

VIII

Populism

The twentieth century was a period of great changes in the traditional societies of Latin America. In the early 1900s, middle-class women and people of color initiated profound changes throughout the region as they pressed their claims for full and equal citizenship. As the century progressed, yet another new social group emerged to challenge the guardians of social order: the industrial working class.

Workers had always been the majority in Latin American societies. They toiled on the haciendas and plantations, labored in the mines and on the docks, sweated in the workshops, and moved merchandise in the streets and markets. But beginning in the twentieth century, a new type of worker was being created by the industrialization of the region's economies. This new, industrial working class was different. For one thing, these men and women were found primarily in large factories that required expensive machinery and produced vast quantities of manufactured goods. For another, such factories tended to be located in or on the outskirts of large cities, leading to an increased concentration of workers in those areas. Given the dense, mostly urban organization of Latin American industrial development, it is no wonder that the new labor force possessed greater class consciousness than any previous one in Latin American history.

This chapter, in examining the political and social consequences that accompanied Latin America's industrial growth, focuses primarily on a political phenomenon known as populism. In the 1930s and 1940s, varieties of populism also appeared in Europe and the United States. At its core, populism was based on a relationship between a charismatic leader and workers. Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement in Italy and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States both had populist aspects. What linked these movements together was the worldwide crisis of capitalism that began with the Great Depression in 1929.

The Great Depression devastated national economies that depended on international trade. Nowhere was this shock worse than in Latin America, whose countries were completely dependent on the exportation of basic raw materials. As markets for exports shriveled, Latin American economies were thrown into free fall. One example of this trend occurred in the port of São Paulo, Brazil, where tons of handpicked coffee beans had to be burned for lack of buyers. To

deal with the impact of the Depression, Latin American countries needed to transform their entire approach to economic development, but such a transformation also required a radical change in political leadership.

Beginning in the 1930s (and carrying through until the 1950s), effective assaults on the political power of Latin America's traditional oligarchies were carried out by populist leaders such as Juan Perón of Argentina, Getúlio Vargas of Brazil, and Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, to name but a few. Populist leaders often came from relatively humble origins, had a background in the military, and knew how to stir a crowd of workers with rhetoric based on nationalism, class struggle, and traditional gender relations. In their speeches, the populists created opportunities for workers to identify with the nation in ways that would have been unimaginable only decades earlier. Taking advantage of the latest communications technologies like radio, populists blasted the corruption and privilege of traditional oligarchies closely linked to the shattered import-export system. By equating the oligarchs with the economic devastation brought about by the Great Depression, populists rode to electoral victory.

Once in office, the populists attempted to implement a set of core policies aimed at the further industrial and social development of their countries. On the economic front, they pursued import-substitution industrialization, a key element of twentieth-century Latin American nationalism. Aggressively protecting fledgling national industries, populists ignored the tenets of laissez-faire liberalism. They also promoted state control over vital sectors of the economy. Many foreign investors lost capital in the "nationalization" of these industries (as the expropriation of industry by the state was called), which generated powerful enemies abroad for the populists. On the social front, their program favored the interests of the urban middle class, the industrial working class, and to a lesser extent, the peasantry. Trade unionism flourished, and though most populist leaders manipulated the unions, Latin American workers generally felt more equitably treated in their relations with business managers and state officials than ever before. The first social security systems were established along with such important benefits as modern labor codes, welfare programs, and land reform.

Women's participation was vital to the success of populist movements. Across the region, female teachers, factory workers, and peasants took advantage of the opportunities to organize collectively that were generated by the populists' call to action. As we will see below, women's involvement in the political process grew to unprecedented levels during the populist era. In many countries women won the right to vote, but it is important to recognize that their political involvement was not confined to voting. You will meet a number of women in the following selections who seized upon the populists' new language of inclusiveness to press for the satisfaction of their own social and economic demands.

There is no better example of the problem of populism than Juan Domingo Perón of Argentina, whose rise to power is explored in three of the selections that

follow. Together with his myth-making wife Eva (Evita), Perón defined the populist era in Argentina. The key moment in the Peróns' political ascendancy occurred on October 17, 1945, when Juan Perón was released from military confinement after having been declared a threat to society by the military regime then governing Argentina. On October 17 (henceforth known as Loyalty Day in the Peronist ranks), the unionists of the industrializing outer bands of Buenos Aires came out of their neighborhoods to demand Perón's release. Late that night, Perón was released by the authorities; the workers won. When Perón finally came to the balcony in Buenos Aires' main plaza to speak, the crowd numbered in the hundreds of thousands. As we will see below, it was a defining moment for the Peronist movement. By the end of this chapter, students will be able to explain what connected leaders like Juan Domingo Perón to workers like Doña María Roldán.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How did populist leaders attempt to achieve their goals? What strategies did they employ in their pursuit of power?
2. What were the limits on the goals and strategies of the populists? What, if anything, were they unwilling to do?
3. Decide for yourself. Were populist leaders legitimate heroes for the working class or authoritarian demagogues whose main goal was keeping themselves in power?

1. The Peronist Political Vision ~ Daniel James*

The career of Juan Perón of Argentina presents a fascinating case study of the problem of populism. Like the other populists, Perón was a powerful orator and manipulator of imagery. In this selection, historian Daniel James writes about Perón's successful linking, in his political rhetoric and symbolism, of Argentine nationalism with the "concrete, material aspects" of working-class life. Such aspects of workers' daily lives constituted the field in which Peronist language grew and included specific words (such as "los descamisados," the "shirtless" and thus penniless) and cultural references (such as lyrics from tangos). Notice how James draws a distinction between the "plebeian realism" of the Peronist vocabulary and the abstract language of Perón's critics on the Left.

*From Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 12–14, 21–24. © 1988 Cambridge University Press.

[Peronism] was . . . a political movement which represented a crucial shift in working-class political allegiance and behavior, and which presented its adherents with a distinct political vision. In order to understand the significance of this new allegiance we need to examine carefully the specific features of this political vision and the discourse in which it was expressed, rather than simply regard Peronism as an inevitable manifestation of social and economic dissatisfaction. Gareth Stedman Jones, commenting on the reluctance of social historians to take sufficient account of the political, has recently observed that “a political movement is not simply a manifestation of distress and pain; its existence is distinguished by a shared conviction articulating a political solution to distress and a political diagnosis of its causes.” Thus if Peronism did represent a concrete solution to felt material needs, we still need to understand why the solution took the specific political form of Peronism and not another. Other political movements did speak to the same needs and offer solutions to them. Even programmatically there were many formal similarities between Peronism and other political forces. What we need to understand is Peronism’s success, its distinctiveness, why its political appeal was more credible for workers—which areas it touched that others did not. To do this we need to take Perón’s political and ideological appeal seriously and examine the nature of Peronism’s rhetoric and compare it with that of its rivals for working-class allegiance.

The issue of credibility is crucial for understanding both Perón’s successful identification of himself with certain important symbols such as industrialism and, more generally, the political impact of his discourse on workers. Gareth Stedman Jones, in the essay to which we have already referred, notes that to be successful “a particular political vocabulary must convey a practicable hope of a general alternative and a believable means of realizing it, so that potential recruits can think in its terms.” The vocabulary of Peronism was both visionary and believable. The credibility was in part rooted in the immediate, concrete nature of its rhetoric. This involved a tying down of abstract political slogans to their most concrete material aspects. . . . In the crucial years 1945 and 1946 this was clearly contrasted with a language of great abstraction used by Perón’s political opponents. While Perón’s rhetoric was capable of lofty sermonizing, particularly once he had attained the presidency, and depending on the audience he was addressing, his speeches to working-class audiences in this formative period have, for their time, a unique tone.

