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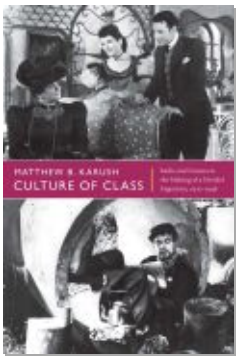
Introduction



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INTRODUCTION

In 1932 the writer Roberto Arlt described the challenge facing Communist organizers in Argentina: "Out of 100 proletarians, 90 have never heard of Karl Marx, but 90 can tell you how Rudolph Valentino used to kiss and what kind of mustache [the Hollywood actor] José Mojica wears."[1] Arlt's pessimism regarding the revolutionary potential of the nation's workers was prescient. To the immense disappointment of a generation of leftist intellectuals, the large majority of the Argentine working class would reject Socialist and Communist parties, embracing instead the populist movement built by Juan and Eva Perón in the mid-1940s. But more illuminating than Arlt's assessment of working-class consciousness is his reference to the movies. Arlt recognized not only that workers made up a substantial proportion of the audience for mass culture in Argentina, but also that the mass culture they consumed must have had a significant impact on their consciousness, one potentially as decisive as their experience of exploitation or their participation in class struggle. That Arlt

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used two Hollywood stars to make his point is also revealing. By invoking Valentino and Mojica, he drew attention to the powerful influence of North American commercial culture in Argentina.

Arlt's suggestion that mass culture tended to dilute class consciousness anticipated the arguments of contemporary historians who have described the 1920s and 1930s as a period in which the militant working-class consciousness of earlier years gave way to a less class-based identity. For these scholars, Argentina's expanding economy effected a kind of national integration, in which radical ideologies were replaced by the pursuit of upward mobility. At the start of the twentieth century, politicians and intellectuals were haunted by the specter of a largely immigrant working class enthralled by anarchism and syndicalism. Yet within a few decades these fears had been dispelled. The new "popular sectors," largely the Argentine-born children of immigrants, were focused on self-improvement and were far less hostile to the state and the nation than their parents had been; they embraced integration into Argentine society as the means to a more comfortable life.[2] The radio and the cinema are typically seen as contributors to this process. Through film distributors and radio networks based in Buenos Aires, Argentines throughout the country were increasingly exposed to a common national culture. Moreover, this new mass culture allegedly encouraged consumerism and middle-class aspirations, thereby reinforcing the trend away from working-class militancy.

Yet despite these dynamics, Argentina was, if anything, more divided in 1950 than it had been in 1910. Although a generation of workers had turned away from orthodox leftist ideologies, their enthusiasm for Peronism revealed that they were still inclined to embrace a working-class identity. The Peróns mobilized the nation's workers behind a project of state-led industrialization and corporatist social organization. They addressed their followers as workers, celebrating their proletarian status. Peronism polarized the country along class lines, creating a fragmented national identity that would persist for decades. Somehow, a society characterized by ethnic integration and the decline of orthodox left-wing ideologies also contained the seeds of this populist explosion and of the intense, class-based polarization that followed. This book argues that the key to understanding this paradox lies in a reassessment of the mass culture of the 1920s and 1930s.

Arlt was right to emphasize workers' enthusiasm for the movies, but

he was wrong to assume that this pastime came at the expense of class consciousness. The films, music, and radio programs produced in Argentina during the 1920s and 1930s trafficked in conformism, escapism, and the fantasy of upward mobility. But they also disseminated versions of national identity that reproduced and intensified class divisions. Facing stiff competition from jazz music and Hollywood films, Argentine cultural producers tried to elevate their offerings in order to appeal to consumers seduced by North American modernity. At the same time, the transnational marketplace encouraged these cultural producers to compete by delivering what foreign mass culture could not: Argentine authenticity. Domestic filmmakers, radio and recording entrepreneurs, lyricists, musicians, actors, and screenwriters borrowed heavily from earlier forms of popular culture such as tango music and the short, comic play known as the *sainete*. The result was a deeply melodramatic mass culture that extolled the dignity and solidarity of the working poor, while denigrating the rich as selfish and immoral. Despite myriad efforts to modernize and improve domestic mass culture, the Argentine media tended to generate images and narratives in which national identity was prototypically associated with the poor. The profound classism of this mass culture has been overlooked by historians who have depicted the radio and the cinema as instruments of national integration and middle-class formation. Instead of unifying national myths, the Argentine culture industries generated polarizing images and narratives that helped provide much of the discursive raw material from which the Peróns built their mass movement.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MASS CULTURE

