

# THE MILITARY AGAINST THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

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One of the most popular jokes heard during the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983) was about a panic-stricken rabbit trying to cross the border.

- *Why are you running away?*, the soldier asks.  
- *Because the government is killing all the elephants*, the rabbit answers.

- *But you are not an elephant. You are a rabbit.*

- *That's what I think. But...How can I prove it?*<sup>1</sup>

In Argentina, military interventions had a long political history when the 1976 coup occurred. The civilian-military insurrection of September 6, 1930, that brought down the Radical government (the first government elected in democratic elections after the imposition of the universal and secret ballot in 1912), denoted the beginning of an unstable political period. With the recurrence of a cycle of crises and disintegration of both civilian and military governments, the surface of Argentine politics acquired a uniform texture in which each cycle was distinguished from its predecessor only by the increased violence and intensity it provoked. From 1955 onwards, after the military coup that brought down the government of Juan Domingo Peron, a general himself, the cleavages in Argentine politics became deeper and deeper. On the one hand, the military tried to dismantle the political model which had prevailed throughout the preceding decade. These efforts were supported by a broad political front which included all the non-Peronist parties, the corporate and ideological representatives of the urban and rural middle classes and bourgeoisie, and the Church. On the other hand, the unifying symbol of the return of Peron and of Peronist Argentina was transformed into a fundamental political objective.

Paradoxically, the leaders of the 1955 coup characterised the Peronist regime as a totalitarian dictatorship and raised the banners of democracy and liberty. Since then, the term democracy has had at least an ambiguous meaning for Argentine society. As Marcelo Cavarozzi (in O'Donnell and Whitehead 1986, 27) pointed out,

*Many anti-Peronists shared the rather naïve notion that Peronists had subscribed to their particular political creed as a result of demagoguery, illusion, and force. Consequently, the anti-Peronists believed that mere denunciation of the*

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*“crimes of the dictatorship”, accompanied by collective re-education, would result in the gradual reabsorption of ex-Peronists into “democratic” parties and unions. This illusion was short-lived: Peronism survived the fall of its government and became the source of a vigorous opposition movement. In the short term, however, this illusion effectively allowed the anti-Peronists to claim that the proscription of Peronism was an essentially democratic act.*

The tradition of authoritarian practices in the name of libertarian principles had begun.

Peronism in power had tended to consider the activities of the opposition parties as manifestations of illegitimate sectoral interests and, consequently, the government increasingly blocked such activities. Opposition politicians were imprisoned and all the newspapers were expropriated by the government. Peronism became a sort of religion: school children learnt to read repeating phrases like “I love Peron” or “my mother is Evita”. All in the name of “democracy for the working class” in opposition to “liberal democracy”.<sup>2</sup>

The policy of “total extermination” of Peronism from Argentine society that started on September 1955, after the coup, had the same degree of authoritarianism. The anti-Peronists gathered the available literature on Juan Peron and his ex wife, Eva Peron, and set them aflame. They were doing the same sort of things as Peronism, which they were accusing of having been a dictatorship. The democratic parties supported the electoral proscription of Peronism and the prohibition on Peron’s return to his country. For seventeen years (1955-1973), while Peron was in exile in Madrid, the very word “Peron” was prohibited, not only in public but also in private use. Neighbour denounced neighbour for pronouncing it. Resistance groups wrote on the walls *Luche y Vuelve* (Fight and he will come back) because they could not paint his name. And when Peron came back into the government, he did it with the slogan *“alpargatas si, libros no”* (worker sandals yes, books no), to express the scorn of the working class and the left for the university and intellectuals. As the writer Abelardo Castillo told me once, “Argentina has an illness that we can call the pathology of the word. The Right believe that if you do not pronounce the words, the things do not exist. They prohibited the name Peron and they believed for seventeen years that he no longer existed. Until he came back with 87 per cent of the votes in an incredible democratic election. And the Left think that if they write the words, the things exist. They paint revolution on the walls and they think that Peron is Fidel Castro.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though it is incontrovertible that during the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983) the level and danger of authoritarianism reached a dimension never seen before, it is also true that the culture of fear, the limits on civil society and general censorship were not an invention of this military government but the main political arms of the leading class in Argentina in this century.

## **Authoritarianism and the Public Sphere**

On June 20, 1973 Juan Peron returned to Argentina after seventeen years in exile. Two million people were waiting for him at Ezeiza airport. Thousands of young people that had been born after the military coup of 1955 were there asking for a return to the Golden Days. The social spectrum as a whole had shifted to the left during these years. The intellectual field not only shifted along with the rest of society but was one of the main forces of change. From it came many of the boldest impulses toward the left including, of course, the new left born inside Peronism. The Argentine writer and political scientist Beatriz Sarlo explains that,

*In the Argentina of the 1970s, revolution was not only thought possible, this was the order of the day, and, moreover, it was deemed beautiful, aestheticizable. The*