They are, for example, framed in a language clearly distinct from that of classic radicalism, with its woolly generalities concerning national renovation and civic virtue. The language of “the oligarchy” and “the people” was still present but now usually more precisely defined. Their utilization as general categories to denote good and evil, those who were with Perón from those against, was still there, but now there was also a frequent concretizing, sometimes as rich and poor, often as capitalist and worker. While there was a rhetoric of an indivisible community—

symbolized in “the people” and “the nation”—the working class was given an implicitly superior role within this whole, often as the repository of national values. “The people” frequently were transformed into “the working people” (*el pueblo trabajador*): the people, the nation, and the workers became interchangeable.

A similar denial of the abstract can be found in Peronism’s appeal to economic and political nationalism. In terms of the formal construction from the state of Peronist ideology, categories such as “the nation” and “Argentina” were accorded an abstract, mystical significance. When, however, Perón specifically addressed the working class, particularly in the formative period, but also after, one finds little appeal to the irrational, mystical elements of nationalist ideology. There was little concern with the intrinsic virtues of *argentinidad* nor with the historical precedents of *criollo* culture as expressed in a historical nostalgia for some long-departed national essence. Such concerns were mainly the province of middle-class intellectuals in the various nationalist groups which attempted, with little success, to use Peronism as a vehicle for their aspirations. Working-class nationalism was addressed primarily in terms of concrete economic issues.

Moreover, Peronism’s political credibility for workers was due not only to the concreteness of its rhetoric, but also to its immediacy. Perón’s political vision of a society based on social justice and on the social and political integration of workers into that society was not premised, as it was, for example, in leftist political discourse, on the prior achievement of long-term, abstract structural transformations, nor on the gradual acquisition at some future date of an adequate consciousness on the part of the working class. It took working-class consciousness, habits, life styles, and values as it found them and affirmed their sufficiency and value. It glorified the everyday and the ordinary as a sufficient basis for the rapid attainment of a juster society, provided that certain easily achievable and self-evident goals were met. Primarily this meant support for Perón as head of state and the maintenance of a strong union movement. 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.

The glorification of popular life styles and habits implied a political style and idiom well in tune with popular sensibilities. Whether it was in symbolically striking the pose of the *descamisado* (shirtless one) in a political rally, or in the nature of the imagery used in his speeches, Perón had an ability to communicate to working-class audiences which his rivals lacked. The poet Luis Franco commented cryptically on Perón’s “spiritual affinity with tango lyrics.” His ability to use this affinity to establish a bond with his audience was clearly shown in his speech to those assembled in the Plaza de Mayo [in Buenos Aires] on 17 October 1945 at a mass demonstration that marks the rise of the Peronist movement. Towards the end of that speech Perón evoked the image of his mother, “*mi vieja*”: “I said to you a little while ago that I would embrace you as I would my mother because you have had the same griefs and the same thoughts that my poor old

lady must have felt in these days.” The reference is apparently gratuitous, the empty phraseology of someone who could think of nothing better to say until we recognize that the sentiments echo exactly a dominant refrain of tango—the poor grief-laden mother whose pain symbolizes the pain of her children, of all the poor. Perón’s identification of his own mother with the poor establishes a sentimental identity between himself and his audience; with this tone of nostalgia he was touching an important sensibility in Argentine popular culture of the period. Significantly, too, the speech ended on another “tangoesque” note. Perón reminded his audience as they were about to leave the Plaza, “remember that among you there are many women workers who have to be protected here and in life by you same workers.” The theme of the threat to the women of the working class, and the need to protect their women, was also a constant theme of both tango and other forms of popular culture.

Perón’s use of such an idiom within which to frame his political appeal often seems to us now, and indeed it seemed to many of his critics at the time, to reek of the paternalistic condescension of the traditional *caudillo* figure. His constant use of couplets from “Martin Fierro,”* or his conscious use of terms taken from *lunfardo* slang can grate on modern sensibilities. However, we should be careful to appreciate the impact of his ability to speak in an idiom which reflected popular sensibilities of the time. In accounts by observers and journalists of the crucial formative years of Peronism we frequently find the adjectives *chabacano* and *burdo* used to describe both Perón himself and his supporters. Both words have the sense of crude, cheap, coarse and they also implied a lack of sophistication, an awkwardness, almost a country bumpkin quality. While they were generally meant as epithets they were not descriptions Peronists would necessarily have denied.

Indeed, this capacity to recognize, reflect, and foster a popular political style and idiom based on plebeian realism contrasted strongly with the political appeal of traditional working-class political parties. The tone adopted by the latter when confronted by the working-class effervescence of the mid-1940s was didactic, moralizing, and apparently addressed to a morally and intellectually inferior audience. This was particularly the case of the Socialist Party. Its analysis of the events of 17 October is illustrative of its attitude and tone:

The part of the people which lives for its resentment, and perhaps only for its resentment, spilled over into the streets, threatened, yelled, and, in its demon-like fury, trampled upon and assaulted newspapers and persons, those very persons who were the champions of its elevation and dignification.

Behind this tone of fear, frustration, and moralizing lay a discourse which addressed an abstract, almost mythical working class. Peronism on the other hand

*The Argentine national epic poem.

was prepared, particularly in its formative period, to recognize, and even glorify, workers who did “threaten, yell, and trample with a demon-like fury.” Comparing Perón’s political approach to that of his rivals one is reminded of Ernst Bloch’s comment concerning Nazism’s preemption of socialist and communist appeal among German workers that “the Nazis speak falsely, but to people, the communists truthfully, but of things.”

Perón’s ability to appreciate the tone of working-class sensibilities and assumptions was reflected in other areas. There was in Peronist rhetoric, for example, a tacit recognition of the immutability of social inequality, a common-sense shrug-of-the-shoulders acceptance of the reality of social and economic inequities, a recognition of what Pierre Bourdieu has called “a sense of limits.” The remedies proposed to mitigate these inequities were plausible and immediate. Perón, in a speech in Rosario in August 1944, had emphasized the apparently self-evident reasonableness of his appeal, the mundaneness behind the abstract rhetoric of social equality: “We want exploitation of man by man to cease in our country, and when this problem disappears we will equalize a little the social classes so that there will not be in this country men who are too poor nor those who are too rich.”

This realism implied a political vision of a limited nature but it did not eliminate utopian resonances; it simply made such resonances—a yearning for social equality, for an end to exploitation—more credible for a working class imbued by its experience with a certain cynicism regarding political promises and abstract slogans. Indeed, the credibility of Perón’s political vision, the practicability of the hope it offered, was affirmed on a daily basis by its actions from the state. The solutions it offered the working class did not depend on some future apocalypse for confirmation but were rather directly verifiable in terms of everyday political activity and experience. Already by 1945 the slogan had appeared among workers which was to symbolize this credibility: “*Perón cumple!*” (Perón delivers).

2. Doña María Remembers Perón ~ María Roldán*

In this second selection dealing with the Argentine populist Perón, historian Daniel James takes us deeper into the world of Peronist workers. In particular, James conducted extensive oral history research with workers in the town of Berisso, a meatpacking town south of Buenos Aires. The focus of James’s study was a remarkable woman named María Roldán, whose life experiences as a woman, a union worker in a meatpacking plant, and a Peronist bring the book to life. In

*From Daniel James, *Doña María’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 58–63. © 2000 Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, <http://www.dukeupress.edu/>.

the following excerpt from the testimony given by Doña María (as James respectfully refers to her), she remembers the experience of participating in the protest/celebration of October 17, 1945. What is especially interesting to consider here is the way Doña María remembers this defining event in Peronist history. According to James, much of her understanding of Argentine history is based on this singular moment. As we will see in chapter 12, the act of remembering such a historic event must always be approached critically by the reader.

