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in the Argentine Political System

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THE PLACE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE ARGENTINE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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In recent years, the concept of social democracy has gained wide currency among Argentine political elites. After years of contempt, important sectors representing the Radical and Peronista parties, as well as the Left and the intelligentsia, accept this type of ideological identification. This merits some exploration of the historical roots of the social-democratic experience in Argentina and its place in the political party spectrum in the years to come.

Social democracy in Europe was an adaptation of the values of socialism (a universal religion) to the specific conditions of each country. The organized working class soon adopted the ideology, which faced little competition from other well-entrenched political loyalties. The liberal, radical, or Social Christian convictions of some popular sectors were, in a sense, remains of an earlier period, which never became a strongly rooted alternative expression for working-class interests. This is in contrast to what happens in the United States and in many Third World countries. Leaving aside the very special case of the United States, in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, some form of populism or radical nationalism successfully competes with socialism, often adorning itself with socialist ideology or tradition. The case of *peronismo* in Argentina is one of the better-known examples.

At the inception of the socialist ideology, Latin American conditions were not ripe for autonomous action by the working class. In fact, conditions were scarcely adequate for consolidating a capitalist bourgeoisie. However, there already existed a tradition and an experience of popular rebellion, from Túpac Amaru to the Mexican Insurgencia and the slave rebellion in Haiti. These rebellions included *caudillista* movements, some of which were quite radical, like *artiguismo*; others, like *rosismo*, were more conservative, although no less successful at mobilizing the masses. In Europe, comparable events were part of a tradition of popular struggles that socialism later incorporated. This is particularly the case of the French Revolution; although the bourgeoisie capitalized on it, its most radical aspects became antecedents of socialist ideology. In other words, socialism is in many ways a meditation on the French Revolution and on the subsequent revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871. The popular rebellions and *caudillista* movements in Latin America, in contrast, are relatively devoid of ideological interpreters, and they have not been incorporated into the corpus of a theoretical structure with any pretension of universal validity. For example, the insurgents of the 1810 Mexican rebellion are a part of the Mexican pantheon, but they are hardly known or taken seriously in the rest of the continent. The same applies to the other cases mentioned, which may be celebrated by patriotic nationalism, but never became part of a universalist narrative with theoretical or ideological value.

Those historical events in Latin America were ignored, distorted, or taken as objects of antiquarian interest by Marx and his first followers. They were not considered when formulating the theoretical structure necessary for the struggle for socialism, unlike the conclusions drawn from critical interpretations of the French or even the English revolutions. This attitude was adopted by the first socialists in our continent, mostly in Argentina, Uruguay, southern Brazil, and Chile, where the massive influx of European immigration was very influential.

At the turn of the century in several parts of Latin America, a labor force existed that could be unionized to take collective action against the established order. This labor force was of two types: the European immigrants in countries like Argentina and Uruguay, where it was expected they would copy Australia in reproducing, in "empty zones," political and social conditions similar to those in Europe; and, in Mexico, Peru, northern Chile, and other areas, important concentrations of mining or agro-industrial labor, made up mainly of native laborers with a small component of foreign migrants. These zones were not "empty," and thus intellectuals became more concerned with their local traditions.

Between 1910 and 1917, the revolutions that took place in Mexico, China, and Russia quickly adopted anti-imperialist and anticapitalist components. The effect that the Russian Revolution has had on the world should not make us put aside the other two, especially—from a Latin American perspective—the Mexican Revolution. Just as a previous generation thought that the *Zeitgeist* had settled in France when the Bastille fell—ignoring the siege of the Alhóndiga of Granaditas in Guanajuato—a subsequent group considered the Russian revolution part of a historical world process and the Mexican Revolution as an episode of local interest with no theoretical value. I do not pretend here to deny the importance of the French or the Russian events, but the level of conceptual and theoretical elaboration of which Russia and France have been the object, in comparison with Mexico, even in Latin America, is simply part of the cultural dependency that affects this part of the world. In any event, after World War I, the social-democratic ideology found two important rivals that operated on the same intellectual and labor groups and that had a greater ability to reach the rural and marginal masses. They were Leninist socialism and revolutionary nationalism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, social democracy in Argentina was consolidated into a Socialist party, which slowly integrated the anarchists and revolutionary Syndicalists. It was flanked by a Communist party, which was oriented to reform and popular fronts. With some hindsight, one can see that socialism in Argentina already suffered from certain shortcomings that hindered its penetration into those parts of the country that were less touched by European immigration. A certain dogmatism made it difficult for socialism to capture a part of the electorate of the popular party of that time, the Unión Cívica Radical. But until the advent of *peronismo* the Socialist party projected itself as the political spokesman for the country's organized working class and intellectual lower middle class, following the social-democratic model.

