



Introduction

In the early 1990s historians and social scientists began applying new theoretical approaches for understanding the meaning and contents of liberalism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America. Previous interpretations had emphasized liberalism as a hegemonic construction imposed by socioeconomic and political elites in the second half of the nineteenth century, a process that, along with the associated consolidation of nation-states and export economies, negatively affected the lower classes. The new studies, however, focused on popular liberalism, on the active participation of lower classes in state building at local, regional, and national levels, showing how the poorer segments appropriated and reinterpreted the liberal ideology in their own terms.¹

The notion of a contested ideology is particularly useful in exploring liberalism's history and meanings in Argentina in the twentieth century. Between 1852, when the last powerful caudillo, Juan Manuel de Rosas, was defeated, and 1930, liberalism was the unquestionably hegemonic ideology shoring up one of the most successful modern states in Latin America. This hegemony was shattered between 1930 and 1955, however, a period characterized by the military coup against the Radical administration of Hipólito Yrigoyen in 1930, a military-run government in 1930–1932, a restricted democratic regime in 1932–1943, another military regime in 1943–1946, and Juan Perón's administrations in 1946–1955. This period also saw a crisis in and transformation of Argentina's traditional export economy and the rise of anti- or nonliberal movements and groups that challenged the liberal hegemony, such as the military, nationalist

groups and ideologies, and the Catholic Church. Thus, in a historical context marked by exacerbated political and ideological crises at the national and international levels, by 1955 liberalism had lost its dominant status in Argentina and had become exclusively associated with opposition to popular democracy. This trajectory raises interesting questions. Does its outcome mean that liberalism was inherently conservative and exclusionary between the 1930s and 1950s? Which groups claimed liberalism in that period, and what did they mean by it? How did liberalism in these years relate to the liberalism of the previous period, when the ideology gained and held hegemony?

This book seeks to address those questions by exploring the changing meanings of the liberal ideology and its appropriation by different actors at a critical moment in Argentina, between 1930 and 1955. The era's political, social, and intellectual groups explicitly and strongly claimed liberalism in terms of politics, economics, and culture. Liberalism influenced the discourse of major political parties, such as Radicals, Socialists, Progressive Democrats, and conservative liberal sectors related to the ruling groups until 1943. In the same period, it was also defended by intellectual institutions and circles—including the literary magazines *Sur* and *Nosotros*, the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (Argentine Association of Writers, or SADE), and the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores (Free College of Higher Studies, or CLES)—and pro-Allied groups and institutions during World War II, such as the weekly *Argentina Libre! . . . Antinazi*, the institution Acción Argentina, and liberal Catholics associated with the magazine *Orden Cristiano*. Liberalism eventually influenced many of these institutions as they turned from antifascism to anti-Peronism in 1943–1946, and it featured prominently among Socialists and other political groups, as well as in new cultural publications and institutions created during the Peronist administrations of 1946–1955.

This multifaceted approach makes several contributions to the historical literature on both liberalism and this particular historical period. Most significantly, it fills a remarkable scholarly gap by providing the first specialized study on liberalism in Argentina during 1930–1955. Understandably, given the major role that political and economic liberalism played in the foundation of the modern Argentine state, a large and in-depth body of work discusses Argentine liberalism during the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but the ideology's career over these two and one-half decades has not received similarly detailed attention. The scholarship has primarily considered liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s through a narrative of decadence and irrelevance, focusing on the crisis of the nineteenth-century liberal republic in the interwar years. This view has informed many traditional studies on the 1930s and early 1940s, investigations centered in the progressive crisis of the political system based on the 1853 liberal constitution.² Other

valuable studies have focused on anti- or nonliberal groups in the 1930s and 1940s (e.g., the military,³ the labor movement,⁴ nationalist groups and ideologies,⁵ and the Catholic Church⁶) and their roles in the emergence of Peronism. In these studies, however, liberalism is not specifically analyzed or is presented just as a foil against which those nonliberal developments defined their positions.

In large part the problem arose because most scholars who discussed Argentine liberalism during this era have focused exclusively on the particular conservative liberal trend represented by the groups who achieved or stayed in power through military coup or fraudulent elections between 1930 and 1943, a period known as the “infamous decade”—a popular yet historiographically meaningless label that emerged from the contentious debates of those years. Such a focus implicitly presumes that liberalism was necessarily conservative, reactionary, and antipopular. This vision was reinforced by Peronism’s victory against groups that actively based their campaigns on liberalism, a development that this book also addresses. These arguments surfaced again in the 1990s, when the implementation of the neoliberal economic policies under Carlos Menem (1989–1999) sparked a series of analyses and debates on the nature of Argentine liberalism.⁷ The discussion certainly shows how contemporary political and economic developments—such as the military regime of 1976–1983 and the implementation of economic neoliberal policies under Menem—forced scholars and intellectuals to reconsider the history and evolution of liberalism in Argentina. At the same time, the debate about liberalism was symptomatic of the shortcomings of the studies on the subject, for many of them made connections between 1990s neoliberalism and pre-1930 liberalism without considering the specific transformations that happened in the period at issue.

