INTRODUCTION

Peronism and the Midcentury Moment

Juan Domingo Perón reached a crossroads in November 1951. Facing reelection, Argentina's president desired a strong showing at the polls to remind supporters and critics alike of his enduring popularity. To this end, Perón and his legendary wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, addressed massive audiences at open-air rallies, while speeches broadcast on the national radio network reached a larger public still. The couple offered a panorama of their administration's accomplishments during the preceding six years: public works projects, nationalizations, social programs, and labor reforms—the types of initiatives that now feature prominently in histories of Peronism. Yet they also spoke about smaller but no less significant improvements in everyday life. In one radio speech, Perón contrasted the poverty of previous decades with the bounty of the present: "Today one eats well and four times a day. Those who in the past had one suit of clothes now have a closetful. Those who in the past went to the cinema or theater once a year now can go every week. Those who in the past spent their summers sitting in the doorway of their tenement [*conventillo*] now go to the mountains, or to the sea shore, or if not, to the comfortable resorts around Buenos Aires itself." At the same time, Perón lashed out at his enemies, arguing that only egotistic elites could bemoan the lack of imported goods, such as whisky, perfume, and refrigerators (*frigidaires*). He assured his listeners that, thanks to government action, the popular majority lived with true "liberty and dignity."[1]

This historical juncture inspired appraisals from other commentators, among them individuals far removed from the commanding heights of the state. A few

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weeks after Perón's reelection triumph, Hilda Benítez de Maldonado, a working-class housewife from a small town in the western province of Mendoza, wrote a letter to the nation's leaders.[2] Like hundreds of thousands of similar petitioners, this woman recounted daily struggles. She lamented that her husband, who belonged to a rural workers' union, earned wages too low to meet the family's needs. Rising prices threatened, and by her estimate the cost of living in town had increased threefold during the previous year alone. Benítez de Maldonado accused local merchants of buying off state inspectors assigned to crack down on profiteering and of plying them with cold drinks and favors. Moreover, her family's attempts to secure relief through other channels had been unsuccessful: "I'll tell you, my general, that my mother stayed for three months in Buenos Aires to see if she could speak with Our *Compañera* Evita, but they did not give her an audience." Nevertheless, she described herself as a "good Argentine and good Peronist" who prayed tearfully for Eva Perón's recovery from illness. Her letter expressed her gratitude for having received consumer goods as holiday gifts from the regime's authorities (a fruitcake, a bottle of cider, and a toy for her son). "Many thanks and forgive the errors and the boldness of having contacted you both," she declared in closing to the president and First Lady.

What should we make of these two contrasting accounts from late 1951? On the surface, Perón and Benítez de Maldonado seem an unlikely pairing. One was the leading figure in twentieth-century Argentine history, a man who held the reins of the state and positioned himself at the apex of one of Latin America's most powerful mass movements. The other was a poor and barely literate woman from a provincial backwater. Despite the gulf between them, however, Perón and Benítez de Maldonado shared certain inclinations that suggest much about the changing political landscape of this historical moment. One may have extolled national plenty and the other recounted personal troubles, but they were joined, however loosely, by a preoccupation with the ordinary stuff of life. Both Perón and Benítez de Maldonado considered getting and spending as matters worthy of public attention and state intervention and thus vital to understandings of citizenship. While neither invoked *consumo* (consumption) explicitly, each viewed popular acquisition and the satisfaction of household-level needs as crucial to living with "liberty and dignity." Perón and Benítez de Maldonado were not alone. They were joined by a host of other actors who grappled, in their respective and sometimes competing ways, with the quandaries posed by this era's commercial offerings, social inequalities, and material aspirations.

Indeed, the Peronist era (1943–1955) was a historical watershed that reconfigured state-citizen relations around new conceptions of entitlement and national

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development. Peronism has lent itself to countless interpretations, yet scholars have tended to mine certain lines of inquiry repeatedly, and the significance of consumer controversies has not received the scrutiny it deserves.[3] But the deep resonance of Peronist politics rested at least partly in its articulation of quotidian consumption as an essential element of social justice. The movement's protagonists adapted relevant social scientific concepts, such as the *nivel de vida* (level of living) and *standard de vida,* (standard of living), drawing them out of narrow reformist debates and thrusting them into the center of mass politics. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the standard of living to the period's contests. The language of "levels" and "standards" guided an array of initiatives intended to lessen vulnerabilities to market forces and to uplift "submerged" populations to a higher plateau of well-being. Through these actions, political authorities sought to transform a marginalized majority into modern citizens—and, it was hoped, loyal and disciplined partisan subjects. What begs for further explanation, in my view, is the process through which individual yearnings intersected with statist visions of progress and Peronist ideals of "dignified" living standards.