Before 17 October it was all just talk, but Perón appeared that night in the Plaza de Mayo and everything was different.

The idea of 17 October was growing because [Cipriano] Reyes* went by plane, by mule, by bus, however he could, visiting all the unions and all the factories, cooking oil factories, textile factories, every sort of factory, arguing that there had to be a strike, that there had to be a 17 October. This started before they imprisoned Perón. We knew definitely that there was going to be a seventeenth on 12 October. On the twelfth Reyes disappeared. "Where is he?" we asked his wife. "He's in La Rioja, he's in Tucumán, he went to Catamarca." He was talking to all the trade unionists so that they would strike the seventeenth. They had to get to the Plaza de Mayo however they could, and everyone who could come somehow got to the plaza.

You know why we went that day? Nobody sent me the seventeenth of October to the Plaza San Martín to ask for Perón, but I felt a tremendous pain, I saw pregnant women crying, asking for help in the streets. In October 1945 there was still awful poverty here, as God is my witness. The union used to ask for meat in the butchers, to give out. "How many kids do you have?" Three kilos of potatoes for you. Then the next, "How many do you have?" Well then four kilos of potatoes. We lived liked that, making do here and there, as best we could. So the seventeenth arose from our pain. Let me repeat it, it came from the great poverty. There were conventillos in the Nueva York where seven or eight families lived, twenty kids playing on the sidewalk, the only yard they had was the sidewalk. What sort of men were they going to be tomorrow?

We set out from Berisso on that day with an old flag, torn. We had already heard from Reyes, that we had to go out into the street with the people, and nearly all the women had been told to be in the Calle Montevideo at such and such a time. We went to Los Talas on foot, that's about twenty blocks along the Calle Montevideo, and from there we came back with the flag. That's when we met the mounted police. The police didn't let us pass so easily like they say now. No, there was gas, they chased us, a little of everything, they wouldn't let us shout "Viva Perón." We got to the Sportman bar at the corner of Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro, two blocks from the Swift. When we arrived there the streets were

*A key leader in the effort to unionize workers in the meatpacking industry and cofounder of the Argentine Workers Party, which worked for Perón's election in 1946.

full of people. We were some seven thousand souls. We formed a caravan on foot. We went to La Plata on foot. Some women who couldn't walk, they got rides in a truck, a car. We arrived in the Plaza San Martín in La Plata. In the Plaza San Martín there seemed to be almost the entire province of Buenos Aires. The plaza was full and the crowd flowed over into the diagonals. I spoke from a stairway leading into the government house. From there you could see more. There were people in the side streets, up in the trees, on the balconies. It was like the taking of the Argentine Bastille. I never saw the French Revolution, but for me it was the taking of the Argentine Bastille. Everyone was happy, nobody fought, people didn't insult each other: "We're going to win. Peroncito is going to come."

DJ: I read that there were some fights that night.

DM: Well, when there are men who drink. You know there are people who drink. There were some who broke windows and took beer, wine, those sorts of people are never absent, then they get into fights. But this is a very small part of the people that has nothing to do with decent working people who get up at four in the morning to be in the *frigorífico** at five. But you're right, there was a little of everything that day, you can't deny it. But people were happy, especially when we heard by phone that Perón was going to be in the Plaza de Mayo at midnight. In my speech in the Plaza San Martín I had said that if Perón wasn't in the Plaza de Mayo alive and well by midnight the workers would continue with arms crossed, that we wouldn't work. Then we went on to the Plaza de Mayo. We went in a truck. I don't know how many of us, forty or so. The truck driver said, "I won't take children, I don't want problems, I'll take adults," and even so Ricardo Giovanelli, who was a man from the union who was worth his weight in gold, was telling everyone who got on the truck not to bring sticks, arms, not to bring anything, we were going in peace, we were going to wait for Perón, that night we would have Perón with us, and that's the way it turned out.

When we arrived at the Plaza de Mayo, we pushed our way to the front, rubbing up against the people, we lost buttons on our clothes, there were so many people. We had also taken a lot of our clothes off. It was so hot. Imagine it, spring, and yet it was so hot. The people, euphoric, they were throwing shoes in the air, hats, they were taking their shirts off, the men were naked up to here, all of them. Later, several of us from Berisso spoke, Ricardo Giovanelli, myself. Reyes wasn't there. He didn't appear all day. When it was my turn I said that the moment of the social demands had arrived, that the people have their moments, their dates, their day, their hour and their minute, and this is our minute, twelve o'clock on the night of 17 October:

"The colonel has to come here because we in the Sindicato de la Carne† have sworn that if he isn't here by twelve midnight among us, we will continue without working, as will all the Argentine people, come what may, we offer our lives for

*A meatpacking plant.

†The meatpackers' union.

Perón, and we will take inspiration from the statue of General San Martín, that man who gave everything for freedom and received nothing, and who is carved in stone and in bronze by great sculptors with his finger raised in the air warning us, “Beware Argentines, so that the gains that we have made shall be eternal.” And I say this because what is in play here is the future of Colonel Perón. Because here there is talk of a Señor Braden* whom we do not know. He may be a great man, a great father, but he is not Argentine. May those who are not Argentines forgive me, but I as an Argentine must say this. Let us remember San Martín at this moment. Let us ask above all for liberty, peace, and work, but this work must be rewarded with salaries that allow us all to live in peace and love.” It was more or less with those words that I spoke. It was spoken spontaneously, without preparation. On all the walls, wherever there was propaganda there was the shape of a pig, and next to it they wrote the word Braden, and then alongside an image of Perón and a flower beside it. That sort of thing that the people invented, the people is extraordinary, there were little songs that really were like small poems, incredible, with just the right words, they were very well received.

Well, when I finished, Edelmiro Farrell, General Farrell, the de facto president, asked me who I was, because my husband and Ricardo Giovanelli were supporting me with their hands.

So I said, “I am a woman who cuts meat with a knife that’s bigger than I am in the Swift packing house.”

“But who are you, señora?”

“My name is María Roldán.”

“Pleased to meet you, señora. Please be patient, Perón will be here.” It must have been about eleven o’clock.

In fact, when Perón arrived Farrell was speaking, and the people started to applaud, and he says, “One minute, please, I am still the president and I’ll speak first, then Perón will talk.” After his words he and Perón embraced, patting one another on the back the way military men do. And then Perón started to talk, and he would have to stop, and he would start again and then have to stop, he couldn’t communicate with the people, they wouldn’t let him, they kept interrupting. Then there were the *bombos* [big drums], beating away. It was something so tremendous. It was almost four in the morning, and when they let him talk for a moment he said, “Muchachos, if you let me I’ll talk, if not I’m going to leave because I am very tired.” When he said, “I’m going,” they finally got quiet. And the speech he gave that night was for us the most memorable, the most sublime that we could have experienced as trade unionists. That night in the Plaza de Mayo, when he arrived all tired, all agitated, the speech was for us who knew that our country was in a bad way, that working people were completely defeated, humiliated if you want, by the bosses, not only in the frigoríficos here, but all the bosses, the words will remain ingrained in my mind until the day God calls me to him.

*U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Spruille Braden.

Because he delivered the speech as if he were transported outside himself: "I am a mortal, I may be here and in a short time cease to exist. I feel very bad, but God will know how to give me the strength to continue with what I have determined to do. I promise you nothing, but I know that you need me." The people were almost beside themselves.