The primary objects of analysis in this book are mass cultural commodities: movies, recordings, and radio programs produced by capitalists seeking to attract an audience in order to turn a profit. As such, these sources pose a particular challenge to the historian. Most basically, they cannot be seen as a direct reflection of popular consciousness. Pop songs and movies are made by artists who are unlikely to be in any way typical of the larger population. More important, the relationship between these artists and the people who consume the products they make is anything but simple or direct. Recording companies, film studios, radio stations, and advertisers intervene, as do the state, intellectuals, fan magazines, and

critics. As a result of these multiple layers of mediation, the mass cultural market does not simply give people what they want. Through marketing strategies, audience segmentation, genre definition, and in many other ways, the capitalist media, themselves under complex and competing outside pressures, help shape audience preferences.[3] Most of these effects vary unpredictably across time and place, but some are more universal. As Stuart Hall pointed out long ago, the mass media tend to direct attention toward consumption and away from production, thereby fragmenting social groups into individual consumers and forging new groupings designed to facilitate capital accumulation.[4] In short, mass culture is not so much a reflection of its audience's attitudes, values, and worldviews as it is one of the forces that work to shape them.

Within the Marxist tradition, the line of argument that depicts mass culture as fundamentally manipulative descends from the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In their attack on the "culture industry," published in 1947, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasized the predictability and homogeneity of mass culture. They argued that movies and commercial music encouraged a passive response, leaving no room for the audience's imagination. The result was a depoliticized working class, incapable of thinking for itself or of generating any critique of the status quo.[5] This view goes far beyond the assertion that mass culture helps shape popular consciousness to assert that it is always and inevitably an instrument of social control and top-down manipulation. Since the 1970s, scholars in both cultural studies and cultural history have tended to reject this pessimistic—and, some would say, condescending—view. Within cultural studies, scholars have reconceptualized consumption as an active process in which consumers make their own meanings out of the commodities supplied by the culture industries. From this perspective, culture is a contested space; ordinary people are shaped by the images and meanings disseminated by mass culture even as they reshape those meanings for their own purposes.[6] Cultural historians like Lawrence Levine have agreed, insisting on the agency of the mass cultural consumer: "What people *can* do and *do* do is to refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations."[7]

Far from the all-powerful, monolithic products that Adorno and Horkheimer imagined, mass cultural commodities enable oppositional readings in particular ways. For Jürgen Habermas, the mass media help modern capitalism overcome its perpetual "legitimation crisis," but not

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without generating a series of contradictions. Capitalism, according to Habermas, seeks to spread consumer consciousness by elevating private consumer choice over social and civic responsibility, but since this new form of consciousness threatens established values and cultural practices, it requires validation. Mass culture invokes the moral authority of older patterns of family and community life in order to legitimize a society characterized by consumerism and commodified leisure. Yet by continually reintroducing those older values, the media provide consumers with the means to criticize capitalism.[8] Following Habermas, George Lipsitz has shown how North American television programs of the 1950s featured ethnic, working-class families in order to encourage viewers to embrace consumerism. These families reminded viewers of a cherished past rooted in community and working-class solidarity, while at the same time suggesting that all individual needs could be satisfied through the purchase of commodities. Still, if this reconciliation of past and present was useful to advertisers, it was inherently unstable.[9] The film scholar Miriam Hansen reaches similar conclusions in her study of North American silent cinema. The early cinema, she argues, appropriated earlier cultural traditions and popular entertainments as its raw material, depoliticizing them in the process. But this depoliticization was never total. The persistence of these earlier traditions meant that the cinema contained the potential for "alternative public spheres." Subordinate groups like women and working-class immigrants could, at times, find in the cinema a space from which to elaborate their own autonomous points of view.[10]

The work of Lipsitz, Hansen, and others suggests that mass cultural commodities are inherently polysemic. The subordination of cultural production to capitalism does not obliterate alternative or oppositional meanings. On the contrary, the profit motive impels the recycling and repackaging of elements that push against the privatizing thrust of consumer capitalism. As a result, mass culture, like culture more broadly, both enables and constrains, providing a limited but varied set of discursive raw materials from which consumers can build their own meanings. Analysis of this meaning-making process needs to attend to the context of reception—how and where consumers interact with mass culture—as well as to the points of tension or latent contradiction that exist in the texts themselves. Finally, the best scholarship in cultural studies and cultural history reminds us of the political significance of mass culture. The cinema and the radio constitute important sites for the

elaboration of identities, values, and aspirations which can and do become the basis for political action.

THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT: ARGENTINA'S PERIPHERAL MODERNITY

Both the production and the consumption of mass culture typically occur in transnational contexts. Even though people throughout the world attend local movie theaters and listen to radios in their own living rooms, much of what they consume is imported, and even domestically produced mass culture is created in dialogue with foreign styles and practices. The Argentine audiences described in this book enjoyed imported films and music alongside domestic products, and that context shaped the way they interpreted what they saw and heard. For their part, Argentine mass cultural producers self-consciously competed against foreign imports that enjoyed significant technical, economic, and cultural advantages. In short, this was a mass culture decisively shaped by what Beatriz Sarlo has referred to as Argentina's "peripheral modernity." Examining the intellectual and literary circles of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s, Sarlo describes a "culture of mixture, where defensive and residual elements coexist with programs of renovation; cultural traits of native formation at the same time as an enormous importation of goods, discourses and symbolic practices."[11] Extending Sarlo's concept to Latin America as a whole, Nicola Miller emphasizes the "uneven and dependent" character of Latin American modernity, in which formal political sovereignty combined with economic dependence.[12] In the 1920s and 1930s, Argentines were fully engaged in modernity, enthusiastically adopting the latest technology, tastes, and styles. Yet their nation's visibly subordinate position in global economic, political, and cultural circuits also produced ambivalence, nationalist defensiveness, and localist nostalgia. Something very much like the "culture of mixture" that Sarlo finds in vanguardist novels is also visible on the level of mass consumption.

As Benjamin Orlove and Arnold Bauer have argued, Latin America's distinctive postcolonial identity crises produced a nearly insatiable demand for imported goods.[13] After achieving independence from European empires in the early nineteenth century, elites redefined their relationship to Europe even as they sought new justifications for racial hierarchies rooted in the colonial experience. Consumption was a key site

for this process of national identity formation. In consuming European imports, Latin Americans were engaged in an effort to create local versions of modernity, which they understood to be centered in Europe. By the twentieth century, the locus of modernity was increasingly shifting to the United States, even as an active culture of consumerism was extending far beyond the elite classes. Corporations in the United States, penetrating Latin American markets to an unprecedented extent, launched an ambitious effort to disseminate North American "corporate culture" abroad. Along with North American goods came a fascination with newness, an ethos of individualism, and the ideal of the self-made man.[14] Yet as Julio Moreno demonstrates for the case of Mexico, the arrival of goods, retailers, and advertising agencies from the United States did not produce a one-way process of Americanization. On the contrary, North American businesses were only successful when they adapted their message to Mexican nationalism, producing a "middle ground" in which cosmopolitan modernity could be reconciled with Mexican tradition.[15] The rising commercial influence of the United States had profound but complex consequences for Latin America, producing hybrid discourses, rather than straightforward cultural domination.

Recent scholarship on the influence of mass culture from the United States in Latin America has reached similar conclusions. Bryan McCann has shown that the introduction of jazz in Brazil in the 1930s, as well as the domination of the local recording industry by the multinationals Columbia and RCA Victor, did not Americanize Brazilian popular music. Instead, these corporations appealed to Brazilian fans with new hybrids that mixed local rhythms with cosmopolitan arrangements.[16] Like other North American businesses trying to succeed in Latin American markets, mass cultural producers had to adapt their products to the local context. However, Latin America also received a flood of imported mass cultural goods that were originally designed for the North American market. Here, too, historians have uncovered complex outcomes. Eric Zolov argues convincingly that the adoption of rock music by Mexican youth in the 1960s and 1970s ought not to be considered an instance of cultural imperialism. A generation of middle-class Mexican kids appropriated a set of North American cultural practices and preferences in order to forge an alternative, countercultural national identity.[17] Similarly, jazz music and Hollywood movies held an irresistible appeal in Latin America as symbols of modernity. But Latin Americans did not simply capitulate

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to foreign cultural domination. On the contrary, they appropriated imported cultural forms for their own purposes, while generating domestic alternatives that aimed to reconcile the local with the cosmopolitan.

