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State and Society in Argentina: Change and Continuity under the Kirchners

Review Essay by Michiel Baud

- *Patients of the State. The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*, by Javier Auyero. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.
- *La política en tiempos de los Kirchner*, edited by Andrés Malamud and Miguel de Luca. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2011.
- *La audacia y el cálculo. Kirchner 2003-2010*, by Beatriz Sarlo. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2011.
- *Everyday Revolution. Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*, by Marina A. Sitrin. London/New York: Zed Press, 2012.

Argentina has clearly changed since Nestor Kirchner quite unexpectedly took power in 2003. Together with his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and a small group of confidants he turned Argentine state-society relations around. He managed to obtain massive popular support by using a radical nationalist rhetoric. After his untimely death in 2010, this agenda was pursued even more tenaciously by his wife. It guaranteed the Kirchners, known in Argentina's vernacular simply as 'los K.', a decade of political power.

The political dominance of the Kirchners poses challenging questions to political analysts. Should the Kirchner government administrations be seen as examples of traditional Peronist populism or do they represent a new kind of progressive politics just like other left-leaning governments in contemporary Latin America? In other words, should the government administrations of 'los K.' be considered as a continuation of traditional Peronism or as a new, idiosyncratic phenomenon presenting a clear break with the past? Eventually, this boils down to an assessment of the power position of

the Kirchners and their influence on, and support by, Argentine society. There is no doubt that these questions are not easily answered.

The books under review here present different viewpoints. Two of them explicitly focus on the influence of the Kirchners. The other two books by Auyero and Sitrin focus on developments in society using a more bottom-up perspective. In this way, and largely implicitly, they tend to stress the continuities in Argentine politics and to qualify the influence of the Kirchners.

For academics who want to understand the logic and influence of the Kirchner administrations, the collection of essays edited by Andrés Malamud and Miguel de Luca, is an excellent introduction. In short articles most elements of the Kirchners' policy pass under review, especially those influencing their political practices. Peronism of course plays an important role. Indeed, in the first paragraph of their introduction, the editors ask themselves the question; '¿Cuánto de la política argentina contemporánea se relaciona con la particularidad peronista y cuanto se puede considerar genérico, independiente de la parcialidad política?' (p. 15). They do not resolve this issue in a completely satisfactory manner (I am not sure anyone could!), but by asking it they highlight the crucial issue of change and continuity in contemporary Argentine politics. The book offers broad and diverse insight into the intricacies of the Kirchner politics from its beginning in 2003. Argentina is strongly polarized today – people are either pro or contra de government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner – and it is admirable how this group of Argentine political scientists maintain an open and balanced perspective that accepts the gains but does not hesitate to point out the problems of the Kirchner policies of the past ten years.

The book describes how Nestor Kirchner, when he came to power quite fortuitously through the withdrawal in the second electoral round of Carlos Menem in 2003, successfully created all kinds of alliances. Of course, he found some support in the Peronist party, but he came from the southern province of Santa Cruz, and lacked a solid powerbase in the Capital with its exigent intellectuals and arrogant elites. In view of this situation, his radical human rights agenda must be considered a master stroke. It allowed him to forge alliances with the urban left and to argue that his government was deepening and perfecting the democracy that had returned in 1983. As Javier Zelaznik writes: 'Para la narrativa fundacional del kirchnerismo, el año 2003 marcaría la transición a una democracia real o democracia con inclusión social' (p. 96). From the beginning Kirchner turned the violations of the human rights during the military dictatorship and the continuing 'impunidad' into the crucial axis of his political agenda. The human rights movement, which traditionally had maintained its distance from the state,

full-heartedly joined his political project. This was most notable with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo who turned into staunch supporters of the *Kirchnerista* agenda. Kirchner also managed to incorporate part of the piquetero movement which had acquired such a strong profile during the 2001-02 crisis. When Nestor Kirchner left the government in the hands of his wife in 2007, his power base was fully consolidated.

Although Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, commonly called CFK, solemnly promised to continue the work of her husband in 2007, something she repeated even more strongly after his death in 2010, her policies demonstrate a strong radicalization in two areas: their centralist tendencies and their nationalist agenda. Presidential centralism is not a new phenomenon in Latin America, and certainly not in Argentina, where presidents used to assemble a lot of power around their person and where the parliament and the ministers play secondary roles. The fact that elected presidents are not held accountable for their promises and political agendas led the late Argentine political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell, to speak of 'delegative democracies'. Under the Kirchners this democratic centralism acquired new overtones. Los K. started to take their decisions in a small internal circle of largely non-elected confidants. Miguel De Luca notes that in the Kirchner governments no ministerial meetings were held and the relations were 'radial' in the sense that ministers were directly accountable to the president and rarely had any contact among themselves (p. 47).