"You need me, and I will join you in this project. I will follow what my heart of an Argentine citizen tells me to do. I have very good intentions. I am going to work first for the workers who are those who keep the nation moving, and then I will work for all the Argentines. But first I will work for you. I know how you are living, because I have seen you weep in the *Secretaria de Trabajo* [Department of Labor], because I have seen you on your knees say to me, 'Please, colonel, do something. We can't bear anymore.' I have never allowed a man to go down on his knees before me, but you did so. I know that Berisso is like a weeping shawl, I know that since 1917 you have struggled, because I am no neophyte, I am old enough to know. I will fight first for you, who suffer most. First, I will raise up the weakest, then I will see if I can raise my country up. I think I will be a good leader, but you will have to accompany me *muchachos* and *muchachas*, because we have to rescue the Argentine people from the pain in which it is submerged."

When he finished speaking we started to leave. The people went back to their homes, to work, half naked some of them, without shoes, without sleeping. We got back to Berisso about seven in the morning.

I think that Perón, without the support of the people, wouldn't have been Perón. Let's start with October seventeenth. If we hadn't been in the plaza on 17 October and all the people in the streets, Perón would have stayed in prison, and I don't know if they wouldn't have killed him. Perón's life was hanging by a thread, because the armed forces had already realized that the Argentine people were with Perón, and that he had a majority of the people. It wasn't just a gift. Nobody gave us anything. It's the people who did everything.

DJ: Because that is a very common idea about what happened. That the people just passively received everything.

DM: I know, and that's what I want to explain to you. The Argentine people needed a man to follow, and Perón was that man. *Semana Santa* [Easter Week, 1987, the week of a military rebellion against the Radical Party government] in the Plaza de Mayo was not like the 17 October for one basic reason. The people went to the Plaza de Mayo this time because they were frightened for themselves and their families. But we went into the streets because we were afraid that they would kill a man, whom we already wanted for president. Look at the difference. The people went into the streets for a man. You have to analyze that. Because at 7:50 I was on a platform in the Plaza de Mayo, and we said that if Colonel Perón doesn't appear there was an order from the union, tomorrow nobody works and we won't work until they give us Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. And Perón was there at twelve midnight. That's what people don't realize.

3. The First Lady's Peronist Feminism ~ Eva Perón*

*María Eva Duarte de Perón ("Evita" to those who adored her) was one of the most controversial women in modern Latin American history. She was the object of both praise and scorn in her native Argentina. Born into a poor, provincial family, Eva Duarte became a successful radio actor as a teenager. She then began a romantic liaison with the ambitious army colonel Juan Perón. Eventually they married and Perón was elected president. As first lady, Eva was extremely active. She helped women secure the right to vote, organized the Peronist Feminist Party, administered the charitable Eva Perón Foundation, and made countless speeches across the country. The following selection is taken from *My Mission in Life*, a collection of her short essays covering various aspects of Peronism, particularly with regard to the role of women in the movement. Two passages have been chosen to indicate the complicated, seemingly contradictory nature of Peronist feminism (at least as it was articulated by the self-proclaimed leader of the Peronist feminist movement). While Argentine women are being called to action, their efforts are still firmly grounded in the traditional feminine ideal of self-sacrifice.*

Women and My Mission

My work in the woman's movement began and grew, just like my work of social service and my trade-union activities, little by little, and more by force of circumstances than through any decision of mine.

This may not be what many imagine to be the case, but it is the truth.

It would be more romantic or more poetic or more literary, and more like fiction, if I said, for example, that all I do now I had felt intuitively . . . as a vocation or a special decree of fate.

But such is not the case.

All I brought by way of preparation to the scene of these struggles were those same feelings which had made me think of the problems of the rich and the poor.

But nothing more.

I never imagined it would fall to my lot someday to lead a woman's movement in my country, and still less a political movement.

Circumstances showed the way.

Ah! But I did not remain in my comfortable position of Eva Perón. The path which opened up before my eyes was the path I took if by it I could help Perón's cause a little—the cause of the people.

*From Eva Perón, *My Mission in Life*, trans. Ethel Cherry (New York: Vantage, 1953), 181–83, 205–6.

I imagine many other women have seen the paths I pursue long before I did.

The only difference between them and me is that they stayed behind and I started. Actually, I should confess that if I girded myself for a struggle it was not for myself but for him . . . for Perón!

He encouraged me to rise.

He took me out of “the flock of sparrows.”

He taught me my first steps in all my undertakings.

Afterward I never lacked the powerful and extraordinary stimulus of his love.

I realize, above all, that I began my work in a woman’s movement because Perón’s cause demanded it.

It all began little by little.

Before I realized it I was already heading a woman’s political movement . . . and, with it, had to accept the spiritual leadership of the women of my country.

This caused me to meditate on woman’s problems. And, more than that, to feel them, and to feel them in the light of the doctrine with which Perón was beginning to build a New Argentina.

I remember with what extraordinary fondness, as friend and master, General Perón explained to me innumerable women’s problems in my country and in the world.

In these conversations I again became aware of the kindness of his nature.

Millions of men have faced, as he has faced, the ever more acute problem of woman’s role in humanity in this afflicted century; but I think very few of them have stopped, like Perón, to penetrate it to its depths.

In this, as in everything, he showed me the way.

The world’s feminists will say that to start a woman’s movement in this way is hardly feministic . . . to start by recognizing to a certain extent the superiority of a man!

However, I am not interested in criticisms.

Also, recognizing Perón’s superiority is a different matter. Besides . . . it is my intention to write the truth.

Women and Action

Ifirmly believe that woman—contrary to the common opinion held by men—lives better in action than in inactivity.

I see this every day in my work of political service and social welfare.

The reason is very simple. Man can live exclusively for himself. Woman cannot.

If a woman lives for herself, I think she is not a woman, or else she cannot be said to live. That is why I am afraid of the “masculinization” of women.

When that occurs, women become even more egoistic than men, because we women carry things to greater extremes than men.

A man of action is one who triumphs over all the rest. A woman of action is one who triumphs for the rest. Isn't this a great difference?

Woman's happiness is not her own happiness, but that of others.

That is why, when I thought of my feminist movement, I did not want to take woman out of what is so much her own sphere. In politics men seek their own triumph.

Women, if they did that, would cease to be women.

I have not wanted women to look to themselves in the woman's party . . . but rather that right there they should serve others in some fraternal and generous form.

Woman's problem everywhere is always the deep and fundamental problem of the home.

It is her great destiny—her irremediable destiny.

She needs to have a home; when she cannot make one with her own flesh, she does so with her soul, or she is not a woman!

Well, for this very reason I have wanted my party to be a home that each basic unit should be something like a family . . . with its great loves and its small disagreements, with its sublime fruitfulness and its interminable laboriousness.

I know that in many places I have already attained this. Above all, where the women I have appointed are most womanly!

More than political action, the feminist movement has to develop social service. Precisely because social service is something that we women have in the blood!

Our destiny and our vocation is to serve others, and that is social service.

Not that other "social life" . . . which is contrary to all service!

4. *Father of the Poor?* Robert M. Levine*

*Like Juan Perón of Argentina, Getúlio Vargas of Brazil employed a radically new vocabulary of class-conscious rhetoric and imagery in his long and influential political career. Vargas defined the populist era in Brazil (which created opportunities for bold nationalist thinkers like Gilberto Freyre, whose book *The Masters and the Slaves* was excerpted in the previous chapter). In this selection, historian Robert Levine begins by posing a puzzling contradiction: most poor Brazilians remember the Vargas years as a time of great progress, yet the standard measures of most workers' material lives showed little sign of improvement. The author looks for explanations in two related areas of Brazilian culture. According to Levine, Vargas's political connection to the daily lives of the workers in his country was similar to the traditional Brazilian kinship role known as *padrinho*, or*

*From Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 100–106. © 1998 Robert M. Levine.

godfather, of an extended family and other dependents. Levine also examines the Catholicism of the urban poor as a dimension of Vargas's relationship with the workers. Along the way, he also allows some Vargas supporters to explain their reasons for doing so. How do they explain their support for Vargas?