By the 1920s several decades of rapid economic growth in Argentina had made a range of both domestic and imported goods available to an ever-growing segment of society. Alongside increases in the demand for foodstuffs, cigarettes, and clothing, Argentina also imported rising numbers of typewriters, bicycles, and telephones. Local advertising agencies imitated the techniques of their North American counterparts, using market research and sophisticated designs to expand the market. At the same time, the introduction of the radio and the cinema extended the democratization of consumption to the cultural sphere. Seemingly overnight, the new technologies transformed daily life for many Argentines, particularly those who lived in Buenos Aires and other cities. In 1930 there were eighteen radio stations broadcasting in the capital, and movies were shown in more than 150 theaters located in all the neighborhoods of the city. Alongside domestic productions, these radios and theaters offered patrons a steady diet of jazz music and Hollywood movies. By 1927 Argentina had become the second biggest market for film from the United States, far surpassing its much larger neighbor, Brazil.[18]

As in other parts of Latin America, the enthusiastic adoption of technology and mass cultural content from the United States did not obliterate local cultural practices, but it did exert a powerful influence. Argentine representatives of multinational recording companies produced a steady stream of tango records that betrayed the influence of jazz instrumentation and arrangement. But despite this influence, these records continued to offer consumers a clear alternative to imported and domestic jazz. Argentine-owned radio stations developed a programming formula that emphasized both tango and jazz, alongside a growing menu of radio theater, modeled partly on Hollywood plots and partly on local theatrical and literary traditions. Similarly, Argentine film studios elaborated a cinematic style that combined Hollywood elements with a self-conscious localism. In all these ways, mass cultural industries produced what I will call, paraphrasing Miriam Hansen, "alternative modernisms" that reconciled cosmopolitan modernity with local tradition.[19] In other words, Argentine mass cultural producers competed for domestic audiences by emulating the technical and stylistic standards set by North

American imports, even as they distinguished their own products by highlighting their *Argentinidad*.

This self-conscious effort to represent the nation was visible in the refusal of many tango bands to incorporate the drum set; in tango lyrics that featured *lunfardo*, the popular Buenos Aires slang; in film plots and characters drawn from an established, local tradition of popular melodrama; and in countless other ways. All of these gestures amounted to efforts to construct and to market authenticity. As Michelle Bigenho points out, any claim of "cultural-historical authenticity . . . purports a continuity with an imagined point of origin, situated in a historical or mythical past."[20] By invoking an allegedly unchanging essence, representations of authenticity offer a consoling experience of rootedness for people facing a world of rapid and uncontrollable change. Invoking authenticity was the only strategy available to Argentina's small mass cultural entrepreneurs. Lacking the resources of their competitors from the North, they could strive for, but never quite achieve, modern style and technique. Yet their global marginality gave them preferential access to local tradition.

Latin American alternative modernisms have been most visible to scholars as elements in intellectual and official programs of cultural nationalism. As the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino describes the process, "Cultural nationalists typically express that a new national culture will be forged from the best of local 'traditional' culture combined with the best of foreign and 'modern,' that is, cosmopolitan, culture. The localist elements (e.g., gauchos, 'folk' music) in the reformist mix are for emblematic distinction and also function as signs of unity or inclusion; the cosmopolitan features (e.g., national anthems and 'folk' music) create iconicity with other nation-states, and are also due to the fact that the designers of state-cultural nationalism are cosmopolitans themselves."[21] This sort of cultural nationalism was certainly present in Argentina, where the writings of intellectuals like Ricardo Rojas inspired a program of folklore research in the early twentieth century. After Perón came to power in 1946, several influential cultural nationalists joined the government, helping it to elaborate a cultural policy built on the principle of harmonizing Argentine folk culture with the best of the modern world.[22] Nevertheless, I will argue that Argentina's local-cosmopolitan hybrids were chiefly the result of forces unleashed by mass cultural capitalism,

rather than the inventions of intellectuals or politicians.[23] During the period studied in this book, the radio and cinema, while not completely free from state intervention, were shaped primarily by the contradictory pressures of the market. Alternative modernisms resulted from attempts to appeal to consumers who were accustomed to North American standards of modernity but who also demanded authentic Argentine products.