In this sense, this book establishes a dialogue with the most recent scholarship on this period. It connects with new studies on the Radical and Socialist parties and conservative political groups in 1930–1943 that go beyond the narrative of crisis and decadence, of increasing electoral fraud and ineffective political parties, that characterized the earlier historiography. Instead, the new scholarship explores political and ideological tensions and coincidences among and within the major political parties, the deeper structural tensions that affected the Argentine political system, and continuities and discontinuities with the pre-1930 and post-1943 periods.⁸ While these works provide valuable information on debates and the influence of political and economic liberalism within those parties, they still do not offer a broader discussion of liberalism or establish cross-party relationships regarding that ideology.

The book also establishes a dialogue with Tulio Halperín Donghi’s most recent and influential works on 1930s and 1940s, whose sweeping coverage of

the crisis of the old liberal republic in 1930–1945 offers penetrating analysis along with a wealth of documents from a variety of social and political actors.⁹ Nonetheless, despite their tremendous value for framing the history of liberalism in this period, Halperín Donghi's books have a much broader scope than the present work's. Moreover, I directly engage with a body of recent scholarship on the confluence of politics and culture in the 1940s and 1950s, studies that explore the development of antifascist groups in the 1930s and early 1940s and their local and international connections.¹⁰ Finally, my book also relates to scholarship on the formation and the dynamics of intellectual and political anti-Peronist groups as connected to the broader process of state building during Perón's midcentury administrations.¹¹ In all these developments, liberalism played a multifaceted role in bringing together disparate groups, legitimizing positions, and defining political and cultural identities. By connecting the insights of these studies into a broader historical and theoretical framework, this book allows a deeper understanding of the history of liberalism in Argentina.

If, as I argue, liberalism still played an influential role in the debates of this period, then it is necessary to specify not only the theoretical approach this book uses to deal with that ideology but also any particular core of ideas and experiences that different groups used to define their specific affiliations with it. At a theoretical level, this study builds on concepts of ideology and culture as flexible sources for multiple constructions. Following Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Partha Chatterjee, I argue that the varied groups that defended the liberal ideology engaged in a dynamic process of "invention of traditions," a deliberate yet not always coherent selection and interpretation of the liberal legacy and ideology.¹² I also draw from the sociological studies of Clifford Geertz and Ann Swidler. In his classic study on the development of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, Geertz distinguished between "being held by ideas" and "holding ideas," the latter lending itself to re-creation and recombination. In her study on the definition of culture, Swidler proposed the definition of culture as a "'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems."¹³

This theoretical approach makes sense when coupled with a broad understanding of liberalism in Argentina. I argue that twentieth-century Argentine liberalism was defined by the liberal tradition that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, which blended international ideological and political liberal ideas and institutions with local concerns for nation building that included the imposition of political order and the achievement of economic development. This tradition was represented by some major liberal thinkers and politicians, the Constitution of 1853, and the political system that

grew out of that document's application. In terms of economics, the liberal age was essentially characterized by the country's incorporation into the world economy through one of the most successful export economies of Latin America, a project in which the state also took an active role.

From this broad definition, as I explain in the first chapter, it follows that liberalism in nineteenth-century Argentina was not a rigid mold; it responded to specific historical circumstances and included both conservative and progressive elements. Therefore, and departing from existing scholarship, this book proposes that liberalism did not have a single meaning common to all the different groups that defended it at different moments in the period under investigation. Certainly, they identified themselves as liberals in relation to some basic elements, such as the nineteenth-century Argentine liberal tradition, fundamental political and economic freedoms, the national historical context, and antiliberal developments and international processes in the period between the 1920s and 1950s. Their particular historical, ideological, and political positions, however, show that they did not always agree on the relative importance of those elements or even on their precise meanings. For example, conservative liberal sectors in the 1930s and 1940s emphasized more restricted interpretations of the liberal legacy, groups associated with the Radical and Socialist parties appealed to liberalism's more democratic and inclusive elements, and liberal Catholic intellectuals attempted a difficult reconciliation of political and economic liberalism with nonliberal Catholic teachings and orientations.

