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## Epilogue - The Rise of the Middle Class, 1955–1976

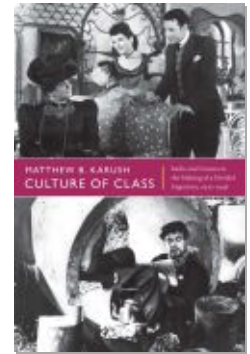
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## EPILOGUE: THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS, 1955–1976

The mass culture explored in this book constructed an image of Argentina that did not accurately reflect reality. By the mid-1920s, Argentina was a dynamic, mobile society that had apparently left behind the fierce class conflicts of earlier decades. In the expanding barrios of Buenos Aires, a heterogeneous population pursued the opportunities that economic development provided. While there were of course many poor people who struggled to survive in the city and beyond, a sizable and growing segment of the population lived in the broad middle ground between rich and poor. Yet domestically produced mass culture depicted Argentine society as fundamentally bipolar. In tango lyrics, radio plays, and films of all genres, an honest, dignified, and long-suffering pueblo confronted condescending and egotistical aristocrats. One of my central claims is that this disjuncture between reality and representation was produced by the dynamics of Argentina's transnational cultural marketplace. Another is that over time the representation came to exert a power-

ful influence on reality. Mass cultural images gave Argentines a powerful language for understanding their society and their place in it.

Nevertheless, Argentine audiences did not simply become the characters they saw on the screen. Mass culture was polysemic; there was more than one way to relate to the images of Argentine society it disseminated. Many consumers must have identified with the plight of the humble girl seduced and abandoned by a wealthy playboy. They surely embraced mass cultural versions of national identity that identified Argentineness with the cultural practices of the urban and rural poor. Yet other members of the audience may have responded more to the recurring images of conspicuous consumption and to the fantasy of rapid upward mobility. For these Argentines, the celebration of rural folk may have offered a means of locating the roots of national identity in a comforting past, rather than a vindication of actually existing poor people. Some saw themselves in the pushy materialism of Nini Marshall's *Catita*, while others simply enjoyed laughing at her. Cultural producers attempted to construct unifying national myths in order to expand the market for their products, but their efforts generally failed to overcome the deep classism of popular melodrama. As a result, contradictory messages persisted.

When Juan and Eva Perón appropriated and politicized the populist discourses that circulated in mass culture, the audience began to split. For the first time, a substantial number of Argentines now came to consider themselves members of the middle class. And they constructed this middle-class identity in explicit opposition to newly empowered Peronist workers.<sup>1</sup> Mass culture did not cause this sudden division between working-class and middle-class Argentines; Peronism did. But as I have tried to show, Peronism was in many ways built out of the discourses that circulated on the radio and in the cinema, and it inherited their class contradictions. Peronism thus failed to build a cross-class, nationalist movement. Instead, it polarized the nation. Over the next several decades, this rift hardened into an unbridgeable fault line. A political conflict rooted in irreconcilable class identities intersected with Cold War ideologies and a growing generational divide, producing severe instability and culminating in the brutal dictatorship of 1976–83. Throughout these years, mass culture continued to reproduce the social divisions that undermined national unity.

Perón's ouster in 1955 ushered in the so-called *Revolución Libertadora*, a nearly three-year military dictatorship whose first priority was

the “deperonization” of Argentine society. Activists and officials were arrested; the Peronist party was banned; and the visible signs of the regime were eradicated from public space. Peronist holidays were abolished, school textbooks burned, and public monuments destroyed.<sup>2</sup> For many artists and producers associated with the deposed regime, the transfer of power had dramatic consequences. Antonio Tormo, who was widely seen as “the voice of the cabecitas” despite never having publicly endorsed Peronism, had his radio and recording contracts summarily cancelled in the wake of the coup.<sup>3</sup> The actor Hugo del Carril spent two months in jail, alongside the director Luis César Amadori and the film producers Atilio and Luis Angel Metasti, allegedly for the illegal exportation of films to Uruguay, but in fact for having collaborated with the Perón government. Del Carril would not make another film until the end of the dictatorship in 1958. Many artists, among them Tita Merello, left the country so as to be able to continue working, while others, such as Fanny Navarro, were unable to resurrect their careers.<sup>4</sup> Still others suffered no direct persecution at the hands of the new authorities but nevertheless struggled to adapt to the new environment. Alberto Castillo was a casualty of the commercial decline of tango. Having starred in ten films between 1946 and 1956, he would make only one more movie, in 1958.<sup>5</sup> Nini Marshall, back from her exile in Mexico, resurrected her most famous character for *Catita es una dama* (Saraceni, 1956). A box-office failure, the film marked the beginning of an eight-year hiatus from the Argentine cinema for Marshall and the end of the line for Catita. After the defeat of Peronism, there were very few Argentines who felt like laughing either at or with a working-class striver. Marshall did have success on the radio with a new character, a wealthy snob named Mónica Bedoya Hueyo de Picos Pardos Sunsuet Crostón, but she never recaptured her earlier stature.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding these career reversals, there were many signs of continuity in the mass culture of the late 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Like the rise of Peronism ten years earlier, the fall of the regime did not occasion a cultural revolution from above so much as a deepening of certain tendencies that were already visible. For example, both the rising commercial viability of folk music and the relative decline of tango proceeded apace. Within the folk milieu, the blacklisting of Antonio Tormo seems to have been a unique case. Although the military government discontinued the official sponsorship that folk music had enjoyed under Perón, and many clubs and festivals were forced to downsize, most folk performers who had bene-

