

# NEW DIRECTIONS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARGENTINE POLITICAL HISTORY

## Introduction

JORGE NÁLLIM, DAVID M.K. SHEININ, AND  
JESSICA STITES MOR

In Argentina, the March 1976 coup d'état is a conceptual fulcrum. Historians have neatly divided Argentina's political, social, and cultural pasts as post- and pre-coup. There is a more compelling derivative, though, of that linear break. What the *proceso* means—how it is understood together with its consequences—keeps shifting, like the disturbing physical breaks in the urban geography of a futuristic Buenos Aires portrayed in novelist Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*. In part, changing understandings of what the *proceso* means to past and present complements Argentina's unusual relationship with its dictatorial past. With the fall of authoritarian rule in 1983, Argentina was the first country in the region to form a truth commission to search for answers into the how and why of murderous dictatorship. It was also the first to bring to trial, convict and imprison military leaders for crimes committed as heads of state—this while dictatorships still functioned in 1980s Paraguay and Chile just next door.

At the same time, Argentines have struggled interminably to accomplish what the truth commission and the 1980s convictions intended—bringing legal and political closure to a period of tremendous political violence. In spite of convictions of the junta's generals, subsequently pardoned by Carlos Menem, the process of justice seeking was forestalled for decades until the trials were reopened in 2003, with the overturning of "Punto Final" by congress, followed by a rebuke of the unconstitutionality of "Obediencia Debida" in 2005 by Argentina's Supreme Court. However during the intervening period, legislation blocked the prosecution of killers, torturers, kidnappers, and their many accomplices. Despite,

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Jorge.Nallim@umanitoba.ca

sheinindmk@gmail.com

jessica.stites-mor@ubc.ca

for example, that the crimes of which he was accused were well-known and effectively documented, it was not until 2003 that the state began proceedings against one of the most infamous military thugs, naval officer Ricardo Miguel Cavallo, known ominously in the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) torture and detention centre as “Sérpico.”

In 2009, twenty-five years after the fall of the dictatorship, Memoria Abierta<sup>1</sup> published a 269-page catalogue of dictatorship-related memory sites—one more effort to order a violent past. The book documented the site of the former Club Atlético torture and detention center, for example, which in 2005 had won a municipal designation as a historic site, permitting the building of a memorial to those killed there and the beginnings of an archaeological search for human remains. Since both the designation and the publication of the catalogue, the Club Atlético has remained in a state of flux. Human rights groups have been fighting constantly to prevent municipal authorities from widening the major Buenos Aires thoroughfare that bisects the site and to mitigate ongoing damage from chunks of an aging, dictatorship-era freeway overpass that keep falling from above.<sup>2</sup> The catalogue itself, like many documents of its kind, seems to be another victim of the superabundance of interest in its subject matter, as the proliferation of new works on the dictatorship produced every year provide updated and freshly revised findings.

But flux and uncertainty through the *proceso* fulcrum also generated unprecedented, dynamic, and ongoing cultural openings in Argentina. At first, technological advances expanded audiences and access to news media coverage, including the beginning of live television broadcasts from around the world beginning in the late 1970s and the advent of cable television. By the early 1980s, a deluge of music, images, and thoughts from inside and outside the country fought for the attention of both the Argentine and the international public. Finally, in the mid-1980s, a sudden breakdown of dictatorship era censorship provided new openings for public debate and critical reflection. While official state reporting was slow, and shy to reveal its hand, international human rights organizations broke the silence, joined by journalists, cultural producers, and activists impatient for information and action. A virtual explosion of reports of violence and state indiscretion captivated an eager public, and historians both at home and abroad recognized the task ahead.

More important, Argentina experienced an extraordinary breakdown in methodological and theoretical certainties, what Beatriz Sarlo called, a “lost hegemony of meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Writing in 1985, Sarlo was intrigued in the first instance with post-modern, post-colonial theory and its implications for rethinking longstanding, pre-dictatorship assumptions about politics and culture in a 1980s political climate of shattered certainties. Post-dictatorship Argentina offered a

rebirth and a distancing from what Sarlo viewed as an intellectually dark decade preceding the 1976 coup, a “period of servility” animated by Marxist rigidities where those responsible for “making us slaves” may have included “the party, a charismatic leader, the representation of workers of the popular sectors.”<sup>4</sup>