The Conjunction of 1943

When the military took over in 1943, strongly supported by the Radical Right, various alternatives existed for those who were oriented to social reform based on working-class political action:

(1) The classic social-democratic model, as in the British Labour party, strongly tied to trade unions and in which the lower middle class and the intellectuals are the main leaders and activists. A variety of this model was a Popular Front in alliance with a moderate Communist party and the Radicals. Until this point, the situation in Argentina and Chile was close to the classic social-democratic model. The ideology was more rigid in the case of Argentina, a country that could pretend, more than Chile, because of its migratory influx, to be a transoceanic reproduction of European countries or Australia and New Zealand.

(2) The Mexican-Aprista model, which involved the formation of popular political parties with leaders from the middle class, the bourgeoisie, or even the military, and support from weakly organized but mobilized trade unions. It was thought that this model was appropriate for lesser-developed countries with an important Indian component. The Radical party in Argentina, apart from what it could have been at the peak of Yrigoyen's popularity, did not appear to follow this model, but rather represented a centrist force with which alliances could be established. It did not seem to be sufficiently committed to social change, although it did guarantee democratic consolidation.

(3) The Leninist or revolutionary socialist model was frozen by soviet foreign politics but was practiced in some places like China, although during the war it still lacked the visibility that it later acquired. In some countries in the area there were groups sharing this ideology, but without enough backing, as the only country that had practiced it successfully no longer encouraged it. This, however, could change in any moment, in which case the model would acquire a greater potential. It was, in any case, more likely to be applied in the lesser-developed countries.

(4) Popular caudillismo, which was strong in the last century in the Río de la Plata and other parts of the continent, could be reactivated with a charismatic civil or military leader. However, there were no actual examples of this type, save an attempt at "military socialism" in Bolivia or the "*tenentismo*" partially expressed through Vargas in Brazil. One could also imagine a local version of fascism as a "third force" between capitalism and communism. But fascism was seen by most intellectuals, except in certain Catholic and nationalistic sectors, as being right-wing and reactionary.

The particular social tensions that existed in Argentina during the Second World War—together with the industrialization that the country was experiencing, which needed protection to consolidate the growth induced by the war—produced a real mutation in the political party system. Before the war the Argentinian system was very much like Chile's, recognizing European models. On the Left, the so-

cialist gamut had electoral following in Chile, and a not negligible one in Argentina. On both sides of the Andes *radicalismo* was in the middle. The Right had a strong electorate in Chile, although it resorted to some vote purchasing; in Argentina it was weak, but capable of putting up a fight in some provinces. The party system survived in spite of disturbances in Chile and overcame the merely temporary impact of *ibañismo* in 1952. In Argentina, on the other hand, in 1943 there emerged from the military sector a new political project which was headed by Perón and supported by an elite of a very heterogeneous ideological composition. The majority of the leftist intellectuals, directly or indirectly tied to the previous socialist pole, firmly opposed what they saw as an American reproduction of European fascism, with the same ability to fill the plazas and mobilize against the centers of high finance and international capitalism. Among the more militant old trade unionists there was also considerable opposition, although a number of them sided with the new movement. Their support reflected the access of the masses, which had not previously been incorporated into the system. Given their migratory nature or their previous passivity, the masses were favorably disposed to paternalistic authority, which Juan B. Justo had labeled "*política criolla*." They were, actually, Creoles, defining the term loosely to include also the sons and daughters of foreigners who wanted to reaffirm their nationality against the excessive Eurocentrism of the Left, from social-democrat to anarchist to Communist.