Since they were the result not of top-down projects but of the messy functioning of a capitalist marketplace, Argentine music, radio programs, and movies disseminated unintended and even contradictory messages. They were polysemic in the ways described by scholars of North American mass culture: built by repackaging elements drawn from existing popular culture, they contained the basis for oppositional readings. But Argentina's peripheral modernity—its subordinate position within transnational cultural networks—deepened this potential by necessitating the turn to authenticity. Lacking the means to replicate Hollywood or jazz modernity, Argentine cultural producers needed to stress their national distinctiveness. And the Argentine images and narratives available to them were distinctly populist in tone. As in the rest of Latin America, elites had embraced European products and cultural practices throughout the nineteenth century; Argentine "high culture" offered little that was distinctive. The only cultural practices that could be packaged as authentically Argentine were those of the poor.[24] Borrowing heavily from a highly developed tradition of popular melodrama, mass culture tended not only to celebrate the poor as the true representatives of the nation, but also to denigrate the rich.

As I will argue in more detail in the chapters that follow, comparison with the United States throws into relief the centrality of class in Argentine mass culture. In a series of groundbreaking essays, the historian Warren Susman described the essentially conservative role played by consumer culture in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. In this view, a culture of material abundance provided the basis for the construction of a powerful sense of national belonging. Historians have modified Susman's conclusions, pointing out that the impact of mass consumerism was not necessarily conservative; for example, the rise in labor militancy during the Depression may well have represented an effort by workers to realize the promise of consumer culture. Nevertheless, in the long term, mass consumption does appear to have led to a more unified nation.[25] And within that process, the mass-culture indus-

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tries played a salient role. According to the film historian Lary May, Hollywood films of the 1930s imagined a more diverse, pluralistic, and just nation, providing a language for a new national consensus even before the New Deal began to make it a reality.[26] Likewise, in the realm of popular music, Lewis Erenberg stresses the inclusiveness of the swing era in jazz.[27] Not all historians are as sanguine, but most do call attention to mass culture's capacity for national mythmaking. Robert Sklar, for example, argues that in the context of the Depression and the rise of Nazism, American filmmakers "saw the necessity, almost as a patriotic duty, to revitalize and refashion a cultural mythology." In Sklar's account, filmmakers like Frank Capra and Walt Disney avoided critiques of American society in favor of national myths that audiences could easily embrace.[28]

The national myths packaged in North American mass culture, whether essentially progressive or conservative, were not easily transposable to the Argentine context. Despite the enthusiasm with which local cultural producers imitated styles popular in the United States, their products tended to reproduce an image of an Argentine society deeply divided by class. Like their North American counterparts, Argentine filmmakers celebrated hard work, yet this trait was usually insufficient to overcome class prejudice. Argentine films appealed to their audience's dreams of attaining wealth and living a good life, yet they delivered these consumerist fantasies alongside explicit denunciations of the selfishness and greediness of the rich. Tango stars performed in black tie and were celebrated as modernizers and innovators, yet they were only deemed authentic to the extent that they had roots in the gritty world of lower-class slums. Tango lyrics endlessly revisited the story of the pure, humble girl from the barrios seduced and ruined by an evil *niño bien*, or rich kid, and by the luxurious, immoral world of downtown cabarets. In short, Argentine mass culture encouraged consumers to identify the nation with the humble. Both the cinema and the radio celebrated poor people's capacity for solidarity, generosity, and honesty while attacking the egotism, frivolity, and insincerity of the rich.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CULTURAL HISTORY

Methodologically, this book belongs to a large and growing body of literature within Latin American history dedicated to exploring the connections between culture and power. Inspired by the Gramscian tradition,

this scholarship views culture both as shaped by social, political, and economic processes *and* as a key factor in shaping those processes. It situates culture explicitly within the process of state formation, exploring how commitments, alliances, and identities are constructed simultaneously from above and below. Attentive to the unequal distribution of power, it nonetheless refuses to impose the reductive framework of domination and resistance. According to one formulation, "popular and elite (or local and foreign) cultures are produced in relation to each other through a dialectic of encounter that takes place in arenas and contexts of unequal power and entails reciprocal borrowings, expropriations, translations, misunderstandings, negotiations, and transformations."[29] In this spirit, this book offers a cultural history that explores how meaning is produced in a complex interaction between the state, capitalist entrepreneurs, intellectuals, critics, artists, and consumers.