Like Sarlo, other scholars saw hope in the new period of democratization, a hope translated into how they now approached the past. Research by historians such as Hilda Sabato, Luis Alberto Romero, and Leandro Gutiérrez on nineteenth and early twentieth century political history focused on different forms of popular participation in politics, such as neighborhood associations, that went beyond electoral politics.<sup>5</sup> Their scholarly work rested on a historical quest for democratic social and political spaces of optimism for the new democratic experiment inaugurated in 1983. Romero recalls how in 1982, shortly after the Malvinas War, he and fellow historians Sabato, Gutiérrez, Juan Carlos Korol, and Ricardo González authored an essay exploring how popular sectors participated in politics. Their underlying hypothesis was that “in periods of political closure,” democratic experiences and participation “find a ‘nest’ in the popular sectors and their institutions, to emerge once again in more favorable periods.”<sup>6</sup> This line of research, born of the democratization years, left an enduring legacy; other historians would expand research on those non-traditional forms of popular political participation for the city of Buenos Aires during both the first half of the nineteenth century and the interwar years.<sup>7</sup>

This special issue is dedicated to new directions in twentieth-century Argentine political history. It features the work of five scholars, none of whom share Beatriz Sarlo’s grim after-the-fact assessment of an Orwellian, pre-*proceso* political culture. Each of the works here addresses a different major subfield, analyzing how new approaches have begun to shape ways of understanding and interpreting parts of Argentina’s political past. This approach informs the articles by Rebekah Pite on gender history, Jorge Nállim on the long 1930s, Eduardo Elena on Peronism, Jessica Stites Mor on political radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and David M.K. Sheinin on recent incursions of *kirchnerismo* into diplomatic history. While each looks at a separate subject, they each reflect the impact of the *proceso* in generating a seismic shift in how scholars have understood the past.

For Rebekah Pite, the fall of dictatorship in 1983 coincides with the beginnings of gendered historical analyses in many countries and is the start of Argentina’s opening to feminist and other forms of gendered scholarship. This new interest in gender and feminism was clearly fueled by the political context of the struggle for human rights, from analysis on the patriarchal nature of the military regime to works on the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. A similar methodological opening is evident in Eduardo Elena’s article, which

describes the 1980s cultural turn in historical research in conjunction with the democratization of Argentine political cultures. This intersection becomes the backdrop for several key studies contemplating a strong cultural component to Peronism, including works by Daniel James, James Brennan, and Mariano Ben Plotkin. The remarkable capacity of Peronism to keep its dominant presence in Argentine politics since the return of democracy—through *menemismo*, *duhaldismo*, *kirchnerismo* and other incarnations—has continued driving scholarly interest into old and new areas of research that could explain its profound appeal.

Jorge Nállim sees the emergence of new perspectives on the ideological and political history of the 1930s and early-1940s as related to the political context of the 1980s and 1990s. Along with trends related to the professionalization of historians in Argentina, the strong reappearance of revisionism in the public and scholarly field, also noted by Sheinin, led to renewed research interest in groups affiliated with antifascism and liberalism and the history of political parties before Peronism's rise. For Jessica Stites Mor, the post-dictatorship context offered new theoretical and methodological possibilities for understanding the history of the left from 1955 to 1976. These possibilities included resituating Peronism within the history of the left, re-evaluating the history of the Argentine "new left" before the coup, and considering the cultural politics of leftist activism. Sheinin's analysis of the new anti-imperialism in the history of Argentine foreign relations questions some historians for their hesitancy to break down longstanding historical chronologies, reinforced by the *proceso* as a grotesque manifestation of the brutal consequences of the U.S.-led Cold War era inter-American system. For some, *proceso* extremes shattered earlier understandings of the past. For others, it led to a reassertion of the traditional conceptual divide between Cold War-era dictatorships and democracies that, while poignant, sometimes papered over government policy continuities across the decades.

Two other aspects of this post-dictatorship, historiographical shift become apparent in these articles. The first is that historical research on Argentina has become increasingly transnational in terms of both themes and conceptualization. This does not mean that there are no historiographical or thematic concerns related to the areas where country-focused research is being produced, nor that the field has failed to move away from the hegemonic meta-narrative of the Cold War characteristic of earlier periods of writing. In this sense, the impact of historical revisionist perspectives pointed out by Sheinin and Nállim highlights their powerful presence in Argentine society as related to shifting political contexts. On the other hand, it is clear that over the last three decades, scholars in Argentina and abroad have built strong international networks, opening the way for increasing dialogue between scholars in Western Europe, North America and other parts of Latin America. For example, Pite clearly shows the fluid

dialog between Argentine historians and their counterparts in North American academia that, since the 1980s, has led to pathbreaking works on gender in Argentina. Pite as well as Elena and Stites Mor demonstrate the impact of the cultural turn on approaches in their respective areas of research—approaches that acquired more prominence following the consolidation of cultural studies in Argentina in the 1990s.