Rather than collapse state-citizen negotiations into a familiar tale of repression versus resistance, we should explore the multiple (and often unexpected) outcomes of struggles over consumption. This history cannot be reduced to top-down manipulation of the "masses"—despite efforts to impose ideological consensus—for such an interpretation dismisses popular aspirations out of hand instead of inquiring into their social origins and political deployment. Most important, as Benítez de Maldonado's letter reminds us, the pursuit of the *vida digna,* the dignified life, was never free of friction. Even among the regime's staunchest sympathizers, state consumer policies were never fully synchronized with individual desires and the intensity of local demands. For the roughly one-third of the Argentine population who rejected Peronism, the era's politics represented a disturbing challenge to norms of property, order, deference, and personal liberties. An awareness of these antagonisms serves, then, as a necessary counterbalance to comprehending how the "Nueva Argentina" modeled by Peronist authorities overlapped, if imperfectly, with the futures imagined by ordinary citizens.[4]

Telling this story, however, is complicated by the current tendency of many historians to compartmentalize culture and economics into separate boxes, at times presenting them as nearly isolated spheres of existence. To better understand Peronism's innovations, we must bridge the divide that often separates studies of political culture from those of political economy, using tools of cultural analysis to examine economic subjects, such market regulation, while contextualizing Peronist discourse and imagery in the specific material conditions of midcentury Argentina.

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Placing norms of morality, patterns of exchange, and personal ambitions in the same interpretive framework offers a far richer portrait of the way contemporaries experienced the era's politics. As state authorities made their presence felt in domestic spaces and the marketplace, the prosaic took on new meaning for pro- and anti-Peronists alike. Everyday objects—from an imported frigidaire to a child's Christmas toy, a humble hunk of cheese to a brand-name motor scooter—became freighted with significance as competing symbols of elite selfishness and social justice, populist excess and national progress.

Rethinking Midcentury Politics

Investigating these conflicts will lead to the reconsideration of a central problem in Latin American history, the shifting terms of political membership and participation —in a word, citizenship. The midcentury era was a crucible in which existing citizenship practices were wrested apart and forged anew across much of the region. Nevertheless, some observers choose to emphasize Argentina's exceptionalism, claiming misguidedly that the country's history stands outside some imagined Latin American norm. Studies of Peronism can occasionally display an insular tendency common to all national histories, but they have also provided perceptive ways of thinking beyond borders. The study of consumption can follow along these lines, pushing at the limits of current studies of citizenship to consider how controversies surrounding consumption contributed to reshaping political subjectivity. Foregrounding these issues reveals the larger constellation of economic forces bearing down on citizenship in Argentina and its neighbors during this historical conjuncture, a time in which novel strategies of development expanded the connections between national politics and the microlevel practices of popular households.

To be sure, Latin American societies were not alone in experiencing a recasting of politics, for the midcentury moment was marked by a global crisis of liberalism. The faith in laissez-faire economics, the individual rights of property holders, and constitutional-parliamentary systems, so solid at the beginning of the 1900s, was battered by two world wars and a major economic depression. By one estimate, in 1944 there were only twelve elected constitutional regimes remaining out of the more than thirty-five that had existed worldwide in 1920. The drift was extreme in Europe, the "dark continent" that witnessed the ascendance of inventive, if noxious, authoritarianisms (from fascism to Stalinism), followed by social democratic attempts to retool liberalism.[5] The inhabitants of Latin America—at once

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part of both the "West" and the "Global South"—confronted the limitations of their own liberal republics, including their exposure to external economic shocks and harsh social inequities. Across the region, the collapse in international trade associated with the Great Depression acted as a catalyst that undermined ruling blocs. Argentina exemplified these trends. The early 1930s saw a military coup overthrow the country's civilian president, ending over fifty continuous years of electoral succession and fifteen years of popular republicanism. This turbulent decade was punctuated in 1943 by another military coup, one from which Perón would emerge, rising to prominence and ultimately achieving victory in the 1946 elections.