Such a cultural history requires interdisciplinarity. More specifically, it requires borrowing from social history on the one hand and from a wide range of "culture studies" on the other. This book relies heavily on the extensive literature on Argentine social history, particularly in the subfields of immigration studies, labor history, and urban history. This literature provides the basis on which I can contextualize the production and consumption of mass culture. The changing physical geography of Buenos Aires, the development of neighborhood and working-class institutions, the interactions between immigrant groups and "natives," the ebb and flow of the economy, and the transformations of the political system all helped determine the meanings that mass culture disseminated, even as mass cultural messages shaped the way people experienced these social, economic, and political phenomena. Yet a purely social-historical approach to mass culture would be insufficient. Social historians often note the existence of mass culture while avoiding any examination of its content. Vexed by the difficulty of ascertaining how mass cultural messages were decoded by audiences of the past, they often limit themselves to examining the conditions of production and reception: Who produced the movies and radio programs and under what constraints? Who owned a radio? Who went to the movie theater? When, how, and with whom did they engage in these activities? These questions are all vital, but cultural history must also directly explore the content of the mass culture that Argentines consumed.

Toward that end, I have benefited from a large and sophisticated body

of literature in a variety of disciplines, including film studies, musicology, literary studies, and cultural studies. Tango lyrics and music, pulp fiction, newspapers, sports, movies, and theater have all been the object of sustained analysis by scholars in these fields. In addition to a wealth of insights about particular mass cultural products, this scholarship underscores the importance of paying attention to genre and form. When we treat songs as if they were poems meant to be read, when we analyze the plot of a film without attending to the mechanics of the cinematic apparatus, when we ignore the process of genre formation and how it constructs meaning, our analysis suffers.

Nevertheless, cultural history has its own contributions to make. For one thing, cultural history can avoid putting mass cultural forms into hermetically sealed interpretive boxes. Quite understandably, film scholars tend not to consider the music industry, while musicologists have little to say about film. Yet in practice, these two cultural fields were inextricably entwined at every level. Radio station owners were often involved in film production, popular singers became movie stars, film plots and tango lyrics developed in tandem, and, most important, the audiences for these entertainments obviously overlapped extensively. The "generalist" approach of the cultural historian may amount, in some contexts, to a lack of expertise, but it also enables him or her to identify larger trends and tendencies that may be misread as specific to one medium or another. Even more important, cultural history asks different questions than do other disciplines. The best cultural history, focused on questions of power, treats movies or pop songs much the same way it treats political speeches or manifestos. Of course, going to a movie is not the same thing as attending a political rally or going on strike. Yet neither do people shut down their political consciousness when they walk into the theater. Commodified mass culture disseminates the ideological and discursive building blocks with which individuals construct their identities and points of view. By exploring mass culture, and in particular by attending to the points of tension or contradiction that structure the possibilities for oppositional or alternative readings, cultural history can illuminate key issues in political, social, and economic history.

This book examines a wide range of sources in order to chart the central dynamics of mass culture in the 1920s and 1930s. My primary focus is on the texts themselves: films, radio plays, tango, and folk songs. But my reading of these texts is informed by an analysis of the produc-