This theoretical and historical approach allows a far more accurate understanding of the history of liberalism in Argentina during this period. It avoids any essentialist pretension of finding a "true" liberal group or tradition, thus avoiding one kind of heuristic stricture that, as Elías Palti reminds us, has commonly affected the understanding of "the erratic evolution of ideas in Latin America."¹⁴ The book also rejects an exclusive focus on political parties or on one aspect of the ideology, such as economic liberalism. Instead, it argues that different groups unevenly defined their liberalism regarding politics, economics, and culture, which justifies the role that the book assigns to the analysis of cultural institutions. Literary enterprises such as *Sur* and cultural institutions such as SADE and CLES, as well as other publications created under Peronism, such as *Liberalis* and *Realidad*, became clearly politicized or expressed implicit political meanings during these years. Moreover, these cultural institutions had personal, institutional, and ideological relationships with political parties, and throughout this period their interaction created sociability circles for the creation, reproduction, and circulation of liberalism.

The concept of liberalism as a multifaceted ideology and tradition influencing different groups is particularly useful in understanding its evolution

in a period of crisis and challenge. As the book explains, the struggle usually transpired not only between liberal and nonliberal groups and ideologies but also among different factions and groups within specific parties, such as the Socialists and Radicals. Also, liberal cultural groups could defend political and cultural liberalism but be critical of economic liberalism, identified with free-market ideas. And besides, even specific issues regarding, say, economic liberalism produced disputes. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, issues in classical economic liberalism related to minimum state economic intervention and maximum individual freedom gave rise to both intraparty differences and cross-party agreements, as did a new liberalism that combined political freedom with state economic intervention and social justice.

While I emphasize the complexity of liberalism in these years and the relevance of the proposed theoretical framework for studying it, note that this book does not seek to rescue the liberal ideology or deny that it underwent a profound crisis in 1930–1955. Indeed, the book shows a somewhat ambiguous trajectory. On the one hand, and in a landscape of national and international crisis, liberalism survived in the 1930s and early 1940s as a central yet varied legitimizing discourse and ideological reference for important political and intellectual actors in Argentina. On the other hand, it increasingly became a rhetorical device for major political parties, emptied of practical content and, eventually, of popular support as antiliberal trends rose and partisan inter- and intraparty conflicts grew increasingly fraught. This description applies not only to the conservative liberalism embodied by some of the groups within the political sectors restored to power in 1930–1943 but also, and more significantly, to the political and intellectual groups that defended a more progressive, antifascist liberalism. The military regime and the rise of Juan Perón in 1943–1946 intensified this contradictory development. The groups that had defended different liberal traditions in the previous decade joined to challenge Perón unsuccessfully, and in doing so, they strengthened liberalism's alienation from democracy and the popular masses. This trend was solidified during the Peronist decade of 1946–1955, when liberalism became the major ideological reference for anti-Peronist politicians and intellectuals who gathered in several social and professional groups.

This trajectory additionally highlights the comparative value of this study and its relevance for Latin Americanists and social scientists beyond the particular Argentine case. After all, why should we care about the history of Argentine liberalism in these decades? Eduardo Zimmermann hints at the answer when he notes that the debate on the meanings and history of liberalism in the 1990s was not peculiar to Argentina but was related to similar historical and ideological trends in the North Atlantic world.¹⁵ Expanding this idea, I argue that the historical and theoretical approach I adopt coheres with the evo-

lution of liberalism at the international level, places the Argentine case within broader contours, and contributes to the understanding of the still largely understudied history of liberalism in Latin America between the 1930s and the most recent period, beginning in the 1980s.

At the international level, liberalism has never been a rigid set of principles. It gradually evolved as a broad body of ideas in the North Atlantic world between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. While there are important differences between authors, historical periods, and national experiences, the liberal ideology is generally identified in its broadest meaning with the basic features it presented through its birth and development in Europe and later in the United States. In this way, liberalism is a philosophical and anthropological conception according to which human society is composed of individuals who possess inalienable rights. The ideal liberal state, then, is one that protects individuals in their exercise of those rights and maximally allows their free pursuit of goals. Therefore, liberalism has been historically linked to constitutionalism, representative government, and limits on political authority so that neither the state nor its functionaries can abuse their power over individuals. Relatedly, liberalism became increasingly linked to *laissez-faire* economics, which includes free trade, an acceptance of laws of supply and demand, and minimum state intervention. Presented in this form, liberalism was also associated with the rise of new social and political groups, such as a merchant bourgeoisie and the middle classes, whose constantly problematic interactions with traditional monarchies and aristocracies resulted in the liberal-conservative struggles that marked Europe during the nineteenth century.¹⁶