Many observers suggest that the more radical centralism of the CFK administration originated in her conflict with the agrarian sector which erupted in 2008. The intense agrarian protests during the so-called 'lock-out' forced the president to withdraw her legislation and intensified her aversion against the opposition. It also revealed serious differences of opinion with her vice-president Julio Cobos. As vice president, he had the decisive vote which he cast against the Agrarian law (Resolución 125) in July 2008.

With the advent of the elections of 2009, the struggle between the president and the private media that opposed her administration also sharpened. The main culprit was, of course, the media group and newspaper *Clarín*, which had developed itself in the previous years as a staunch critic of the Kirchner project. This acquired strong partisan overtones during the agrarian conflict. In his contribution to *La política en tiempos de los Kirchner*, Philip Kitzberger ironically calls the deep conflict between CFK and the *Clarín* group, 'La madre de todas las batallas'. This battle continues as the Constitutional Court looks at some of the legal details of the *Ley de Medios*,

which many see as the government's instrument in its struggle against the opposition media.

In the international arena, the agenda of the CFK administration continued to be inscribed in the traditional parameters of the Argentine foreign policy, which are strongly informed by national political interests and give the president a central role. But where it was traditionally embedded in a clear pragmatism, often described in Argentina as *realismo periférico*, it has become more ideological under CFK. Because it is meant for internal purposes, its radical nationalism is often more a matter of 'style' than 'form' (p. 256), which nevertheless has led to protectionist measures that were quite aggressive towards Uruguay and caused problems with important Mercosur partner Brazil. It also eventually culminated in the nationalization of the Spanish oil company Repsol in 2012. This was not considered completely unjustified by many observers, but it was done in such a manner that it directly antagonized Europe.

The social policies by the Kirchner administrations were an important element in safeguarding popular support for the government. These policies were made possible by the increasing international (especially Chinese) demand for agrarian commodities after 2003 and the resulting higher state revenues. In 2005 the share of the GDP dedicated to the educational system was increased from 4 to 6 per cent. Other measures were directed to the improvement of the public health system. Fabian Repetto describes how programmes like *Remediar* (for the elderly) and *Nacer* (for children) tried to improve the situation of vulnerable groups in Argentine society (pp. 229-30). In 2009 these social policies culminated in the programme *Argentina trabaja* that was meant to form a safety net for the poorest sectors of Argentine society. In contrast to similar programmes of 'conditional cash transfers' in Brazil and Bolivia, the lack of institutionalization and transparency made these programmes vulnerable to accusations of patronage and populist pork and barrel policies.

Mediatic strategies

If we want to understand the Kirchners' political practices, we cannot overlook their mediatic strategies. This topic is the theme of the entertaining and at times disturbing book by Beatriz Sarlo, *La audacia y el cálculo*. On the basis of her contributions to *La Nación*, she focuses on the cultural policies and strategies during the life of Nestor Kirchner, who from a weak minority position managed to become one of the most loved Argentine presidents of modern times. After a first chapter in which she highlights the social and political importance of public television as a creator of what she

calls 'Celebrityland', she then outlines how the Kirchners gradually succeeded in mastering the art of using the media for their own political ends. Nestor Kirchner initially acquired power by bypassing the existing mediatic circles and networks of power and started to directly address the Argentine public following his own strategic interests. 'En ese sentido, la política comunicacional de Kirchner superaba a Celebrityland' and in this way escaped 'la esclavitud televisiva' (p. 38/90). Sarlo demonstrates how gradually, instead of avoiding the media, the Kirchners started to use them to strengthen their political project and popular appeal. This not only meant television but also referred to the social media and twitter. When their political position had been consolidated they did everything to control and manipulate the media according to their own political goals. In a long series of examples that for a non-Argentine public which was not present when events occurred, are sometime difficult to follow, Sarlo shows the web of media-power created by them. Her observations move from the dresses worn by CFK, the texts and links on Twitter, website and blogs to the 'oficialista' pro-Kirchner programmes on television. Her often sharp and anecdotic observations are interlaced with erudite academic references. She points out how the aggressive and simplistic use of the new social media tends to simplify, personalize and radicalize the political debate. Observing for instance, how 'el Kirchnerismo de Twitter' leads to radical binary views, she concludes that because of its banal translation of politics, Twitter leads to a deepening of O'Donnell's idea of a 'delegative democracy' (p. 71). Sarlo's iconoclastic analysis ends with a provocative analysis of the human rights agenda of the Kirchner government. She suggests that the Kirchners also simplified and banalized the memory of the Guerra Sucia. By appropriating the human rights struggle Nestor Kirchner presented himself as the first president who really cared about human rights issues and therefore had the right to define who could be called 'progressive' and who remained outside.

