

# The enigma of Peronism

*by Humberto Cucchetti*

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**Peronism, a political and social movement, has structured life in Argentina since the 1940s, and has been emulated elsewhere in Latin American. But it eludes any precise definition. Neither a dictatorship, nor a democracy, this plebiscitary regime is based on the army and trade unions.**

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Reviewed: Alain Rouquié, *Le siècle de Perón. Essai sur les démocraties hégémoniques*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, 409 p., 25 €.

Alain Rouquié, political analyst and author of numerous works on Latin America (or the ‘Far West,’<sup>1</sup> as he defined the region three decades ago), is well-versed in Argentinian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here he presents a work that summarises Argentina’s long journey since the advent of the *Peronist century*. The book, empirically rich and suggestive in terms of its argumentation, while avoiding a reading of Peronism as an ‘exceptional’ phenomenon, raises a range of normative questions – in the same spirit as Federico Neiburg, something not uncommon when dealing with Peronism. A. Rouquié’s concerns are also scientific, and his idea of ‘hegemonic democracy’ seeks to go beyond current conceptualisations. The author uses this idea as a means of identifying the specificity of Peronism within a more widespread series of political manifestations that combine mass democracy, national reform, the charisma of a leader (envisaged in terms of a ‘supreme leader’, ‘orchestrator’) and other orientations often opposed to Republican principles and a structuring of the party system. This idea provides the scope to go beyond the epistemic limits of other interpretations — false extrapolations of the idea of Bonapartism, the ‘pseudo-concept’ of populism and all the pejorative notions it implies.

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<sup>1</sup>According to Rouquié, Latin America is ‘largely Westernised due to its culture, defined by its expectations and consumption models. It is located at the fringes of the universe developed by its production and trade’, *Amérique latine. Introduction à l’extrême occident*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 426.

## The history of Peronist policy

The French reader will discover all the different episodes of a journey that is simultaneously complex, dramatic and sometimes violent. The events recounted are too numerous to mention, and each chapter and period would deserve a detailed commentary that goes beyond the ambit of a review. With remarkable empirical and historical density, A. Rouquié recreates the events, cultural traditions and social feuds that served to anchor Colonel Perón's movement in the Argentinian political landscape. Peronism was born out of the depths of the nationalist military groups of the 1940s. One of the leaders, Colonel Juan Perón, State Secretary in 1943 and 1944, who went on to become the democratically elected president in 1946, managed by a political and social feat to impose himself as the iron ruler and representative of the working class worlds and their trade union organisations. Until its fall from power in 1955, the Peronist regime favoured the popular classes, encouraged an industrialisation model that remained incomplete, adopted a nationalist political programme and pursued a doctrine that was *neither capitalist nor Marxist*. Then, as throughout its history, Peronism went on to incorporate new actors, new social strata or various modes of political contestation. As a 'movement' it took shape around a partisan as well as a trade union branch, and developed specifically around the figure of its leader, his successors and a whole group of nebulous territorial solidarities and policies. When its founder died in 1974, and after a period of uncertainty, the movement reorganised allowing emerging figures to take over the Peronist Party.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, when trade unions were no longer the unifying factor of worker representation, and industrial production was in decline leaving a large section of the population in extreme poverty, Peronism drew its support from territorial leaders or *caudillos* – provincial governors and above all, the mayors of the most densely populated towns in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Nonetheless, it did not ignore the emergence of the *piqueteros* movements, the social organisations for the unemployed, which for two decades, and particularly during the 12 years of the Kirchner couple's government (2003-2015), entered the informal and sometimes even formal arena of politics.

A. Rouquié demonstrates a great skill for synthesis in this detailed work of historical reconstruction. Although some of his analyses can be considered imprecise, (the historian of the Peronist Resistance, Julio Melón Pirro, would certainly contest the statement that 'Perón himself called upon civilians and the army to rebel. A military uprising took place on 9 June 1956' (p. 117)), others are extremely perspicacious, for example the description of the Ultra Kirchnerist or *Cristinist*<sup>3</sup> – *La Cámpora* organisation 'the youth lobby group that was a training ground for administrative skills' (p. 314).

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<sup>2</sup> The Peronist partisan and electoral names changed during the different political moments.

<sup>3</sup> Referring to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was President twice between 2007 and 2015.