Throughout the Vargas years, the unmistakable division separating the social classes remained essentially untouched by government reforms. Brazil's "haves," in fact, employed more maids and domestic servants than any country in the Western world, because labor was so cheap. Whether remaining in the rural interior or as migrants to urban areas, these men and women were barely above subsistence level, hidden, in that sense, from the everyday world of the affluent. That the "have-nots" on the whole tended to accept their lot caused them to be treated as if they were children, a by-product of the paternalistic legacy of Brazilian society. They used good-naturedness and resignation as coping mechanisms, although when they snapped, mobs smashed and burned streetcars (*quebra quebra*) or looted storehouses for food. The lower classes, Spanish journalist Ricardo Baeza pontificated, are a "garrulous and laughing people, who do not yet know the poison of thought or the curse of work."

Vargas maintained a sharp distance in his mind between himself and the people he called *populares* in his diary. They loved him nonetheless. During the 1930 election campaign pro-Liberal Alliance crowds overturned streetcars in Salvador. After the Liberal Alliance triumph, thousands lined the tracks to watch Vargas's train proceed from the South to Rio de Janeiro, where he would take office. Street poets called Getúlio the *defensor dos marmiteiros*, the protector of the workers who carried their tin lunchboxes of rice and beans with them to their jobs. At the same time, the growing migration of rural families to the cities of the coast in a desperate search for jobs spawned ever larger slums: foul *mocambos* on the river banks of Recife, shanties in Salvador and Pôrto Alegre, *favelas* (shantytowns) sprouting in São Paulo for the first time, between 1942 and 1945, and a proliferation of new and larger favelas on the hillsides of Rio de Janeiro.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, an indigent black girl in rural Minas Gerais living at the lowest rung of poverty, scorned by the "good families" in her small city and condemned to deprivation, describes in her autobiographical memoirs what the 1930 Revolution meant to her:

One day I awoke confused to see the streets filled with soldiers. It was a revolution. I knew only revolutions of ants when they moved about. Revolutions by men are tragic. Some killing others. And the people only talked about Getúlio Vargas and João Pessoa. It was the union of the State of Paraíba with the State of Rio Grande do Sul. And the military rebels asked people to arm themselves, that men shouldn't be absent in the hour of their country's litigation. These seditions occur because of the arrogance of those who want to govern the nation. With Getúlio Vargas we will have more work.

The soldiers spread through the streets with green, yellow, and white banners with Getúlio's face in the center. Those who saw the portrait liked him and said: "Now, Brazil will be watched over by a man!" This will move the country forward. We are a country without a leader. We have to wake up. Countries cannot lie down eternally in a splendid cradle. Our country is very backward. The girls who were domestic servants didn't leave their employers' houses. I was working in Dona Mimi's house, the wife of the *gaúcho*.* He was happy it was his state that would bring order to Brazil.

I walked the streets. I heard the soldiers sing:
 Long live our Revolution
 Brazil will ascend like a balloon
 With Getúlio, Brazil moves ahead
 With Getúlio, Brazil won't fall
 Let's have more bread on the table
 Getúlio is a friend of the poor.

When she was eighteen or nineteen, in the early 1930s, Carolina went to a charity hospital. She wrote:

In the ward the women only spoke about the [1930] Revolution, that it was beneficial for the people. That it had changed the rules of the game for workers. Salaries were better; they now were able to have bank accounts and other benefits from the working-class legislation. A worker is able to retire when he is old and be paid for full-time work. Workers were content with the laws. And Getúlio was becoming known as the "father of the poor." The people were disciplined.

Carolina, who wrote her memoirs during the last years of her life in the mid-1970s, did not remember that Vargas's social legislation came into effect only over decades. Unskilled workers were initially excluded from benefits. Still, Carolina remembered that Getúlio gave young men the opportunity to join the army and therefore leave the hardscrabble interior. Many of them got jobs in São Paulo, she said; in their letters home to their relatives they convinced them to come to São Paulo also. They came to believe that São Paulo was the paradise for poor people. This was the moment in which she decided that when she could, she would go to São Paulo herself, a place that for her, in her words, was "Heaven's waiting room."

Men in rural Minas Gerais, Carolina said, when they got together, started to speak about Getúlio being the great protector of the poor. She later wrote that she thought, "Will this be the politician who is going to improve Brazil for the Brazilians? . . . He had reanimated the people, that people who were lukewarm, apathetic, leave-it-for-tomorrow idealistic dreamers, now moving into action

*A nickname for people from Vargas's home state of Rio Grande do Sul.

because they believed that this government would not deceive them.” Planners, she claimed, said that they were going to Sao Paulo to get a loan from Getúlio and open a plant with fifty workers because Getúlio said that if workers have jobs they won’t have time to go astray. “Not only does he give us loans,” she wrote, “but his goal is to make workers the beneficiaries. Industry in São Paulo brings immediate profits.”

Almost from the outset of his arrival in the public eye, millions of these men and women revered Vargas as a father figure. One reason for this was the importance of fictive kinship in Brazilian society. The descendants of slaves became kin of African tribal ancestors through initiation into spiritist cults. Landless peasants traditionally took powerful figures as godparents [*padrinhos* or *madrinhas*] for their newborn children. In the northeastern backlands in the late nineteenth century, for example, parish birth records list the Virgin Maria as *madrinha* for thousands of baby girls and the northeastern charismatics Antonio Conselheiro or Father Cícero* as *padrinhos*. Many more families elicited permission of the local landlord to godfather (and therefore protect) their offspring. In the same way, Getúlio Vargas, the first national politician to reach out to all Brazilians, became the nation’s *padrinho*. For ordinary people, Getúlio was accessible, all-powerful, demanding of their loyalty, and willing to intervene on their behalf if they proved him worthy.

Many lower-class Brazilians, including Carolina de Jesus, mixed spiritism with the penitential Roman Catholicism prevalent in the hinterlands. For people with such beliefs, Getúlio was a miracle-working saint, with whom one could commune spiritually. They decorated personal shrines with his photograph, and asked him for personal intervention, as they did to clay statues for Father Cícero, the miracle-working defrocked priest whose backlands Ceará religious community in Joazeiro coexisted with Vargas’s government during the 1930s and who exerted considerable influence in state politics.

The life histories of ordinary Brazilians who reached adulthood during the 1930s and 1940s demonstrate incontestably that the Vargas era was pivotal in changing their lives, even if the new opportunities for mobility were more incremental than dramatic. Consider the case of Maurílio Tomás Ferreira, born in 1915 in rural Espírito Santo:

I had six brothers, most of them older. I even have a photograph of them. Three were drafted into the Guard, all at once, and they had to go even though they were married and had small children. . . . Before the Vargas government things were out of hand. . . . We lived on my father’s land he had bought, everyone in the family had a little house and a small plot. . . . He distilled *cachaça* [rum] from

*Antonio Conselheiro, or Antonio “the Counselor,” was the spiritual leader of the rebel community of Canudos discussed in chapter 6, “Race and Nation Building.” Father Cícero Batista was a Catholic priest and the religious leader of the community of Juazeiro do Norte from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth.

sugar cane. . . . I had four sisters also. My father was angry because he now had to take care of his three daughters-in-law and their kids. My father had to pay for their uniforms, shoes—in the countryside you had to provide everything yourself.