Reading Sarlo's book, it is easy to understand why the *Clarín* group has become arch-enemy number one of the CFK government. In its urgent wish to control and dominate all possible kinds of media, the existence of an autonomous public voice becomes almost intolerable. *La audacia y el cálculo* shows how this political conflict is embedded in a long-standing cultural struggle which started in 2003.

The politics of waiting

There is no doubt that Argentina is a divided society. One third of the country's population lives in the relatively small geographical area of greater

Buenos Aires, but the lives and perceptions of these different groups are strongly separated, socially and culturally. It is remarkable how this division also colours and shapes academic research. The readers of the last two books listed in this review essay would find it difficult to realize that it is the same society and same reality being described and analysed as in the first two books. In the new book of the prolific Argentine-US writer Javier Auyero the Kirchners are not even mentioned. In the book on social mobilization in Argentina by Marina Sitrin, the Kirchner administration is present but merely as the background against which Argentine society has organized itself.

Javier Auyero published a number of books on Argentina in the past decade. Initially, his aim was to understand the political behaviour of the poor Argentine population and the indignation and resistance of poor people in the face of the deep economic crisis of 2001-2. Later his interest turned towards the perceptions of poor urban dwellers and the different ways in which they are interacting with larger society and the state. Together with Débora Swistun he wrote a revealing ethnography of the inhabitants of the 'Flammable' neighbourhood located on the banks of the river Riachuelo.¹ The river is heavily polluted by petrochemical plants, and this book presents a shocking case of 'environmental suffering' in which poor residents have to live in appalling circumstances which are not recognized by the state or the involved companies (among which Shell is an important player).

Partly building on this research, he has now published a small book in which he portrays the relationship between poor citizens and the state. He does so by focusing on what he calls 'The politics of waiting' which, according to him epitomizes the inefficiency and disrespect of the state vis-à-vis its most vulnerable citizens. On the basis of his own ethnographic material and using a wide array of fictional and theoretical literature he describes the endless loss of time the poor have to accept to obtain services to which they are rightfully entitled. Part of the fieldwork that he and his research assistants did took place in the offices of RENAPER, where Argentine citizens go to obtain a DNI, *documento nacional de identidad*, and the welfare office. His stories vividly depict the indignities that unreasonable waiting means for people who, for example, have travelled two hours to get there and are told to come back the next day, or who have waited in the rain for hours only to come back and find the office closed. Exactly because of their everyday banality, these examples give an insight in the injustice and denial of rights to which ordinary Argentine citizens are subjected. Auyero sees this situation as a conscious ploy to subordinate them. He distinguishes

three elements in this logic of waiting: veiling, confusing and delaying/rushing (p. 73). This last binary best symbolizes the arbitrary behaviour of what Michael Lypski has called the ‘street-level bureaucrats’, the employees on the lowest level of the state hierarchy. Citizens may have to wait for days or months, and then they may miss an opportunity because all of a sudden an acceleration in the system requires direct action.

What is striking about the story told by Auyero is the absence of the politics described in the first part of this essay. Although his examples took place in the period between 2002 and 2010, there is no direct mention of the role of the Kirchners and the political changes they brought about. In many ways, this is the strength of the book. Its implicit message is that all the political conflicts and debate are largely immaterial to the lives of the poor and that the inequalities and injustices of modern Argentina have a long term character that defies political change. In that sense the book offers a mirror to many political descriptions and asks pertinent questions as to the fixation on short term changes.

On the other hand, Auyero’s approach runs the risk of presenting some kind of modern-day version of Charles Dickens gruesome descriptions of nineteenth century poverty in England. His book presents an image of a poor underclass that is brutally exploited and has no chance to liberate itself from an oppressive state. This is the result of his repetitive emphasis on the systematic oppression by the modern Argentine state. Auyero’s emphasis on structural violence in examples of the military occupation of the neighbourhood *Fuerte Apache* and the specialized units that evict squatters and turn into ‘violence specialists’ (pp. 52-4) tends to obscure agency and change. When he talks about the ‘massive dislocation and collective suffering’ brought to the Argentine poor by neo-liberal reforms (p. 36), he omits any reference to the recent political changes in the country. The careful analysis he and Swistun made of the views of the inhabitants in their book on *Flammable* presents a much stronger and in many ways profound picture of the plight of the Argentine poor, but also how they try to cope with it. His analysis of waiting is thought-provoking and in many ways original, but, in this sense, it lacks the ethnographic depth of that earlier study.