fited from Peronism were allowed to resume their careers. At the same time, several newer acts became major recording and radio stars, including Los Cantores de Quilla Huasi, Los Fronterizos, Los Chalchaleros, and Los Huanca Huá. In fact, the genre would achieve its commercial high point in the period between 1959 and 1966, a phenomenon known as the “folklore boom.”<sup>8</sup>

Folk music had clearly benefited from state sponsorship during the Perón years; laws requiring the inclusion of the genre on the radio and in live venues, as well as direct financial subsidies, were major factors in the consolidation of the genre. Nevertheless, Argentine folk music was primarily a commercial genre and had gained a significant and growing presence on the radio before the advent of official support. It is no surprise, then, that the music was able to retain its audience after 1955. Oscar Chamosa points out that despite its support for the genre, Peronism never established its own “brand” of folk music. There were no Peronist folk lyrics and, with the exception of the work of Atahualpa Yupanqui, very few in this period that even expressed an explicit concern for social justice. As a result, Chamosa argues, folk music offered a source of Argentinidad that was attractive to a middle class that had rejected Peronist versions of national identity.<sup>9</sup> The most commercially successful folk music of the boom years featured rich vocal harmonies and romantic lyrics. Roberto Cambaré’s *zamba* “Angélica,” a hit for several different folk groups, was typical:<sup>10</sup>

Angélica, cuando te nombro,  
me vuelven a la memoria  
un valle, pálida luna en la noche de abril,  
y aquel pueblito de Córdoba.

*Angélica, when I say your name,  
a valley, a pale April moon,  
and that little town in Córdoba  
come back to my memory.*<sup>11</sup>

In its romanticism and its nostalgic evocation of rural life, this version of folklore recalled Homero Manzi’s “country milongas” of the 1930s. Middle-class consumers embraced it wholeheartedly.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the rise of the middle class decisively reshaped Argentine mass culture. Middle-class Argentines took

to the streets in support of the Revolución Libertadora, and by the time the dictatorship ended, they had become the primary target of new political appeals. Arturo Frondizi, who assumed the presidency in 1958, emerged as “the Perón of the middle class.” Embracing the doctrine of “developmentalism,” Frondizi aimed to achieve economic growth through a combination of industrial policy and foreign investment, while building a cross-class alliance that would assure social integration and stability. Within this project, Frondizi carved out an especially prominent role for the middle class, becoming the first Argentine president to defend that sector’s interests explicitly. Having staked its claim to both politics and public space, the middle class now constituted an inviting market for cultural producers. In addition to folk music, a host of other programming was aimed at these consumers. Programs featuring model middle-class families proliferated on television, which was introduced in Argentina in 1951. One classic of the genre was *La Familia Falcón*, launched in 1962, the same year that its sponsor, the Ford Motor Company, introduced its new sedan to the Argentine market. In reassuring programs like this one, middle-class porteño families encountered a series of challenges and conflicts, but all was happily resolved by the end of each episode thanks usually to the wisdom of the father.<sup>12</sup>

Like the decline of tango and the boom in folk music, the development of mass cultural products depicting happy middle-class families began before 1955. As early as 1933, *Los tres berretines* featured a respectable family led by an immigrant shop owner, although, as I have argued, that film was quite ambivalent about the patriarch’s middle-class values. *Así es la vida* (Múgica, 1939), a film adaptation of another sainete by the authors of *Los tres berretines*, betrayed less of this ambivalence.<sup>13</sup> The movie follows one prosperous family over thirty years, presenting a series of generational conflicts that pit old-fashioned parents against children with modern ideas. In the inevitable happy ending, the parents adapt, and the family survives. By 1940 *Los Pérez García* had begun its long run on Radio El Mundo, following the quotidian struggles of a middle-class family. In sharp contrast to the melodramatic mass culture that was so dominant in the 1930s, these films and programs depicted a world in which class divisions were easily overcome. Interclass romance, for example, no longer required that a rich person embrace working-class values. In *Así es la vida*, the father is happy to marry his daughters off to his employees, so long as they are not Socialists or atheists. In *Los Pérez García*, the family’s