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tion process and a consideration of mass cultural consumption practices. Rather than divide the process of meaning-making into analytically distinct moments of production and reception—what Stuart Hall described as "encoding" and "decoding"[30]—I have tried to attend to the ways these levels of meaning-making are intertwined. Argentine filmmakers, for example, were consumers of Hollywood products and local theatrical traditions, even as they were producing their own alternatives. In the transnational marketplace, there was no moment of production that was not also a moment of reception. Needless to say, this analytic approach cannot overcome the paucity of sources available to study the appropriation of mass culture at the grassroots. Since oral history is no longer a viable option for this period and in the absence of surveys or other similar material, I have relied extensively on the entertainment press to inform my readings of mass cultural texts, as well as to chart the debates that swirled around mass culture. Fortunately, vibrant "letters-to-the-editor" sections do enable the voices of ordinary consumers to come through, even though these voices are heavily mediated. Finally, this book does not offer a cultural history of the entire nation. The production of mass culture in this period was almost entirely dominated by Buenos Aires: Argentina's film studios were located in or just outside the capital, and the nation's radio networks were based there as well. Just as important, the primary market for Argentine mass culture was composed of the residents of *porteño* (or Buenos Aires) barrios. The reception of these products in the Argentine interior is an important object of study, but it lies outside the scope of this book.

THE MASS CULTURAL ORIGINS OF POPULISM

The populism of Juan and Eva Perón was more than an instrumental appeal to workers' material interests; it was an identity and worldview that resonated with their experiences and attitudes. More than thirty years ago, Ernesto Laclau argued that the power of Peronism lay in its ability to mobilize already existing cultural elements and rearticulate them in defense of the class interests of Argentine workers. For Laclau, "populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the dominant bloc."[31] Laclau's examination of these "popular-democratic elements" focused primarily on the formal political realm: he explored the capacity of Hipólito Yrigoyen's

Radical Party to articulate liberalism with democracy and then argued that this synthesis fell apart in the 1930s. Yet the two decades before the advent of Peronism saw the transformation of the radio and the cinema from novel curiosities into a major part of everyday life. As Roberto Arlt recognized, this new mass culture must have had an impact on popular consciousness. In the chapters that follow, I argue that consideration of the films, music, and radio programs of the period can help resolve some of the persistent puzzles about this period in Argentine history and shed important new light on the origins of Peronism.

The 1920s and 1930s appear in Argentine historiography as a crucial transitional period, but the nature of the transition has remained mysterious. With the onset of the international economic crisis in 1930, Argentina experienced several key changes: The massive immigration of the previous period came to an end as did the experiment in electoral democracy on the national level begun in 1912. The Depression also catalyzed a major economic and demographic transformation, deepening a process of import substitution industrialization and, by the late 1930s, spurring large-scale migration from the provinces of the interior to greater Buenos Aires. In other ways, though, these decades reveal important continuities. Economic growth had produced the rapid urbanization and expansion of barrios in the outlying zones of Buenos Aires, neighborhoods characterized by a heterogeneous population and significant levels of homeownership. The 1920s and 1930s saw the spread of advertising and consumer culture, the growing importance of neighborhood associations promoting self-improvement and upward mobility, and the rise of a much more inclusive public sphere, with the emergence of popular tabloid newspapers like *Crítica*. Partly thanks to the increased demographic weight of the children of immigrants, anarchism and syndicalism lost their appeal, and the labor movement lost members and militancy at least until the Communist-led resurgence of the late 1930s. But if this period is characterized by the decline of unions, the rise of consumerism, and the pursuit of upward mobility, then where did the Peronist explosion come from? If the 1920s and 1930s were marked by national integration, then how can we explain the profound, class-based polarization of the 1940s?

Much of the literature on the origins of Peronism has focused on the process of industrialization, internal migration, and the rise of industrial unions.[32] But the majority of Perón's followers did not belong to any

union before 1946, and even unionists enjoyed a life away from the shop floor and the union hall. By examining the content of mass culture in this period, this book offers a new perspective on the roots of Peronism. My contention is that the spread of consumerism and mass culture in the 1920s and 1930s did not promote a decline in class consciousness. Historians have too easily assumed that upward mobility, self-improvement, material abundance, and homeownership represent "middle-class" aspirations, and that the rise of these values must coincide with a decline in working-class consciousness and, indeed, in the significance of class itself. These assumptions leave scholars struggling to account for the apparently sudden reemergence of class in the popular imagination after the advent of Peronism. What the cinema and radio reveal is that class was not, in fact, disappearing during the 1920s and 1930s; it was instead being refigured. Mass culture embraced the deeply classist, Manichean moral vision of popular melodrama, disseminating versions of national identity that privileged the poor and rejected the rich. On movie screens and over radio waves, this classism was combined with consumerist titillation, conformism, the celebration of individual upward mobility, misogyny, and other conservative messages. The result was a deeply contradictory discourse, but one in which class loyalties still resonated powerfully. In other words, many of Arlt's proletarians were proud of being proletarians, even if they also dreamed either of kissing or of being Valentino. When Juan Perón emerged after the military coup of 1943, he spoke a language that was built to a significant extent from mass cultural elements. These discursive borrowings help explain his appeal for workers who, as Arlt recognized, were unlikely to embrace Communism. By charting the emergence of populism within the commercial mass culture of the 1920s and 1930s, this book illuminates both the power and the internal contradictions of Peronism.

