SUMMARY - CHAPTER 7

Power to the People

The populist leaders typical of Latin American politics were able to transcend ideological polarities of Left and Right by their natural charisma and ability to inspire their people. Examples of this type were: Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre (Peru), Getulio Vargas (Brazil), Carlos Ibañez (Chile), Jorge Eliéser Gaitán (Colombia), Juan and Eva Perón (Argentina), Lázaro Cárdenas (Mexico), Fulgencio Batista (Cuba), Anastasio Somoza (Nicaragua), and Rafael Trujillo (Dominican Republic). Perhaps the most iconic of those populist figures was Juan Perón, who was able to take advantage of the broadcast sound medium—the radio—to foment popular sentiment among the people. Indeed, his character was uniquely suited to the radio, a medium that united people in a single live experience of national politics.

The Crowd

While the political consciousness of nineteenth century crowds attending politics rallies was both empowered and limited by a strong sense of localness, twentieth century crowds engaging in political action tended to have a more urbane and flexible sense of the political arena. The parochialism of the nineteenth century limited the kind of engagement that was needed in the political arena. The twentieth century crowds attending political rallies had many more opportunities at making an impact in that arena, by virtue of their constitution as a single cultural mass—as the people.

The different media of popular culture—such as music, movies, etc.—also served as a cultural backdrop against which the different factions of society could share their experiences and be united as the people.

The Hora do Brazil

Getulio Vargas, Brazilian president, was one of the first leaders to exploit the power of the radio to communicate with the people en masse. Taking advantage of the fact that, by the time he came to power 85 percent of Brazilian households owned a radio, Vargas set up a government-sponsored hour-long program every day at 8 pm, which all stations in the country were required to play the signal for. While this was an excellent way to have the nation’s ear for an hour, the program’s tedious nature led to its near wholesale unpopularity with the Brazilian populace. Vargas attempted to appropriate the popular genre of Brazilian music, Samba, in an attempt to draw listeners. However most listeners saw right through this and decided instead to tune into other stations that played their music for the music’s sake.

Mastering the Medium

Because of his lack of charisma, and because he had less experience and know-how than the more commercially-minded radio stations, Vargas was unable to sustain interest in his program. In contrast, Vargas’ opponent, Carlos Lacerda, a popular man among the masses, and with a captivating personality,
was during a single year (1953–1954) able to create the third most popular radio program in Brazil—a program devoted to criticism of Vargas.

But when Vargas’ suicide note was broadcast over the radio hours after his death, the sense of visceral immediacy that the radio gave Vargas’ posthumous words united the people of Brazil in a grief that had been previously overshadowed by the failures of Vargas’ regime. The radio broadcast had produced a sense of nostalgia among the people, which arguably changed the legacy of Vargas.

**Un Dia Personista**

In contrast to Vargas, in Argentina there is the example of Juan Domingo Perón and his wife Eva Duarte, who both possessed the natural charisma to command the crowds. They arrived onto an Argentine political stage in which the social divide between the worker, and the middle-class and elite Argentinian had been exasperated to a high degree. On the back of the Argentine Patriotic League was hoisted a military-backed regime supported by the oligarchy and the middle-class—a regime in which the working class were no more than cogs in the economic machinery of this right-wing military-run Argentine government. The working-class turned to popular forms of culture, such as the Tango, which seemed to accommodate their suffering with its hard-edged slang lyrics and danceable music. It was a music so well-suited to their experience that it was censored for a while by a government fearing popular incitements of the masses.

This is the point at which Perón steps onto the political stage, as a young officer seeking to remove the pernicious influence of the oligarchy in Argentine politics. After joining in a coup that overthrew the government in 1943, he consolidated his power while taking charge of the Department of Labor. At this time, the industrial workforce was on the rise, and this allowed Perón to implement changes in trends of national industrial production. Using his position of power, he set up clientelist networks to shore up popular support at the local level, and created networks spanning all factions of the industrial workforce, in an attempt to consolidate a popular vote base. To the members of this workforce he promised increased wages, various incentives, and in the end delivered on all his promises. With his natural charisma and *lunfardo* (slang) style of speaking, he was able to integrate the entire workforce into a national project that liberated Argentina from the impact of foreign capital. The meteoric rise in his popularity led his neurotic fellow junta members to jail him.

The people who had regained a sense of national identity from Perón’s reforms, a quarter million of them, amassed in Buenos Aires and demanded Perón’s release. After his release, an election was called—in 1946—and Perón won easily. For the next three years, Perón’s reforms energized the Argentine economy and brought in unprecedented revenue that was used to pay off national debts and to nationalize all foreign-owned and operated projects in Argentina.

**Santa Evita**

While Perón was a traditional military man bent on reforming the Argentine political order, Eva Duarte was a radio star of working-class origins. Nonetheless, they immediately took to each other, and both benefitted from the other’s position in Argentine society. She offended the genteel elements of that society by having a strong sexual presence and by courting the working classes. She appealed to the downtrodden, exploited, and oppressed, and she set up the Eva Perón Foundation (FEP), which

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accumulated over $200 million in assets and became the most important social service institution during the reign of Perón.

When Eva died in 1952, she was transfigured into the status of myth and her body was embalmed. Meanwhile, Perón was ousted in 1955 in the midst of economic crisis, and his reforms failed to have the centralizing impact that he strove for. Nonetheless, he exercised a powerful nostalgia over his people even from his position of exile, and in 1973 he was elected president again. However, he was too old and frail to make any sweeping changes, and he died the next year. Up to even this day, Juan and Eva Perón are perceived as symbols of optimism in Argentina.

The Documents: Evita Speaks

1. New York Times article covering Eva Perón’s address, the renunciamiento. The article takes a negative skew of the renunciamiento.
2. An accounting of the renunciamiento by the Peronist Party. Of interest here is that the words of the text published by the Peronist Party were not the same ones spoken by Eva Perón.
3. Edited newsreel and recording of the renunciamiento.
4. Complete recording of the radio transmission broadcasting of the renunciamiento.