

Book Reviews

Elena, Eduardo (2011) *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship and Mass Consumption*, University of Pittsburgh Press (Pittsburgh, PA), vii + 344 pp. £22.75 pbk.

Although much has been published in Spanish in recent years looking at Peronism in a more objective and less partisan fashion, the literature in English remains dominated by an often trivialising view of President Juan Domingo Perón and his movement as a crude version of Latin American fascism. This excellent book makes a considerable contribution to reverting this biased viewpoint, examining in great detail some of the key aspects of Peronism and of Perón's relationship with his followers – notably the casting of the right to a *vida digna*, with the material benefits that entailed, as part of the concept of citizenship, and the two-track relationship between the Conductor and his supporters, illustrated by the Perón Wants to Know campaign of the early 1950s. Despite the frequent contention that Peronism was simply another example of authoritarian repression (an analysis that does not bear up in light of its continued salience 60 years later, despite its often chameleon-like nature), that relationship was often enthusiastic and spontaneous on the part of the grassroots, although Perón's largely conservative nature and suspicion of the 'inorganic mass' helped to lessen its spontaneity over time. As

Elena points out, Peronism was scarcely unique in the post-war era in its focus on state planning and living standards and its more inclusive notion of the 'consumer citizen', nor was it unique in Latin America as a political movement seeking reform rather than radical transformation of institutions – indeed, it was something of a latecomer in innovative social policies (p. 54). However, consumption was arguably an even greater political issue in Argentina, given its reputation as a 'rich' country, ostentation of that wealth in Buenos Aires in particular, and its position as one of the world's great food exporters – as Elena rightly notes, this alone made prohibitively high food prices (in particular for beef and wheat products, the country's key staples) a more inflammable issue than in the case of a country whose main exports were not edible (p. 51). Peronism gave much greater political salience to consumption and the consumer – and incidentally to women, cast in the role of informal consumer watchdogs and guardians of the household budget. However, despite this, and despite giving women the vote in 1947, the Peronist position was hardly a feminist one – Eva Perón may have been one of its giant figures, but a basic Peronist tenet of the period was that workers should earn enough to allow women to remain at home looking after the domestic front.

Perón himself had a clear (if not wholly workable) notion that, to realise its potential, Argentina needed a productive and well-remunerated working class able to perform its role as both labourer and consumer, stimulating both output and demand, although when demand ran ahead of output the blame was placed on 'speculation' and excessive consumption, and austerity demanded. The discussion of Peronism's didactic bent, seen in efforts to teach workers to become responsible consumers and thus patriotic citizens, highlights the movement's idealistic (not to say naive) characteristics, as well as the ambition to create an all-encompassing (and partisan) definition of citizenship that stifled opposition and eventually undermined many of the government's achievements. As Elena notes, 'Peronism's midcentury moment forces us to consider both how national politics can inspire a greater sense of individual purpose and solidarity and how high ideals of freedom and inclusion can become tools of domination' (p. 260). However, Perón's supposed hegemony was far more limited than was widely supposed both at the time and since, as evidenced by his failure to coerce both consumers and manufacturers to overcome ongoing problems with inflation, shortages and the difficulties of balancing competing interests in a country dependent on agricultural exports and lacking either a sufficient industrial base or indeed a critical mass of consumers to enjoy genuine 'economic sovereignty'.

The book's focus on the Peronist concept of citizenship and mass consumption leaves little space for opposing viewpoints or for more serious criticisms of the 'model', although in fairness these have received considerable space elsewhere and representation of the anti-Peronist position is not its real aim. Despite a few questionable assertions outside the main thrust of the book (such as on the Catholic Church's role in Perón's overthrow (pp. 245–246)) and a few minor errors of fact (Chaco and Neuquén were territories, not provinces, in the period under discussion), Elena's book is a significant contribution to a more nuanced understanding of 'the major turning point of twentieth century Argentine history' (p. 252). It may also provide useful insights for understanding the economic 'model' in place since 2003, with its continuing challenges of inflation, demands for greater public spending and redistribution, and the pitfalls of piecemeal acts of state intervention as a means to grapple with intractable macroeconomic imbalances.

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