Could the Argentine Left have reacted differently to the threat that originated from the secretary of labor in the military regime? The possibility should certainly be admitted. There is the nearby example of Chile, in which the Left knew how to react successfully against a similar populist challenger, General Ibáñez, with a mixture of alliance, negotiation, and opposition. In any event, and without denying the possibility or even the desirability of a different reaction, the fact is that the cards were dealt in such a way that it was difficult for the Argentinian parties and groups leaning toward socialism. We must keep in mind the fact that the ideological distortion caused by the European model at the intellectual level generated a "demonstration effect" that was much stronger in the Río de la Plata than in the rest of the continent. Also, the enormous impact of foreign immigration, unequalled in any other part of the world, had created a great political void not only in the elite but also in the popular sectors. For decades not only the great majority of the bourgeoisie and the skilled working class had been foreigners for the most part little integrated into the system of civic participation. This vacuum of participation debilitated, even made impossible, the emergence of a strong progressive bourgeois party, which Juan B. Justo wished to see as much as a socialist one. In its place there was a conservative landowners' party and a Radical party anchored in the middle class, neither of which was originally linked to the urban bourgeoisie. The foreign origin of the masses also weakened the bond between the working class and the party system which could represent them in Congress, which gave clay feet as much to the Socialist as to the Communist party.

Peronismo demonstrated that it did not have a great respect for the system of public liberties and balance of powers. Its authoritarian aspects were evident from the start, were, in fact, inherent in its origin in the military dictatorship of 1943. One of its first victims was the Partido Laborista, the principal partisan organ that carried the popular movement to power. Some of the old trade union leaders, unlike the foreign-oriented Socialist party, which was also more closely patterned after the French or German centralized models than the highly federative one practiced in England, had thought to reproduce the British experience but with a nationalist emphasis. Before assuming power, Perón dissolved the Partido Laborista, without much reaction. Later he tightened control over other aspects of national life by closing down most independent newspapers in 1950 and controlling the radio stations and, later, television, so that the opposition had access only on rare occasions.

These were years of particular discredit to the social-democratic model in Argentina. It was reduced to the confines of a Socialist party that had been converted into a minor member of a coalition of the Center Right and included a Radical party that had become a channel for conservative interests and military conspiracies. After the fall of Perón in 1955, this political scheme continued, even worsened. Many social-democrat politicians were converted from persecuted to persecutor, some of them demonstrating a particular harshness toward the popular "mistaken" masses and an excessive flexibility in the presence of new military regimes that would save the country from the return of *peronismo*.

Changes in the Ideological Climate

As the sixties moved on, the impact of the Cuban Revolution and events in France in May 1968 were strongly felt. The severe erosion of the Soviet model caused by more information about its repressive practices made its erstwhile advocates align themselves with more radical models, like the Chinese, or with the popular movements of the Third World. This realignment, in spite of its leading to Messianism, had a positive component: it was the first reaction against the fixation with European models. The conclusion was not long in coming: *peronismo* was the way to social revolution in Argentina. The natural versatility of this movement responded and soon an extreme left-wing sector was formed among the real or self-proclaimed *peronista* activists. The shift toward *peronismo* was massive among the intelligentsia and the students and resulted in violence and a return to power in 1973. *Peronismo* became a broad coalition that accommodated the extreme Left and the extreme Right.

This is not as strange as it seems, above all if one reexamines certain historical events. This coexistence of extremes occurred in the last century in Mexico with Iturbide and, on a few occasions, with Santa Anna. In Argentina, *rosismo* also showed this characteristic by unifying the remains of Dorrego's liberal populist federalism with the conservative landowners and ultramontane Catholics. In Europe these strange alliances are less frequent. Their greater incidence in the Third World is due to its

uneven development and the coexistence of very different social systems. Incongruent social structures are superimposed and their ideological expressions coexist creating strange alliances.

The ideological political convergence around *peronismo* in 1973 is one of the most extreme cases of this kind of alliance. Social democracy was visibly absent, and the concern for democracy was very tenuous, as large sectors of the alliance considered it a simple bourgeois ploy. Some favored authoritarian solutions; others thought that "true democracy" would naturally emerge after the revolution. A great many of the country's intelligentsia and students participated in this ideological frenzy, certainly no worse than others that have affected humanity. Reality dealt hard blows to the participants in this collective enthusiasm, first in the form of the eruption of the internal contradictions of the coalition, where the right-wing sector asserted itself, and later in the form of military repression.