I went to a rural school, very rudimentary. After primary school I studied with a teacher my father hired for all of us. Getúlio regulated lots of things. Before that, things were disorganized. I was now the oldest boy living at home. My father decided to send me to the army too, to get it over with, so I lied about my age. . . . I served in the army in 1930 when I was fifteen. . . . I was sent first to Vitória and then to Rio, to the Praia Vermelha barracks. I got out in December. I returned to work with my father and when I was twenty-two I married, in 1937. I grew corn and potatoes and coffee beans and raised pigs. There was no place to sell things, so I had to transport my produce, and this was expensive. We made very little money. Things grew well; my father sometimes harvested ten thousand sacks of coffee. But we had too little land for all of my brothers and their families. All of my family were *crentes* [evangelical Protestants]. There was a church in Córrego Rico. We went. I directed a choir. We were baptized. I met my wife there when she was twelve years old.

[In 1942] I decided, overnight, to leave. We had two children already. We went to [the town of] Muniz Freire and bought a house with my savings. I had no job, nothing. I worked as a barber but didn't make very much; the town was too small. I worked for the mayor's office. I got one job through one of my brothers-in-law who was a driver for an Arab. I became foreman on his farm but he didn't pay me. I stayed for a year and then left for another foreman's job. Then I got a job with the railroad. I got it [in 1945] when I went to Cachoeiro to sell chickens. A fellow I sold them to told me to try and get a railroad job, that they were hiring many people. He introduced me to some officials of the Leopoldina Railroad. They hired me. I liked the idea of living in Cachoeiro because there was a school there my kids could attend. My children all studied, one as far as the fifth grade, the others to high school. And railroad workers were eligible for pensions; [we were] one of the first. . . . When I started working they registered me in the railroad pension institute. There was an enormous union building in Cachoeiro. The union sold provisions and merchandise to us at cheaper prices. Later on the union gave a scholarship for my youngest son to study at high school.

Starting in 1945 my wife and I always voted in elections, every year. I joined the PTB [Workers' Party] . . . and became active in the union. . . . I admired Getúlio Vargas, always voted for him. . . . He named the state interventors. He was leading Brazil forward. . . . When he killed himself it was an enormous shock. . . . I kept his photograph [the union had given to us] and a copy of his suicide letter, to remind me of what he did for poor Brazilians. . . . He was the chief organizer of this country.

Looking back on his life nearly a half century later, Maurílio recognized that this was the turning point in his life. Employment by a state agency meant school for his children, a future. To have a government job meant security and a pension. Perhaps because he understood that so few other workers received these benefits, Maurílio idolized Vargas, considering him his personal benefactor. He would

have scoffed at social scientists writing that Vargas's labor measures were enacted to control the labor force, because he knew that he and his family benefited. As long as he belonged to the union, his wife would receive food at reduced prices at the union-run store. He would receive a pension, and his children would be eligible for scholarships available to families of union members. He considered voting for Vargas a natural obligation and something that gave him satisfaction. The union allowed him to advance: when Maurilio started, he was an apprentice brakeman. When he retired in 1970, he held the position of "chief of the train." Such upward mobility would have been impossible before 1930.

5. Cardenismo and Women's Organizing ~ Jocelyn Olcott*

In some ways, the populist experience in Mexico was similar to that of Argentina or Brazil. A charismatic leader willing to engage in a new approach to economic development and eager to adopt a new attitude toward workers rode an electoral landslide to power. That leader was Lázaro Cárdenas, whose six-year presidency (1934–1940) did much to fulfill the radical promise of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. But Cardenismo, as his political movement was known, differed from Peronism and other populist movements in an important way: Cárdenas, as president of a country with a large population of landless peasants (many of them indigenous), carried out a major land reform during his administration. Using language from the revolutionary constitution of 1917, which guaranteed a set of social rights, Cárdenas broke up large haciendas and redistributed thousands and thousands of square kilometers of land to the peasants, who could now access those lands through a new form of agrarian collective called the ejido. In this selection, historian Jocelyn Olcott examines the relationship between the Cardenista state and the peasant women of the Comarca Lagunera (or simply, Laguna) region of northern Mexico, which was known for its vast cotton farms. In this excerpt from her path-breaking study, Olcott explores the tensions that ran through the relationship between Cárdenas and the Ligas Femeniles de Lucha Social (Women's Leagues for Social Struggle), which were created by the Cardenista government to support female labor organizing and social services. As Olcott demonstrates, the women were very specific about the reforms they sought. What were they?

Cardenas's final address ending his forty-day regional tour [of the Comarca Lagunera] concentrated largely on the details of the new Ligas Femeniles,

*"All the Benefits of the Revolution: Labor and Citizenship in the Comarca Lagunera," from Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 142–44, 147–50. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, www.dukeupress.edu.

which figured prominently in government propaganda about the Laguna reforms. Exhorting his audience that “we should fulfill our obligation to stimulate and strengthen all acts that advance her liberation,” he rhetorically distanced women from their own emancipation. “Women’s intervention in the functioning of the communities,” he explained, “will ensure that efforts are not lost or wasted, that saving and economizing benefit families, that the profits produced by working the land are poured into improving the quality of food, clothing, and housing, constantly elevating the standard of living.” In the brief period between Cárdenas’s 30 November national address, when he announced his government’s intention to prioritize women’s organizing, and his departure from the region on 9 December, the Agrarian Department constituted the first sixteen Ligas Femeniles de Lucha Social, with a total membership of 1,256 women. The Agrarian Department donated eighteen sewing machines to these leagues, and the PNR* donated another twenty-five to leagues formed shortly after Cárdenas left the region. By 1940, the Agrarian Department claimed 159 leagues with a total membership of 4,000 women, all pledging to support the department’s program.

In December 1936, the daily *El Siglo de Torreon* published a pamphlet with the text of Cardenas’s speech, the Ligas Femeniles’ statutes and declaration of principles, and prototypes for registration, membership cards, and officers’ credentials. This pamphlet became the handbook for leagues throughout the country, and Gabino Vázquez [a key Cardenista official] touted it during a national radio address soon after its publication. Intertwining the rhetoric of old-style patronage and revolutionary entitlement, it began, “We recognize the moral impulse and support that the señor President of the Republic, Division General Lázaro Cárdenas, and his respectable wife, the señora Amalia Solórzano de Cárdenas, give to all peasant women and especially those who live in the Comarca Lagunera so that the benefits of the Revolution not only reach the men but also belong directly to us.” The language underscored that the leagues would make women “worthy wives and mothers” and exist only with the support of their husbands and (male) heads of families. “Far from keeping her from fulfilling her domestic obligations and her high moral goals in the heart of the family and of the collectivity,” the pamphlet elaborated, “the time a woman spends on her preparation and organization makes her more dignified and respectable.” The Agrarian Department reassured its public that league meetings were “not political acts” but, rather, social events. Although the department asserted that the leagues allowed women to gain “equality to men with respect to rights and duties,” it continued, “The above does not mean to say that the woman has abandoned the place she has traditionally occupied in the home. Very much to the contrary; today more than ever she is

*The Spanish acronym for the National Revolutionary Party, founded in 1929, which supported Cárdenas’s campaign for the presidency in 1934. Cárdenas subsequently changed its name to the PRM or Party of the Mexican Revolution in 1938.

owner and mistress of the domestic realm; today more than ever she is tender and loving with her man and sweet with her children.”