The second aspect of the historiographical shift is that it has maintained the centrality of the state in the analysis of twentieth-century Argentine history, while at the same time complementing it with new theoretical and methodological frameworks. In this sense, one might extrapolate on Elena's observation that the state has never really been left out of the analysis of Peronism. Argentine and non-Argentine historians really never had to "bring the state back in," following Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol's call in an influential book published in 1985.<sup>8</sup> This should not come as a surprise, as a state that throughout the twentieth century marginalized, incorporated, impoverished, or murdered scores of its citizens could hardly be left out of any historical research. The articles in this issue address how the state might be considered from these new perspectives. Elena sheds light on how the analysis of the Peronist state has been enriched by studies looking at the physical and symbolic spaces that mediated its power with different social groups. Pite addresses how feminist and gender-conscious scholarship did more than just "add women" to Argentine history, revealing how gender has become a conceptual tool in the analysis of state-society relations as advanced, among others, by Elizaeth Dore and Maxyne Molyneux.<sup>9</sup>

Stites Mor also problematizes the centrality of the state for the historiography on the left in the 1955-1976 period, reflecting on work that has moved beyond questions of state power and resistance to explore the left from its own unique vantage points. For his part, Sheinin addresses another angle: how the peculiar narrative advanced by revisionist historians has not only informed scholarly and general-audience books alike, but also has become part of the political discourse and state policies of *kircherismo*. In the case of Nállim, the crisis of the state is the background for new studies on the politics of those years, now framed within methodologically dynamic transnational perspectives.

Beyond major shifts, a number of nuances of approach have also been gaining ground in the field. While quite a body of new work has been done to resituate culture in Argentine history, beginning with Daniel James and James Brennan's trail-blazing work<sup>10</sup> and more recently with Eduardo Elena and Natalia Milanesio's most recent studies of class and consumption, much of the new cultural history of Argentina tends toward questions of political economy of culture.<sup>11</sup> As such, much recent work has been attentive to the question of political opera-

tions within cultural life, far beyond the framing of cultural markets and cultural imperialism that tended to dominate the field of Latin American culture studies through the mid-1990s. This shift in focus has the benefit of departing from overly proscriptive theoretical approaches to give more meaningful analyses of local political and cultural concerns. The field has also been enriched by closer dialogue with leading scholars from other disciplines, such as film studies, visual culture, art history, cultural anthropology, and media and communications studies. Interdisciplinarity, while not foreign to the historian's toolkit, has certainly been encouraged in professional settings since the 2000s, partially as a result of shrinking history departments, but also due to the importance of Latin American studies departments and professional associations as venues of exchange.

If 1976 was truly a dividing line, rather than simply another point along a longer progression, as others have argued, the most recent turn in Argentine history writing evidences a break from considering political cultures and political economies as uniformly distinct between periods of dictatorship and democracy. New writing has rejected the "before" and "after" pictures of the past, dismissed the term "transition," and argued fiercely that there are continuities between military and civilian administrations. This very wrestling with the normative periodization of Argentine history attests to the continuing importance of dealing with this moment and coming to terms with its consequences and the agendas it has set in place. This special issue assembles five perspectives on these key shifts in the field, which together reveal where the field has been in the most recent decade, and suggests where it might be going in the next.

## Notes

- 1 Memoria Abierta is comprised of some of the most prominent Argentine human rights groups including the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, the Comisión de Homenaje a las Víctimas de Vesubio y Protobanco, the Fundación Memoria Histórica y Social Argentina, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Línea Fundadora), and Servicio Paz y Justicial. It is responsible for all aspects of the maintenance of the ESMA.
- 2 Memoria Activa, *Memorias en la ciudad: Señales del terrorismo de estado de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2009), 130-131.
- 3 Beatriz Sarlo, "Intellectuals: Escision or Mimesis?" in *The Redemocratization of Argentine Culture, 1983 and Beyond*, ed. David William Foster (Tempe: Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, 1989), 55 [orig. article, Beatriz Sarlo, "Intelectuales escisión o mimesis?" *Punto de Vista*, 25 (1985): 1-6].
- 4 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 5 Leandro Gutiérrez and Luis Alberto Romero, *Sectores populares, cultura y política. Buenos Aires en la entreguerra* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1995); Hilda Sabato,

- The Many and the Few. Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires* (Stanford: Stanford, University Press, 2001).
- 6 Luis Alberto Romero, "Introducción," in Gutiérrez and Romero, *Sectores populares*, 18.
  - 7 Pilar González Bernaldo de Quirós, *Civility and Politics in the Origins of the Argentine Nation. Sociabilities in Buenos Aires, 1829–1862* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications and University of California, 2006); Luciano de Privitellio, *Vecinos y ciudadanos. Política y sociedad en al Buenos Aires de entreguerras* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2003).
  - 8 Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
  - 9 Elizabeth B. Dore and Maxyne Molyneux, *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
  - 10 Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1943-76* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988). James Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Cordoba, 1955-76: Ideology, Work and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
  - 11 Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011). Natalia Milanese, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2013).

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