only son married the maid in an episode from 1955 that was a major event for the program's fans.<sup>14</sup> Rather than challenge the middle-class characters in any way, the marriage offered the poor servant an easy and unproblematic route to upward mobility. As they became more and more common on the radio and television, shows like *Los Pérez García* and *La Familia Falcón* began to transform the dominant image of national identity, holding out the contented middle-class porteño household as the quintessential Argentine family.

The growth of mass culture about and for the middle class was a transnational phenomenon, in which influences from the United States were particularly important. These influences partly reflected the growing role of North American capital in the Argentine mass media. Immediately after the coup of 1955, the military authorities had dismantled the Peronist radio networks. As they prepared to relinquish power three years later, they sought to prevent the reemergence of media oligopolies run by Perón allies. In a public auction closed to Peronists and designed to outlaw networks owned by a single entity, many individual radio stations were sold to private owners. Similarly, just three days before turning the government over to the Frondizi administration, General Pedro Aramburu granted television licenses to three private companies with no connection to Peronism. But unlike radio, commercial television was new in Argentina. The new license holders lacked the necessary capital to produce programs that could compete with the state-owned Canal 7. For help, they turned to the North American television networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC. Each network created a production company that generated programs for one of the Argentine stations. Not only did this system allow the North American companies to evade the legal prohibition against foreign ownership of stations, it also enabled the elaboration of de facto networks. By 1970 the production company PROARTEL, co-owned by CBS and Time-Life, had acquired seventeen affiliates throughout Argentina.<sup>15</sup> Although charting the precise impact of these corporations is beyond the scope of this book, the direct involvement of networks based in the United States in the production of Argentine television represented an important channel for North American influence.

In the 1950s, Argentines remained enthusiastic consumers of mass culture from the United States, including the films of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, the rock 'n' roll of Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, as well as

dubbed television programs like *Highway Patrol* and *The Cisco Kid*.<sup>16</sup> There is little doubt that mass cultural depictions of harmonious middle-class families were constructed in dialogue with North American images. Television programs like *Father Knows Best* offered obvious models. Beyond the realm of mass culture, North American imports provided middle-class consumers with opportunities for distinction. Peronism had dramatically increased the purchasing power of the working class, expanding that sector's consumption of household appliances and other amenities. By the late 1950s, refrigerators, blenders, washing machines, television sets, and stereos were symbols of modernity. For middle-class consumers, North American brands like Osterizer, General Electric, and RCA Victor carried the most prestige.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, during the early 1960s, Argentine young people of all classes began to wear blue jeans. But while working-class teenagers wore domestically manufactured *vaqueros* that evoked North American associations through the brand name "Far West," middle-class youth bought the real thing: Lee and Levi's.<sup>18</sup>

As the example of blue jeans suggests, foreign influence had a great deal to do with the emergence of youth as the nation's newest and fastest growing marketing category. Imitating international trends, local producers developed a series of mass cultural commodities aimed specifically at young people. In 1962, RCA Victor and local television station Canal 13 inaugurated *El Club del Clan*, a weekly musical program featuring a cast of clean-cut, well-dressed teenagers. With each performer specializing in one particular genre, the show offered rock 'n' roll in the style of Elvis Presley, international pop music, *cumbia*, bolero, and tango, alongside lighthearted comic sketches. Gradually, an emphasis on songs in English and Spanish-language covers of North American hits gave way to original compositions. In terms of both aesthetics and morality, *El Club del Clan* offered only the gentlest sort of rebellion. The show was apolitical to a fault, suggesting that while teenagers had their own tastes, they had no deeper critique of the adult world. Similarly, in the television program *La Nena*, an independent-minded teenage girl caused her middle-class father an unending series of headaches. Like *Los Pérez García*, each episode of *La Nena* ended happily. In this comforting vision, the middle-class family was strong enough to withstand generational conflict.<sup>19</sup> The omnipresence of this sort of programming constituted a middle-class takeover of mass culture, an echo of that sector's new political dominance. The pro-



scription of the Peronist party combined with this mass cultural transformation to reduce the space for the expression of working-class values and aesthetics in the public sphere.