The program emphasized community improvements through official, bureaucratic channels such as the National Ejidal Credit Bank and the Department of Public Health. Those activities that did not involve government agencies relied instead on local support for projects such as constructing homes, planting fruit orchards and ornamental trees, establishing public washing facilities, and maintaining public sanitation. The program also promoted Cardenista modernization projects, such as public education, temperance campaigns, and sanitation—a priority following the meningitis epidemic—and instituted mechanisms through the ejidal credit system to establish consumer cooperatives and to acquire sewing machines and motorized corn mills.

In many ways, the pamphlet merely explicated practices in which women’s leagues already engaged, such as temperance campaigns, as well as customary duties, such as domestic work and family health care. But women demonstrated enthusiasm for these leagues despite their seemingly limited objectives. The pamphlet’s formality, much like the leagues themselves, not only legitimated their organizing efforts but also explicitly valued women’s work within their households and communities. The language regulating membership—requiring members to be at least 14 and “living honestly in the village”—echoed the conditions for Mexican citizenship, linking revolutionary citizenship with women’s reproductive labor. More important, Cardenas’s endorsement brought legitimacy and leverage, creating an organizing infrastructure with access to government agencies. Thus, the *Ligas Femeniles* accrued material benefits and official recognition within a longstanding Mexican political culture of patronage. By pledging their allegiance to Cardenismo, league members expected greater access to government services. . . .

Nothing sparked as much controversy as the coveted *molinos de nixtamal* (corn mills) promised by the Agrarian Department. The discord stemmed from a host of symbolic and material factors. By the late 1930s, the labor-saving molinos had become the emblem of rural women’s emancipation and a focus of women’s organizing, with many organizers viewing them as a league entitlement. “Before even uttering the phrase ‘feminine emancipation’ in a town,” one Agrarian Department pamphlet explained, “molinos must be sent to prevent women from having to prostrate themselves as slaves before the rough *metate* [stone-grinding tablet].” Hand grinding corn for the dough, or *masa*, for a family’s daily tortilla ration was in many ways the physical act of *abnegación* [self-sacrifice]. Rural women rose before dawn and spent exhausting and tedious hours on their knees, bent over the metate. According to the historian Arnold Bauer, corn tortillas made up 70–75 percent of ordinary people’s daily caloric intake by the early twentieth

century, giving them “a decreased range of food and, in the case of tortillas, the calories were purchased at the cost of massive inputs of female labor.”

Available since the late nineteenth century, molinos remained commercially owned and mostly urban until the 1930s. Although women occasionally requested molinos before the *Ligas Femeniles*, the Agrarian Department made them widely available through donations and credits. As the single most sought-after benefit of league membership, they symbolized women’s embrace of the national modernization project; the Cardenas government’s promotion of milling cooperatives transformed rural women’s labor burdens much as land and labor reforms changed men’s. Between 1935 and 1940, the number of molinos de nixtamal in Mexico jumped from 927 to almost 6,000. Rural teachers argued that corn mills and sewing machines reduced women’s daily household labor duties from ten to twelve hours to two or three. “Once the [women’s] leagues were constituted,” proclaimed the Agrarian Department, “their first emancipatory step was directed at destroying the shameful slavery that the metate meant for women. ‘Here are the mills! Away with the metates!’ went the cry of salvation that was heard in all the *ejidos* once this liberating act took place.” Leagues often impatiently informed Cárdenas that they awaited promised mills or the credit to purchase one. In petitions listing a community’s needs, women often placed a mill above schools, health clinics, and water rights; in many cases, no other demands competed with the request for a molino. Thus, the molinos formed part of the Cardenista program to remake Laguna society through education and technology, providing women not only with relief from one of their most taxing domestic chores but also with a modest income.

Urban feminists have often overlooked or dismissed the momentousness of this technological innovation. “The *Ligas Femeniles*,” the activist intellectual Clementina Batalla de Bassols asserted in the 1950s, “did not incorporate rural women—as they should have been—into the general struggle for radical agrarian reform, for their integral rights as rural workers, but rather distracted them with small demands of daily life (such as obtaining a molino de nixtamal, sewing machines and at most a school) but that did not direct them to support our country’s greater campesino struggles.” Situating the desire for corn mills apart from women’s struggle for rural labor rights—branding them a form of payoff that distracted women from “greater campesino struggles”—ignores the extent to which women’s daily experience of arduous reproductive-labor tasks shaped their priorities as activists and revolutionaries.

Given their obvious benefits, countless disputes erupted over the mills and the profits they yielded. Ejidal regulations granted the women’s leagues exclusive rights to operate the mills and limited competition based on the local population. To “encourage women’s organizing,” competing corn mills required the municipal president’s express permission, and a 1932 presidential decree regulating competition among molinos limited the number of mills per capita and their

proximity to one another. Thus, organized women in the ejidos gained access to monopoly, or near-monopoly, control over one of the communities' most basic services. Cooperatives unaffiliated with the Ligas Femeniles contended that the new mills violated the 1932 decree. Commercial millers like the Spaniard Vicente Arteaga, meanwhile, often sidestepped legal avenues entirely, simply using their influence to undermine the leagues' cooperatives. Opposition to the molinos also came from another, less likely source. Some campesinos objected that the mechanized mills produced inferior masa and therefore inferior tortillas. Rural men complained that the molino—along with its labor-saving cousin, the sewing machine—would give women too much free time, and rural women looked askance at their neighbors who, failing in their femininity, relied on a Molino. The Francisco I. Madero Federation of Women's Leagues informed Cárdenas that ejidatarios [men given a parcel of an ejido to work individually] expropriated mills from the women's leagues, and some even established competing mills to undermine the leagues' cooperatives.

The characterization of the metate as enslaving women (and the molino as emancipatory) appears frequently both in official materials and in petitions from women's leagues pointedly linking government patronage and postrevolutionary citizenship. Complaining that requests to the state government for a molino had only met with "interviews, evasions, reversals, waiting, and unfulfilled offers," a Durango Liga Femenil appealed to Cárdenas for support, noting his "ideology that has raised women from the lethargy in which, until now, she found herself submerged, without voice or vote." The letter's tone and temporal location of this advance ("until now") not only depicted the Cardenista government as a more effective patron than its predecessors but also indicated that women, no longer "submerged," now enjoyed the rights of "voice and vote," the standard formulation of citizenship.

6. Trujillo, the Benefactor ~ Lauren Derby*

While Perón attempted to incorporate Argentine meatpackers and Cárdenas Mexican peasants into their populist projects, the Dominican populist Rafael Leónidas Trujillo built his political movement on support from the mixed-race, urban underclass of Santo Domingo. They were not the unionized workers or organized peasants we saw elsewhere in this chapter. In this sense, Trujillismo presents us with a notable variation on the Latin American populist phenomenon,

*"Conclusion: Charisma and the Gift of Recognition," from Lauren Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 257–64. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, www.dukeupress.edu

one in which no real industrial working class existed. Trujillo rose to power from humble origins. After a period of criminal activity, he enlisted in and climbed up the ranks of the national guard, which had been established under U.S. military occupation of the country (1916–1924). After winning a landslide election in 1930, he went on to rule the Dominican Republic for more than thirty years, either as president (1930–1938, 1942–1952) or as generalissimo of the army and head of the Dominican Party. His assassination in 1961 triggered a political crisis. In this selection, historian Lauren Derby breaks down the connections between Trujillo and the people, focusing especially on the anthropological concepts of charisma and symbolic capital. According to Derby, many unemployed or underemployed Dominicans found in Trujillo a patron who was willing to do things for them, a completely novel development in Dominican politics. In particular, she explains how Trujillo included Dominicans of all classes in his political project through an elaborate system of private gift giving, public works projects, and state-sponsored cultural events. Like other populists, Trujillo employed a specialized vocabulary, what she calls his “vernacular practices.” But she never lets us lose sight of the fact that Trujillo’s power was backed up by the ever-present threat of state violence against citizens.