The self-examination that the Argentine intellectual generation put itself through at the beginning of the eighties produced a general disillusionment with the prescribed Marxist nationalist or *peronista* -type revolutions and a reevaluation of democracy. It was no longer believed that a dialectic or some other metaphysical mechanism guaranteed the final objective. This, added to a concern for social change, should result in social democracy. Many sectors disillusioned by the Soviet or Chinese experiences, or even by the Cuban experience, and not prepared to emulate Third World leaders, look at European social democracy as an example of a genuine third position between savage capitalism and totalitarian communism.

Similar events have occurred in other countries in the area. In *aprimo* and parties like Acción Democrática in Venezuela and Liberación Nacional in Costa Rica, the progressive access to power and the execution of moderate political reforms make them look for legitimization to the social-democratic sources of their ideology, and to the prestigious European paradigm. In Brazil the political inheritors of *varguismo*, principally in the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), define themselves more and more as social democrats. Similar tendencies are expressed in the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT) and in the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

On the other hand, social democracy in Europe has abandoned the Cold War rigidity of the fifties. It has slowly adopted pragmatic strategies, including electoral alliance with the Communists, and it has opened communications with popular nationalist movements and Leninist revolutionaries, such as those in Nicaragua. Concurrently, some socialist movements in southern Europe, such as Spain's, which hardly a decade ago aspired to a "Mediterranean" identity that included the Libyan or Palestinian revolutions, have adopted the political ideology and practice of European social democracy. During these decades, social science theorizing has been redefining the role of the working class in the political system. Few now think that the working class is the harbinger of the New Jerusalem, destined to represent humanity because of the disappearance and proletarianization of the remaining classes. Far from that, technological development has increased middle-class jobs in the private sector, threatening to re-

duce the working class to a permanent minority; to avoid this it is necessary to incorporate the middle class and the technical sectors in a socialist project.

Political parties in Argentina began to reactivate in the early eighties, addressing new militants to the nuclei they had maintained during the long and sometimes desperate fight for democratic recovery. Within this awakening the political sectors that were active in the intellectual community were incorporated. They had already been through a revision and reconsideration of their previous strategies. What kind of a panorama did they face?

The rediscovered value of democracy made *peronismo* unattractive, in spite of its strong popular and labor component. The classic *peronismo* of Perón's first presidency was little concerned with public liberty and had a bad record in cultural and university matters. The fact that it represented labor and trade unions was minimized by social science revision of the working-class role and by the authoritarian or bureaucratic nature of the unions. The Radical party appeared to have a more democratic tradition, in spite of its history of involvement with the military during the resistance against Perón's authoritarian regime. The links with the military forged by some Radical party leaders were seen as occasional attempts to overcome totalitarian tendencies in the *peronista* governments, not as part of a permanent model. By contrast, relations of some of the *peronista* leaders with the military were seen as the result of a major convergence of attitudes that sought to re-create an alliance between the armed forces and the people. The Left was seen as a dinosaur, repeating old precepts.

The Alfonsinista Period

The maturation of the socialist intelligentsia in the country coincided with an open-mindedness toward new strategies in the Unión Cívica Radical sector, headed by Raúl Alfonsín. For years he had fought to direct the Radical party more to the left, overcoming its profound anti-*peronismo*, and had tried to increase its electorate from the steadfast 25 percent that, with a few fluctuations, it had polled for decades. The possible incorporation of many modernized leftist sectors created a promising perspective. The independent Left could claim more than 10 percent of the total electorate, as shown in the 1973 elections, where parties calling themselves leftist had won almost that much (to which one must add those included in the Cámpora vote). Naturally, not all the Left would join *radicalismo*. But if 10 percent could be added to the traditional 25 percent, they would provide a basis from which to fight *peronismo*, which in the 1973 presidential election had polled (with some allies) 50 percent of the national total. As the campaign developed during 1982 and 1983, two things happened: (1) it became more certain that Alfonsín would get his 25 percent, plus 10 percent of the votes from the renovated Left; (2) the Right, which had obtained almost 20 percent in 1973 by adding its many sectors, in the majority voted for Alfonsín, even if it did not like the radical leader's new partners. So in 1983, the