Social movements and the state

The criticism of simplification can also be directed towards Marina Sitrin’s book *Everyday Revolutions*. Sitrin is an engaged US writer who believes that the revolution will come from movements from below such as those that emerged during and after the 2001 crisis. She sees the horizontalism and *autogestión* that emerged in some social movements and recuperated

workplaces as the roots of a new society. Sitrin describes the human rights movement that emerged in response to the military dictatorship. She also analyses the history of the labour movement and Peronism. But the main thrust of the book is the description of the new wave of social movements that emerged in the twenty-first century. Using especially the work of Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa, she demonstrates the importance of the social movements in the political development of present-day Argentina. In the specific tradition of Peronism in Argentina, the close relations between the state and the social movements is an especially important and complex topic. Sitrin describes how part of the piquetero movement also came to support the Kirchner administration. She presents some interviews of activists who have their doubts about the close relations to the state, but it remains obscure what these tensions and debates mean for the future of horizontalism in the country.

The book is so strongly informed by its revolutionary solidarity and its belief in the autonomous power of social movements that it leaves little space for debate or contradiction. This is regrettable because the issue of social movements and their relation with the state may well turn out to be essential in understanding the political development of Argentina today (and is being hotly debated in today's Argentina). Critics like Auyero stress state dominance and repression of the poor, and Sitrin is right in emphasizing that it is just as important to understand their agency and collective struggle. However, it is also necessary to understand the contradictions and ambiguities in the relation between popular struggle and the state. This struggle is often supported and, in this way, manipulated by the *Kirchnerista* state. Sitrin tends to ignore these elements, just as the other books reviewed here. Nevertheless, I would think it is crucial to investigate and analyse the complex and often contrasting relationship between the Kirchner administration and Argentine social movements.

Continuity or change?

The first thing these books unwittingly demonstrate is the existence of sharp divisions within Argentine society and the radical divide between the lives and perceptions of the different social groupings. Academics, NGOs, political parties and even foreign embassies are involved in urgent debates on political strategies, new legislation and democracy. They assess the democratic or authoritarian nature of the Kirchner administrations and try to understand what the secret of their popular strategies has been. At the same time, large segments of the Argentine population, including many migrants, are fighting to survive in a daily struggle for food, education and

environmental protection. The world of the politicians and intellectuals that they know only from television are light years away from their own world. For them the state is represented by street-level bureaucrats that, though often of good will, are the rank and file of what Auyero calls the 'everyday reconstruction of political domination' (p. 157). For the poor, it does not matter so much which political party is in charge of the government. Their lives revolve around the confrontation with the diluted consequences of state action and political debate. They may feel some changes when their pay increases or when they can obtain some financial support, but these windfalls are always insecure.

In light of this division, Beatriz Sarlo's analysis is interesting because it could be said that the television is the cultural space where some level of convergence exists between these different worlds. Her description of the political manipulation of the media by the Kirchners is convincing, but it would have been more interesting if it could have been complemented by an analysis of the reception of the media, especially television. Argentine society has never acquiesced in political domination, and social movements and collective forms of everyday protest, both social and cultural, have coloured Argentina's social history. Sitrin gives some examples of people who try to find alternatives to the existing political and economic system. Her analysis is too simple, but she points to the undercurrent of agency and protest which is just as characteristic of Argentine society as its authoritarianism and political domination.

Not only in the media can we see connections between different social actors, however. The influence of Peronism in Argentine politics is crucial in this respect because it has led to all kind of structures of state-society interaction and political brokerage. The Peronist tradition has forged strong links between the party, its political leaders and its constituency. There is no doubt that old and young social movements often resist state intervention, but at the same time many have become dependent on state support and have become, implicitly or explicitly, part of the political playing field in Argentina. Many social movements in today's Argentina continue to be dependent on the state. The government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is making use of this dependence to maintain its popular support and stay connected to different social groupings. This could, to a certain extent, be considered the same mutual dependence that has always characterized state-society relations under the Peronists. This element also affects the political participation that has become a crucial element in progressive politics in many other Latin American countries. In Argentina this participation has been strongly coloured by the tradition of a centralist and, in certain

respects, authoritarian state. This specific element is implicitly highlighted by Auyero when he demonstrates that the intricate web of welfare and support programmes does not lead to participation or emancipation of poor citizens but to a larger dependence of the state and thus should be seen as instruments of the hegemonic policies of the Argentine state.

In the final instance, these books draw attention to the crucial question of continuity and change in present-day Argentine politics. Where the Kirchneristas themselves and many observers tend to stress the radical change in today's Argentine society, the books reviewed here present many indications of strong continuities. These are complex issues. Are Argentine state-society relations still embedded in twentieth-century parameters? Or can we say that the 2001 crisis and the subsequent Kirchner governments have forged new social and political structures that fundamentally changed twenty-first century Argentina? The jury is still out!

* * *

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Note

1. Auyero, Javier; and Débora Alejandra Swistun (2009) *Flammable. Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*, Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.