The secret to unraveling Trujillo’s charisma is the politics of patronage under the regime, a feature with both instrumental and expressive dimensions. Trujillo took over the central pillars of the economy and then converted some of the cash he usurped into his own symbolic capital, by investing it in houses and women and by distributing it to his allies and the population at large through gifts. As Pierre Bourdieu has said, “The gift, generosity, conspicuous distribution . . . are operations of social alchemy . . . which tend to bring about the transmutation of economic capital into symbolic capital.” Yet this alchemy also transformed the recipients. These gifts became tokens of recognition that fostered a feeling of inclusion, a form of symbolic citizenship as the marginal were acknowledged as members of the nation. This was especially meaningful given a history of a weak state and weak market penetration, especially in the interior.

The growth of the informal sector in the capital city in the 1950s as well as the instability of mestizo identity may have made Dominicans more available to Trujillo’s kind of symbolic politics. The fact that Dominicans see themselves as Creoles or mixed-race indios, “both black and white, like dominos,” means that everyone potentially carries the invisible stigma of blackness, of nonpersonhood, of anonymity, and harbors a fear of this secret being outed. The other side of the *tigueraje** fantasy of social climbing is the threat of possible failure, which creates the figure of the *resentido*—someone like Trujillo who dreamed of being rich, loved, and powerful and yet never quite made it, who was ultimately seen by some

**Tigueraje*, which has no direct English translation, is a Dominican word that signifies a kind of hyper-masculine identity based on being a “ladies’ man” as well as having “street smarts.”

as an outcast, a foundling, a pariah. Trujillo's vernacular politics played upon a thirst for recognition, which as Frantz Fanon reminds us is a feature of former slave societies; Dominicans in popular parlance call this condition *comparona* (incessantly envious), which is said to be a Creole trait especially among the petit bourgeoisie. Dominicans were also more available to Trujillo's politics of symbolic inclusion because of the nature of economic development under his rule. . . .

In Max Weber's classic model, charisma is founded upon recognition; it is expressed via gifts from the population to the leader. Under Trujillo, these vectors were reversed. Thousands of large and small gifts moved from the National Palace into Dominicans' homes as tokens of official recognition that made even poor residents feel part of the national project, as did scripting them into official party events. These exchanges helped forge an illusory bond between them and the president and thus masked a relation of domination in an idiom of *confianza* [trust]. Gifts were not an operation of ideological persuasion or interpellation, however; they were an acknowledgment of citizens' personhood as members of the national community as they moved from the periphery to the center—a shift with particular resonance given the individuation of the former peasantry and *chiriperos* (informal sector), who lacked cohesion or identity as a community, and the stains that many Dominicans secretly harbored. The regime also felt more familiar, more *criollo* [creole], than previous liberal regimes because of the vernacular practices which made this sinister swindler appear to be one of them. Trujillo's biggest gift was offering Dominicans a myth of national *progreso* [progress], one providing the illusion of self-transformation through social mobility, whether through a baptism, a new house, a pair of shoes, or a prosthetic arm. This "authorizing myth" gained legitimacy in part because of Trujillo's personal narrative of conversion from cattle rustler's son to world-class president, a trajectory with both class and racial inflections.

However, there was a dark underside to Trujillo's modernity. The gift of modernization which also resulted in Trujillo's excessive wealth was rumored to be a hex . . . a gift produced by sorcery that demanded sacrifice. Sovereignty and sorcery are frequently linked in the Caribbean; "languages of stateness" such as theatricality and secrecy are often assumed to operate within a logic of magic since they draw on a "dialectics of publicity and secrecy, and revelation and concealment."

Trujillo reverted to a traditional mode of power based on providing public works and pleasures to the masses, a logic similar to that of caudillismo. The fact that true authority rested on the national army and police, of course, made this a modern form of rule. Trujillo also merged the logic of the market with that of the gift; he was equally the shrewd capitalist when it came to money making and the clever caudillo when it came to throwing a civic fete. He fashioned a public sphere in an intimate, familial guise, a leadership style modeled more on the patriarch than the president. Sumptuous expenditure became a central reason of

state under the Trujillato;* it served as a mask of generosity occluding the extortion that was the true logic of the regime.

Patronage was an essential means of control under the Trujillo regime; indeed, it is key to understanding its culture of compliance. All state activities were framed as personal prestations from Trujillo—from public works such as highways, canals, and coastal dredging to antimalarial measures, tax exemptions, library and radio station inaugurations, Christmas bonuses, and mother's day greetings. The bulk of state gifts were public works, although symbolic gestures . . . formed one fifth of the total. State gifts increased as the economy improved; in the early years they averaged an annual total of 197, but by 1955, when Trujillo's twenty-five years in office were commemorated, they reached a total of 258, some 40 per month. This accounting merges gifts to the public and private sectors; personal presents ranged from trifles to subsistence payments, from sewing machines, Christmas food handouts, and silver demitasse spoons to more substantial housing, public sector employment, or land.

Tokens from Trujillo extended his name and renown into every household, from the boudoirs of wealthy aristocrats who despised the regime to the rural and urban poor for whom the state seemed a distant locus of dread. They were reminders of his awesome authority, everyday signs that each crack and crevice of the country was Trujillo's immanent domain. They made him appear omnipresent, further instantiating the *respeto* [deference] he had as a result of his brutality. In combination with the frequent and elaborate state rites they also framed Trujillo, as [anthropologist Clifford] Geertz has put it, as the "charismatic center of social life." These objects appeared to be owned by individuals, yet served as constant reminders of his totalizing possession of the nation; and amid the palpable fear that asphyxiated Ciudad Trujillo,† they were also terrifying reminders of the extreme violence that the regime was capable of. Placards saying "In this house, Trujillo is the boss" were displayed in plain view in the foyer during the regime, but personal gifts insinuated Trujillo's presence into private, hidden spaces. The fact that these state fetishes are still guarded and swapped indicates their value as "inalienable possessions," particularly among former Trujillistas and the poor, who were amazed at having such "personal" contact with a person of such awesome power.

The symbolic capital generated by these gifts was intended to translate into social capital or honor—precisely what Trujillo lacked owing to his background as a mulatto underclass arriviste. Thus they formed part of a larger economy of domination in which objects circulated as well as speech forms such as praise and denunciation—one in which praise could buy a post in the Dominican Party or

*The thirty-one-year period (1930–1961) of Trujillo's domination of the country.

†In the mid-1930s, after a major reconstruction following a powerful hurricane, Trujillo renamed the capital, Santo Domingo, Ciudad Trujillo, or Trujillo City.

denunciation could cost one's job; one that enmeshed individuals in the tentacles of state power whether they liked it or not.

Trujillo manipulated a complex economy of conversion. The "*mysterium tremendum*" [terrifying mystery] of his "skilled revelation of skilled concealment" resulted from a slick conversion of graft into gifts. His public face of generosity, such as thousands of crisp hundred dollar bills as baptismal presents to the poor, were funded by backstage sleights of hand—for example, the kick-backs required on all government contracts, revenues from his crop monopolies, and the institutional 10 percent "tax" on all public-sector salaries which went to the Dominican Party, a good portion of which flowed into his private salary (rumored to be hidden in Swiss bank accounts). If Trujillo lacked cultural capital at the onset, he bought it and then converted it to social capital by indebting the citizenry to the state. Although these gifts seemed to be tokens of recognition flattering the recipient, they were actually intended to buy the respect that Trujillo so desperately wanted. They were in fact debts that eventually purchased the charisma of Trujillo by locating him at the apex of an economy of domination.