The 1960s witnessed the political radicalization of significant segments of Argentine society. The coup that overthrew the Frondizi government in 1962 demonstrated that politics had become an “impossible game”: the military refused to countenance the participation of the Peronists, who continued to enjoy the support of a majority of Argentines.<sup>20</sup> Frustrated by this political stalemate and inspired by the example of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, many Argentine young people joined the revolutionary Left. This radicalization was a response to developments in domestic and international politics, but for middle-class youth it also involved the reworking of identity through consumption. Blue jeans, which had been marketed as “dynamic, joyful, and sexy,” now became a countercultural symbol and the typical uniform of young radicals.<sup>21</sup>

Mass culture played a significant role in the leftward drift of Argentine society and particularly middle-class youth. In the late 1960s, the apolitical music of the folklore boom gave way to the protest songs of the Nuevo Cancionero movement. New singers like Mercedes Sosa drew on the legacy of Atahualpa Yupanqui as well as the example of Chilean singers like Violeta Parra to create a politicized folk music that provided the soundtrack to leftist militancy. At more or less the same time, the Beatles inspired a generation of young rock musicians in Argentina. Luis Alberto Spinetta, Litto Nebbia, and many others elaborated multiple versions of what would come to be called *rock nacional*.<sup>22</sup> The emerging rock scene—with its sexual freedom and drug use—scandalized the older generation but also horrified young leftists, for whom the new music represented both sterile escapism and cultural imperialism. Eventually, as Sergio Pujol points out, this rift would be inadvertently healed by the brutality of a military dictatorship that made no distinction between “Marxist subversives” and “hippie drug addicts.”<sup>23</sup>

In the context of this generalized radicalization, disaffected middle-class youth forged a powerful, if short-lived, alliance with Peronist workers. Persecuted and shut out of politics by the Revolución Libertadora and subsequent governments, labor activists steadily moved to the left. Workers forged the so-called Peronist Resistance in the late 1950s, using sabotage, strikes, and factory takeovers to combat the anti-popular policies of the military. The proscription of the Peronist party as well as workers’

exclusion from the public sphere deepened their attachment to the exiled Perón.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Peronism became attractive to many middle-class leftists. The coup of 1966, which installed the repressive military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía, increased the appeal of Marxism for middle-class young people. For many, including a sizable percentage of those who joined armed revolutionary groups, Peronism represented an Argentine variant of international anti-imperialism. These two trends came together in a series of rebellions, the most important of which was the “Cordobazo” of 1969, in which radical university students made common cause with combative, left-wing unions in the city of Córdoba, the epicenter of the country’s automotive industry.<sup>25</sup> In a sense, this alliance reflected a temporary intersection of class-based and generational polarization. When the military finally legalized Peronism and allowed Perón himself to return to Argentina in 1973, the movement could no longer withstand its internal divisions: as a huge crowd assembled at the airport to greet the returning leader, right-wing, anti-Communist Peronists opened fire on the Peronist left.<sup>26</sup> After three more years of persistent instability, the military, with substantial middle-class support, responded with yet another coup, repressing both Peronist workers and those middle sectors suspected of radicalism with unprecedented brutality.

The mass culture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s broke in three important ways from the patterns established in the 1920s and 1930s. First, whereas the radio and cinema of the earlier period addressed its audience as a popular mass defined in opposition to the rich, post-Perón-era mass culture spoke primarily to the middle class, a class that had coalesced in opposition to the Perón regime. Second, the marketing of mass cultural products specifically to young people was also novel. Finally, the intense politicization of the 1960s and 1970s had no equivalent in the earlier period. In the 1930s, consumer choices—whether to listen to tango, folk, or jazz, for example—did not tend to indicate specific political preferences, as similar choices later would.

Nevertheless, there were also significant continuities. The Argentine mass cultural marketplace remained—and remains—fundamentally transnational. In both periods, Argentines consumed substantial amounts of foreign, particularly North American, mass culture. Likewise, in both periods, this imported culture offered more prosperous Argentines a means of achieving distinction: those who disdained local films in favor of the latest Hollywood releases prefigured middle-class porteños

who insisted on wearing Levi's jeans. Domestic mass culture—whether it was tango music or rock nacional, radio theater or television—reflected a dialectical process in which producers both emulated and sought to distinguish their output from prestigious, ultra-modern imports. The resulting genres constituted alternative modernisms through which Argentines reconfigured national identities. The vocabulary and imagery disseminated by mass culture were available for political mobilization and, as a result, had real effects in the world. As I have tried to show, the deep divisions so visible in the 1950s and beyond were the results of a political process that was itself made possible by mass culture. By appropriating and repackaging the populist messages that coursed through mass culture, Peronism generated a profound chasm that would divide the Argentine working and middle classes for the rest of the twentieth century. This chasm looked quite different from the one depicted in so many melodramatic movies and songs, but it was every bit as deep.