa Oliver, both associated with the PCA and the Unión Argentina de Mujeres (UAM), a women's rights group created in 1936, sprang into action. They founded a pro-Allied popular front women's group, the Junta de la Victoria. María Rosa Schlieper, vice-president of the UAM, head of the Inter-American Commission of Women, Argentine representative of the Pan American Union, and a Radical, became its president, with Ratto as secretary-general and Oliver as

vice-president. The Junta claimed to stand for the true Argentina, one that was democratic and pluralistic. It saw anti-fascism as a transnational struggle that required fighting for democracy at home as well as abroad. The Junta also asserted that women's rights and political participation were vital parts of democracy.

The Junta's composition was diverse. Most Junta members were homemakers of varied class origins. The group also recruited upper-class socialites, middle-class intellectuals and professionals, and *colonas* and *campesinas*. The Junta's ties to the PCA and unions helped it attract women workers. It included women from Allied and German-occupied countries, Spanish exiles, Jews, Swedes, Hungarians, Italians, and *criollas*.

Why did they join? Aristocrats celebrated their links to British and French culture, conducted customary charitable work, and portrayed themselves as democrats. Women from war-torn Europe wanted to defend their *paisanos* from Nazi persecution. Their union and Communist loyalties, ties to Europe, and opposition to fascism prompted laborers and progressives to affiliate. Leftists, professionals, and feminists saw the Junta as a vehicle for reform. Communists flocked to the Junta because it helped the besieged Soviet Union and widened Communist influence at a time when the party was illegal.

Certain Catholic sectors also worked with the Junta. The authoritarian climate pushed Monsignor Miguel de Andrea toward partial acceptance of political freedoms and cooperation with Communist workers on some issues in the 1930s. He appeared at a Junta meeting, and members of his Federación de Asociaciones Católicas de Empleadas participated in the Junta. Other "liberal" Catholics like Eugenia Silveyra asked fellow Catholics to join the Junta and protect their faith against the German foe. Their liberalism was nuanced; Silveyra, for example, supported both the Allies and Francisco Franco. Nevertheless, Catholics stood alongside Jews, Protestants, and non-practitioners in the Junta. This religious diversity and tolerance was unusual before the 1960s.

As noted, the Junta also brought together women of different classes, who mixed but did not become friends. Still, at a time when only charity, commerce, or domestic service brought together women of divergent backgrounds, the Junta united them behind a common goal. It encouraged respect, dialogue, and cooperation among them, traits essential for democracy.

By raising funds, organizing benefits, and making bandages and clothing for the Allies, the Junta made anti-fascism tangible and visible to many. These activities and the Junta's maternalist rhetoric accorded with customary gender discourses and made female

participants feel comfortable. Yet the Junta also opened arenas for women. It showcased female performers and speakers and offered a forum for discussions among women. Women compiled reports, debated issues, elected officers, and studied democratic rights and procedures. Indeed, the Junta's specific contribution to Argentine anti-fascism was its attempt to democratize the polity by incorporating women.

The Junta contested fascism and its local manifestations. Its belief in pluralism, equality, democratic practices, and women's rights contrasted not only with European fascism, but with *nacionalismo*. *Nacionalistas* denounced the Junta's views and Communist ties, solidarity with the Allies, and what they saw as the privileging of foreign over local needs. Both *nacionalistas* and the Castillo government attacked the Junta, and the military regime finally shut it down in 1943.

The Junta returned to public activity during the electoral campaign of 1946, supporting the Unión Democrática and encouraging women to oppose Peronism. But the end of the war had removed the Junta's main purpose, and the PCA reconsidered its backing for this group. Party leaders wanted to compete with Peronists to regain labor loyalties, reclaim issues of social justice and anti-imperialism, and recruit women laborers and *campesinas*. The PCA desired a new

vehicle for these goals, one less identified with the elite, Great Britain and the U.S., and resistance to Peronism. The Junta faded away in 1947, and the Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina replaced it.

Zimmerman valued this paper's focus on anti-fascism as a form of sociability,[5] as well as its transnational quality. He also urged McGee Deutsch to explore the limits of the Junta's diversity. How closely did the women of varied origins mix? Did the differing backgrounds of delegates at the Junta's national and regional conventions prompt disagreements over policies or competition for leadership roles? Did the Communist members clash with the aristocratic ones?

In a private communication with this author, Andrés Bisso offered related observations about this paper. He called for a re-examination of the links between the leadership and the base. In his research Bisso found that despite the differences between them, the rank-and-file tended to respect the luminaries who directed the Junta and other anti-fascist groups. What accounted for this relationship?[6]

Notwithstanding their greater willingness to critically analyze Peronism, Argentine scholars still have been reluctant to probe the relationship between it and fascism. Addressing the "unthinkable," Federico Finchelstein's paper contested this taboo. His research on Italian Fascism and its transnational links with *nacionalismo* gives him a broader understanding of the European movement than most

Argentine specialists and enabled him to draw connections. While Finchelstein did not see Peronism as fascist, he described it as a reformulation of fascism.