## Beyond singularism

One of the book's great qualities consists in not adopting an isolated approach to Peronism, but including it in an in-depth analysis of Argentinian society and its complexities. The pages of the book teach us that the Perón century (a title chosen by the author to explain the impact of this phenomenon on political life in Argentina from the 1940s to date) is also the century of anti-Peronism, for two somewhat inextricable reasons. The first reason the political analyst suggests deals with the actions of individual and institutional actors who opposed *Justicialism*.<sup>4</sup> The anti- and non-Peronists played just as decisive a role in Argentinian politics, often founded on the radical and recurring questions that have pervaded it over the last fifty years: what should one do about Peronism? What should one do with the Peronists? Questions that no one has been able to answer to date. The second reason is embodied in what offers a partial explanation to the problem: without anti-Peronism, Peronism would have taken a different form. On this question the author is explicit (pp. 324, 379): the Peronist following and the characteristics of the movement developed because of the failure of the attempts on the part of the government to propose, at times, an alternative to Peronism's electoral hegemony and, at others, to eradicate the very the societal and political expression of its existence.

Thus, A. Rouquié's approach goes beyond the Argentinian political system to suggest a global, or even comparative view. This is an excellent means of avoiding the trap of singularism. The final part of the book deals with the question of similar democratic models. Other recent political regimes in South America (Chavism, Evo Morales' Indigenism, the Citizen's Revolution in Ecuador) as well as Putin's Russia, represent cases of 'hegemonic democracy' which A. Rouquié analyses. These regimes claim to be reformative, in the sense that they are driven by a 'desire to wipe the slate clean' (p. 354). Some democratic institutions become incompatible with the idea of recreating a Nation around a leader and imbuing it with a radically innovate historical sense. Electoral procedures are indispensable to these State regimes, they impose a legitimacy based on majority rule that is at variance with certain democratic principles, which are in fact abused: freedom of the press, the separation of powers, pluralistic respect for partisan minorities. In this manner 'it is accepted that 'Peronisms' are both legitimately elected regimes with an anti-democratic tendency' (p. 349). Undeniably Perón's *Nueva Argentina* encouraged a rewriting of national memory and the pantheon of fathers of the Motherland, amongst whom Perón went on to play a decisive role in national history. However, the following Peronist experiences cannot easily be qualified as reformative: in the 1970s, there was a return to origins, a revival of the ancient justicialist utopia, as well as its institutionalisation. The issue was no longer one of reforming the nation, but of finding a type of Peronism that would prevail in the fratricidal war, — the political struggle was by now essentially intra-Peronist: between the revolutionary fraction and those faithful to the old leader. In the 1990s, Menem was more interested in economic liberalisation

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<sup>4</sup> Justicialism, a synonym of Peronism, defines the centrality of the idea of social justice in the Peronist doctrine.

and the modernisation of the country than reforming the nation: nonetheless, his Peronist identity cannot be questioned. Kirchnerism developed more in the continuity of the earlier political experiences: the core group of its political staff was drawn from the classically Peronist elites. It is only much later, between the landowners' fiscal revolt of 2008 and Kirchner's death in 2010, and particularly from this time on, that Kirchnerism reinforced both its reformative discourse and its hold over the State apparatus (with the *La Campora* trying to take over the highest posts in the administration). The figure of the late ex-president was then glorified, almost sacralised, in a consecrated dynamic that A. Rouquie is well aware of (pp. 297- 306). But the reform, limited to a few radical thinkers who formed the Kirchnerist core, remained a limited phenomenon that was exacerbated when the political model began to crumble.

## Conclusion: the limits of an interpretation

In this work, A. Rouquie tries to arrive at a balanced synthesis; but what are the key points of his interpretation? How does one understand 'hegemonic democracy' in the light of the Peronist influence? We can but note that the latter plays an inevitable role in Argentinian political society, and that it is deeply ingrained socially and politically; but it is not an overarching collective and political actor. From our perspective, Peronist hegemonism turns out to have had a relatively weak influence in terms of stabilising the partisan game. However, for A. Rouquie, Peronism remains the motor of a paradoxically democratic system:

Indeed, Peron was not unaware that Peronism had lastingly shaped the Argentinian political system and created a dominant political culture that encouraged it [...]. The direct influence of the Justicialist model on the functioning of other political systems is not negligible either, as it contributes to weakening partisan identities and the representative system (p. 331- 332).