Chapter 1 examines the fluid process of class formation under way in the expanding barrios of Buenos Aires, where the primary audience for the new mass culture was forged. In these areas, uneven economic growth and a series of contradictory discourses from advertisers, neighborhood associations, labor unions, and political parties meant that class identity was very much in flux. Upward mobility was the dream for many, but it coexisted with expressions of class consciousness. As cultural producers sought to attract consumers, these competing discourses inevitably found expression in the movies and on the radio. Yet the fluidity and

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indeterminacy of class identities in the barrios also meant that the new mass culture would exert a profound influence on the consciousness of its consumers.

Chapter 2 explores the introduction of the phonograph, the radio and the cinema in Argentina and assesses the strategies through which small, undercapitalized firms sought to compete against their wealthier rivals from the North. The entrepreneurs who came to dominate the new culture industries tended to be immigrants who were open to exploiting the commercial potential of popular cultural forms disdained by elite Argentines. Although they emulated North American standards of mass cultural modernity, they were unable to replicate them. Instead, they offered consumers an alternative modernism that repackaged existing popular culture, offering fans a distinctly populist vision of Argentine authenticity. While this sort of populism came to dominate radio programming, the nascent film industry was forced to accept a segmented market in which domestic films were screened in "popular" theaters and ignored by many of the well-to-do. These consumption patterns reinforced the classism of the new mass culture.

Chapter 3 examines the meanings of Argentine melodrama. More than a genre, melodrama was a language that shaped virtually all mass cultural products in this period. Melodrama was premised on a profoundly fatalistic view of the world, in which individuals were victimized by fate, and resistance was futile. Yet at the same time, by positing a Manichean world in which poverty functioned as a guarantor of virtue and authenticity, melodrama presented Argentina as a nation irreconcilably divided between rich and poor. In this way, melodramatic mass culture disseminated the ingredients for a profound critique of the values that supported the status quo. Even the heavily gendered aspects of Argentine popular melodrama—its tendency, for example, to punish women for the "sin" of pursuing a better life—reinforced a subversive class message by celebrating working-class solidarity.

Chapter 4 explores the contradictory results of the many attempts to sanitize and improve mass culture. Despite efforts to purge music, film, and radio theater of their associations with plebeian culture and violence, the commercial viability of these commodities depended on their capacity to satisfy nostalgia for an authentic past defined by just these troubling associations. Unable to reconcile modernity and authenticity, Argentine mass culture swung between an insistence on middle-class

respectability and a defense of plebeian grit, between the pursuit of upward mobility and the celebration of working-class solidarity. Despite the proliferation of efforts at mass-cultural nation building—attempts, for example, to identify an untainted folk culture in the countryside or to elaborate a high art based on Argentine folk traditions—cultural producers failed to generate national myths capable of integrating the nation across class lines.

Finally, chapter 5 examines the political appropriations of mass cultural images and narratives of national identity after the military coup of 1943. By reading Juan and Eva Perón's rhetoric of 1943–46 in light of the preceding analysis, this chapter will reveal the mass cultural origins of Peronism's essentially moralistic view of class conflict, its critique of the egotism of the wealthy, and its celebration of the humility, solidarity, and national authenticity of working people. Likewise, I will argue that Peronism inherited many of its contradictions—such as its tendency to attack elite greed while legitimizing working-class envy and to embrace both anti-elitism and conformism—from the cinema and radio of the preceding period. Peronism's debt to mass culture helps account for the movement's explosive appeal. It also helps explain how such a polarizing political movement seemed to appear so suddenly. The deep social divisions that characterized Argentina after the rise of Peronism were incubated and reinforced on movie screens, on radio waves, and in fan magazines during the 1920s and 1930s.