Perón's roots lay in fascism and its local manifestation, *nacionalismo*. He had ties with the Liga Patriótica Argentina, and his mentor, General Francisco Fasola Castaño, revered Hitler and Mussolini and headed a *nacionalista* group. Peronism reflected the policies of *nacionalista* governor Manuel Fresco in Buenos Aires province. The GOU, which Perón helped lead, favored the local fascist platform: national sovereignty, integral Catholicism, and purity – a vital concern for fascists -- in opposition to Communists and Jews. The military dictatorship of 1943-1945, in which Perón also played an important role, was the closest that Argentina ever came to a fascist regime. Some of its policies, such as the nationalization of Catholicism and an immigration policy that discriminated against Jews, continued after Perón became president in 1946. Unlike Mussolini but very much in *nacionalista* style, Perón expressed his social and economic policies in Social Catholic terms. While many have cited FORJA as a prime influence on Perón's economic nationalism, they have overlooked the close ties between this group and rightist *nacionalistas*. Indeed, Perón popularized *nacionalista* discourses and agendas. Even though he

would distance himself from the radical right, Peron's links to it were clear.

Peronist policies toward the Church after 1946 resembled those of Mussolini far more than the notions of *nacionalistas*. In contrast to the *Nacionalistas*' desired "'Christianized fascism,'" a "'Peronist Christianity'" emerged. Indeed, Peronism relegated both the military and the Church to secondary places in the New Argentina. The leader and his people now represented the sword and the cross, and the leader was unwilling to share his power with anyone, even God. *Nacionalistas*, however, saw God as the head of their movement. Through the "*Marcha del Trabajo*" and other means, Minister of Education and former *nacionalista* Oscar Ivanissevich sought to convert Peronism into a political religion that would supersede Catholicism. These policies helped explain why the Church and the military overthrew Perón in 1955.

It took over ten years for the Italian Fascist movement to create a doctrine and about five years for Peronism. The Congress of Philosophy in Mendoza in 1949 represented the attempt to construct a "third way" – a term frequently employed by fascists and *nacionalistas* -- that would transcend the Cold War binary of Communism and capitalism. Among the diverse group of listeners and presenters at the Congress were fascists such as Ugo Spirito and Jaime María de Mahieu,

as well as the *nacionalistas* César Pico, Julio Meinvielle, and Nimio de Anquín. Perón's speech revealed both his links to and differences from *nacionalismo*.

Similarly, Perón's leadership principles drew upon yet varied from those of fascists. Like the latter, he saw himself as the conductor -- indeed the owner – of the masses. Yet the Argentine leader sought to redeem the nation not by resorting to war, but instead by creating an equitable society that would remove the Communist threat. Anyone was welcome to follow Perón – in a manner that Hitler's designated enemies could not – but those who did not follow him were marginalized. Voters were allowed to reconfirm Perón's leadership but were not considered autonomous political actors. Italian Fascist propaganda asserted that Mussolini was always right; from a more intimate standpoint, Eva Perón made the same claims for her husband.

In some respects Peronism and Italian Fascism were similar. Each saw its ideology as appropriate for other countries, although neither devoted extraordinary efforts to its peaceful promotion overseas. Both the Argentine and Italian leaders regarded their revolutions as having surpassed the French and Soviet ones. Perón duplicated Mussolini's belief that doctrine had to change and adapt to the circumstances. While Perón claimed not to identify with the losers of World War II, neither did he identify with the victors.

The Argentine political experience resembled yet also differed from the Italian one. Crises in seemingly entrenched liberal democracies brought Fascism and Peronism to power. The two governments offered totalitarian responses to the challenge of modernity, and both were anti-leftist. Both mobilized the populace from above, but Fascism primarily mobilized the middle class and Peronism the workers. Perón's economic nationalism went much further than Mussolini's, however, and was primarily industrial rather than agrarian. Nor did Perón unleash warfare, racism, or imperialism, unlike Mussolini and Hitler. Indeed, he learned from their mistakes.

Peronism represented an extension of fascism and *nacionalismo* applied to a very different context. Anti-Communism lay at the heart of Perón's ideology. Yet the Cold War era offered an alternative to Communism that was not previously available: a "reformed capitalism." Perón's version was authoritarian and corporatist but not fascist or racist. He took from fascism a few elements considered acceptable and applied them to new circumstances that did not permit a whole-scale appropriation. Perón's program also represented a populist adaptation of Leopoldo Lugones's "*estado equitativo.*" As was true for fascism and *nacionalismo*, the goal was to create a state that stood above class conflicts and united the people.