We should nonetheless add that the 'flaws' in the Argentinian political system existed historically prior to the Peronist wave and are common to, and reproduced by all, or almost all, the actors and institutions in the field of power in Argentina. For our part we would be more inclined to emphasise the limits of Peronism than its strength and success. Peronism or Peronisms, according to A. Rouquie, transform reality and when the model has to face up to its own shortcomings, it is replaced or reinforced by propaganda. The twelve years of Kirchnerism, with their myths, legends, appropriations and manipulations of issues related to Argentinian history and memory did not succeed in establishing a model of reform. Fierce Kirchnerists and anti-Peronists mistakenly agreed on the Kirchner's power — some were in favour of an irenic reading, while others denounced an unlikely risk of totalitarianism — Cristina Kirchner's mandates, particularly the second, were remarkable for their dubious efficiency, the repetition of political errors and the dilapidation of an electoral legitimacy that had been approved in 2011.

A. Rouquié underscores the gap between this type of system and representative democracies. He tells us that ‘of the two pillars of representative systems, electoral consultation and freedom (or rule of law) only the former was maintained, or even reinforced by a extension, or over-development of the electorate,’ (p. 389). What about the elements they could have in common? Max Weber, a reference dear to A. Rouquié’s heart, lucidly noted that in the advanced democracies of his time, there existed a tension between the charismatic power of the leader and the ‘mundane power of the party apparatus’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, between the two democratic models there are common and widespread problems. The exacerbation of charismatic power infuriates the hegemonic regimes analysed in the pages of the book.

In Peronism one can see a ‘strong social democracy’ (p. 384) in which the leaders display a little concealed appetite for power, incompatible with Republican values. In Argentina, this model takes the form of a paternalist approach, politicising certain social rights — this hypothesis deserves to be nuanced, as it is not always the case — by depoliticising the party system as Peronism finally merges with national identity. This paternalism, a pejorative idea associated with that of clientelism, opposed other paternalist models. A. Rouquié recalls: it is an ‘authoritarian paternalism’ projecting an efficient social model that subverted, for example ‘the paternalistic social relationships in the Argentinian countryside’ (pp. 49- 50).

For this reason, and many others, A. Rouquié clearly avoids any attempt to ‘compare the incomparable’, ‘a left wing electoral victory with a fascist style coup’ a ‘counter-revolutionary dictatorship’ (p. 353). It is evident that an explicitly formulated fundamental question runs through the book, structuring the authors concerns around the salient characteristics of Peronism. This question is not resolved as, in the end, we continue to question why the transformation of social hierarchies embodied by Perón ...

... was a result of Peronism and not of a Popular Front, of an autarchy and not a coalition between left wing parties in a democratic context. In other words, why did social democracy first triumph in an authoritarian regime, then join hands with anti-democratic excesses? Lastly, an additional, but essential question: why were the cult to General Perón’s personality, and his glorification such efficient means to achieve the social objectives propounded by a transformative popular regime, while it seems highly likely that a structured party would have ensured far greater continuity and coherence? (pp. 353- 354).

Marking the differences between a highly idealised typical model (with a mobilisation of masses around a party structured along European lines) and a concrete historical experience (that of Peronism) runs the risk of leading to seriously insufficient and predominantly Eurocentric analyses. Recognising the situation prevalent in Europe today, A. Rouquié, concludes his book with a few lines dedicated to the ‘unequal machine’ of Western

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<sup>5</sup> Weber, Max, ‘La transformation du charisme et le charisme de fonction’, *Revue française de Science politique*, Vol. 63, n° 3, 2013 (1913), p. 474.

democracies, where political vacuity and feebleness, highly characteristic at least of the last French governments, in no way conceal the use of decisional mechanisms of a questionable democratic nature. 'An explosion of inequalities, social hardship, denationalisation' (p. 697), will the 21<sup>st</sup> century be that of European Peronisms? The formula is simple; it does not explain the differences between Peronism and current European 'populisms'. It nonetheless has the advantage of drawing attention to a reality that the elites in France do not seem to notice.

### **Further reading:**

- Combes, Hélène – Vommaro, Gabriel, *Sociologie du clientélisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015.
- Cucchetti, Humberto — Jessica Stites Mor, « Reconversions militantes et fabrique du pouvoir d'Etat en Amérique latine », *Revue internationale des Etudes du Développement*, vo. 2, n° 230, 2017, p. 11- 28.
- Levitsky, Steven, *La transformación del justicialismo. Del partido sindical al partido clientelista, 1983- 1999*, Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno, 2005.
- Melón Pirro, Julio, *El peronismo después del peronismo*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2009.
- Neiburg, Federico, *Los intelectuales y la invención del peronismo*, Buenos Aires, Alianza, 1998.
- Rouquié, Alain, *Amérique latine. Introduction à l'extrême occident*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

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