As has been emphasized, the ideology's social identification with the rising bourgeoisie made liberalism intrinsically conservative and exclusionary regarding the lower classes. Indeed, several recent studies have thoroughly explored the idea that this exclusionary and restricted aspect went deeper than the social identification, for it was embedded in class-based and imperialist categories at the moment of liberalism's original historical and theoretical formulations.¹⁷ And the current wave of economic neoliberalism has undoubtedly attacked the interests, rights, and welfare of the vast majority in those countries where it has been implemented.¹⁸ Despite these basic ideas, however, liberalism did not necessarily involve similar practices or meanings in the twentieth century, for it evolved in two main trends facing the challenges of World War I, the rise of totalitarianism, the Great Depression, and World War II.

A reformist and popular variant combined the defense of traditional political freedoms with state economic intervention and social welfare. This version, expressed by Benedetto Croce, John Maynard Keynes, Karl Mannheim, and other intellectuals, found expression in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal

and gave birth to the current meanings of the terms *liberal* and *liberalism* as associated in the United States with the Democratic Party. Simultaneously, a conservative trend proposed restoring the old liberal creed of a free market and a minimum state, as advanced in Europe and the United States by economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman. These economists not only strongly influenced the libertarian group that contributed to the ideological formation of the era's Republican Party but also played a central role in the more recent reemergence of economic neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁹

These international trends in the evolution of liberalism, as well as the previously mentioned recent scholarship on Latin American liberalism, underscore the comparative value of my project. If liberalism has been a contested ideology for multiple actors, it is then fitting to inquire into its diverse appropriations in the Argentine case. The development of more democratic and reformist versions of it in the North Atlantic world of the 1930s, as well as the legacy of nineteenth-century popular liberalism in Mexico and Colombia, has echoes in the different articulations of progressive liberalism voiced by the Argentine Radical, Socialist, and Progressive Democratic parties and the antifascist cultural groups in which they joined with intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. Their political failure, and the fact that their progressive liberalism eventually adopted a quite conservative tone with the rise of Peronism, sheds light on the factors that prevented the survival and development of progressive liberalism in Argentina after the 1940s and 1950s. The book also helps illuminate the history of liberalism in Argentina and Latin America between the 1930s and the reemergence of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, a period that has received considerably less scholarly attention. Finally, the crisis of the neoliberal economic model in Argentina in 2001–2002 and around the world in 2008 once again highlights the need to understand the historical cycles and transformations of the liberal ideology. In all these manners, this book contributes to the broader understanding of the evolution of liberalism at the local, regional, and international levels.

No book is perfect or satisfies every reader, so I would like to emphasize the scope and limits of this one. Specifically, it concerns how a particular ideology—liberalism—was adopted, adapted, and used by different actors in 1930–1955, tracing the historical roots of that process back to the nineteenth century. Therefore, it does not attempt to provide a total history of Argentina. This, then, provides the perspective from which I analyze political parties, such as the Radicals, Socialists, Progressive Democrats, and various conservative groups, and historical periods, such as the midcentury Peronist years. I focus on specific political parties and cultural institutions because they constituted the most important actors in the production and circulation of liber-

alism in Argentina during this period, but this should not be understood as denying the historical importance of other actors (e.g., unions) that lack the same relevance for the history of liberalism. Also, intellectuals and politicians affiliated with the Communist Party may seem to get short shrift, for they too explicitly claimed liberalism, were part of the antifascist liberal groups, and joined the anti-Peronist fronts at different moments in the 1930s and 1940s. While considered in the book, however, they do not receive the same degree of treatment as do others, for the party's abrupt ideological and political changes do not put it at the center of the story.

Finally, some readers might be puzzled by the relatively greater weight given to the 1930s and early 1940s than to the Peronist administrations of 1946–1955. I do this first and foremost because I believe the former years were critical in the history of liberalism within the broader ideological and political debates in Argentina. Second, while Peronism was a defining moment for Argentine history, its importance for the history of Argentine liberalism is somewhat contradictory. Peronism certainly contributed to the alienation of the self-styled liberal forces from the popular masses, but it shifted the center of the debate, which in the 1930s and early 1940s was still largely devoted to the crisis of liberalism in Argentina and the world. Finally, the focus on these earlier years has the additional benefit of avoiding the too-common trend of seeing them as a preordained prelude to the rise of Peronism, denying their historical specificity.