In Finchelstein's view, Perón understood that one could not be a fascist after 1945, even though this was his desire. In this regard Perón would have agreed with the German scholar Ernst Nolte. The evocative title of Nolte's book, Der Faschismus in Seiner Epoche (Fascism in its epoch),[7] suggested that the fascist era ended with the defeat of the Axis. I wonder whether we must accept this formulation. Was a postwar fascism possible? Wouldn't it necessarily have differed from the pre-existing versions? Prominent scholars of fascism such as Robert Paxton have answered in the affirmative.[8]

Zimmerman noted Finchelstein's careful comparison between fascist and Peronist ideology, social composition, and notions regarding the relationship between the leader and his followers. He suggested that the author complement his detailed intellectual history with an analysis of Italian and Argentine government structures and policies. It would also be useful to compare Perón with other corporatist leaders in Latin America, such as Getúlio Vargas, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Carlos Ibáñez, to see to what extent fascism may have influenced them as well. Furthermore, while the fascist influence on Peronism is evident, one should take into account the impact of Argentine political conditions and practices.

Summing up his observations on the panel, Zimmerman raised the key question of how to evaluate the importance of the radical right in

Argentina from the 1930s to the 1950s. Despite the multiple challenges posed by Uriburu, the *nacionalistas*, and others, liberalism continued to exert much sway. The very fact that Socialists and Communists appropriated elements of the liberal tradition demonstrates this point. In turn, this identification made it possible for them to unite with classical liberals in anti-fascist and anti-Peronist movements. An understanding of fascism and anti-fascism in Argentina, then, rests upon an understanding of Argentine liberalism, with its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, evolve into new forms, and attract diverse adherents.

[1] For a recent review of works on the Socialist and Communist parties, see Hernán Camarero, "La izquierda como objeto historiográfico: Un balance de los estudios sobre el socialismo y el comunismo en la Argentina," Nuevo Topo, no. 1 (Sept./Oct. 2005), 77-99. On antifascism, see, in particular, Andrés Bisso, Acción Argentina: Un antifascismo nacional en tiempos de guerra mundial (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005); Ricardo Pasolini, "El nacimiento de una sensibilidad política. Cultura antifascista, comunismo y nación en la Argentina: entre la AIAPE y el Congreso Argentino de la Cultura, 1935-1955," Desarrollo Económico, 45 (2005); James Cane, "'Unity for the Defense of Culture': The AIAPE and the Cultural Politics of Argentine Antifascism, 1935-1943." Hispanic American Historical Review, 77 (Aug. 1997); Adriana Valobra, "Partidos, tradiciones y estrategias de movilización social: De la Junta de la Victoria a la Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina," *Revista Prohistoria*, 9:9 (2005); Tulio Halperín Donghi, Argentina en el callejón (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe/Ariel, 1995); Sandra McGee Deutsch, Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, ms. Some of the recent works on antifascism, especially Bisso, Pasolini, and Cane, amply reflect the new cultural history.

[2] Sandra McGee Deutsch, "Changing the Landscape: The Study of Argentine Jewish Women and New Historical Vistas," Jewish History, 18 (2001), 61-62, 66-67.

[3] A multitude of works have appeared on Peronism. I will limit myself to only a handful: Noemí M. Girbal-Blacha, Mitos, paradojas y realidades en la Argentina peronista (1946-1955): Una interpretación histórica de sus decisiones político-económicas (Bernal: Univ. Nacional de Quilmes, 2003); Karina Inés Ramacciotti and Adriana María Valobra, comp., Generando el peronismo: Estudios de cultura, política y género (1946-1955) (Buenos Aires: Proyecto Editorial, 2004); Donna Guy, Performing Charity, Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880-1955 (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, forthcoming); Daniel James, Doña María's Story: Life, History, Memory, and Political Identity (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); Eduardo Elena, "What the People Want: State Planning and Political Participation in Peronist Argentina, 1946-1955," Journal of Latin American Studies, 37 (Feb. 2005); Juan Carlos Torre, dir., Nueva Historia Argentina: Los años peronistas (1943-1955) (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2002).

[4] As studied by Ricardo Sidicaro, La política mirada desde arriba. Las ideas del diario La Nación (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1993), cited by Nállim.

[5] As did Bisso, Acción Argentina.

[6] Bisso explored the relationship between Socialist anti-fascist leaders and base in "'Hablar a las Pampas.' Contraposición y convergencia de miradas entre la dirigencia nacional antifascista y los habitantes del interior de la Provincia de Buenos Aires," conference paper, 2007.
[7] Ernst Nolte, Der Fascismus in Seiner Epoche: Die Action Française, Der Italienische Faschismus, Der Nationalsozialismus (Munich: R. Piper, 1963). My reference to this book does not constitute acceptance of Nolte's later and very controversial views of the Holocaust. On these views and the debate they inspired, see, for example, Charles S. Maier, The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988).
[8] Robert O. Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism (New York: Vintage, 2004), esp. 172-205.