These were times of enormous political experimentation in Latin America. At the crest of this wave was a remarkable generation of leaders, including Brazil's Getúlio Vargas, Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas, Colombia's Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Peru's Victor Haya de la Torre, and Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz, in addition to the most famous of all, Juan and Eva Perón. For all their differences, these figures shared a drive to reform liberalism while stopping short of a total transformation of republican institutions and capitalist structures. Most stressed popular inclusion within more vibrant national orders freed from the threats of excessive social stratification and the overconcentration of wealth. Although their promises outstripped their abilities (and, ultimately, willingness) to implement change, this generation broke with many political conventions and identified closely with the interests of the common person–or to use the preferred term, *el pueblo* (the people). Scholars grouped these leaders and their followers under the label "populism." A notoriously elusive term, loaded with derogatory connotations, populism has been subject to endless definitional controversies.[6] For all its slipperiness, the notion of populism remains a valuable means to draw comparisons between different national histories and the region's political practices. That said, the strict categorization of Peronism as populism can unnecessarily close off other avenues of inquiry, at worst minimizing the issues at stake to matters of raw clientelism and exotic caricatures of charismatic leaders grandstanding before malleable masses (populism in its "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" mode).

While the populists were prone to a dramatic style, they went to the core of liberalism's crisis in the concerns they raised—the inadequacies of republican institutions, the desire to assert anticolonial forms of economic sovereignty, and above all, the drive to incorporate the citizenry within a more just, modern nation. Perón and his peers inaugurated an era of contention that, when combined with the onset of the cold war, set into motion accelerating cycles of civil strife and radicalization. In this sense, the mid-twentieth century was another "Age of Revolutions"

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during which the very terms of state authority and political action were thrown open to debate. Like their counterparts, Peronists presented themselves as picking up the flag from their independence-era forebears, as embarking on a revolutionary project to found a "New Argentina." This rhetoric was exaggerated and self-serving: actual revolutions were far less frequent than thwarted nationalist campaigns and fragile state reforms. Unlike those of the early nineteenth century, the upheavals of this mid-twentieth-century generation did not lead to the full collapse of the *ancien régime* (at least outside of Cuba). Yet before the phase of counterrevolution and neoliberal restoration took hold in the 1970s, Argentina and its neighbors went through convulsions that burst the established boundaries of political life.

Despite the importance of this historical moment, we lack the conceptual framework to appreciate its significance fully. This is part of a larger interpretive problem: our analytical tools are borrowed mainly from Anglo-U.S. cases seen as universal norms (based, for instance, on a fundamental distinction between the state and civil society). Latin Americanists have displayed creativity in adapting this terminology to fit the subject at hand. This impulse is only logical: Western examples shaped the region's political systems, and for academics in this field, the task of translation is inescapable (even if one cannot ignore the imperial implications of less-than-voluntary choices).[7] But the labor of tailoring concepts to the specific historicity of Latin American societies results in interpretations that do not fit comfortably, that pinch in certain areas and leave others uncovered. This holds especially true for that vexing political keyword "citizenship." The return of civilian rule after savage dictatorships in many areas of Latin America during the 1980s sparked renewed interest in citizenship as a category of analysis not only within academic circles but also among a wider public energized by the promise of democracy.[8] In Argentina research on citizenship has revolved around locating where democratic traditions are "nested" within society and has opened new vistas on elections, civil associations, and neighborhood-level politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[9]

But the midcentury moment, the heyday of experimentation with mass politics, remains something of a black box. The consensus is that T. H. Marshall's elegant account of the history of citizenship in England—the progressive accumulation of civil, political, and social rights from the eighteenth to the twentieth century—does not jibe with the more fitful expansion and contraction of rights in Latin America. New research has addressed the region's uneven citizenships, characterized by the distance between rights talk and social practice (what one recent work on Brazil calls the problem of "disjunctive democracy").[10] But the literature on citizenship in Argentina hits a snag with the 1940s. When viewed from an Anglo-

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American interpretive tradition, Peronism scrambles our bearings. What is one to make of a government that was democratic in the sense of being popularly elected and boasting majority support but that employed mobilizational and authoritarian methods of rule? Can one talk about "civil society" with respect to a context where associational life was heavily suffused with partisan politics? How do theories of citizenship apply to the Peronist government, which extended entitlements and collective modes of participation in public life but abrogated of civil liberties and minority rights?

One response has been to conceive of Peronism as advancing a form of "social citizenship." In this view, Peronist politics stoked a sense of empowerment among working-class Argentines that mitigated earlier experiences of exclusion. According to Daniel James's pathbreaking interpretation, Peronism supplied a "credible vision" of change that redressed class inequities through labor reforms while mounting a "heretical" challenge to cultural norms of deference.[11] Social citizenship offers a welcome antidote to the traditional emphasis on governing elites and electoral politics, but this approach leaves unanswered crucial questions about the meaning of social citizenship as realized in practice, especially outside the much-studied arena of state-union relations. How were individual perceptions of inclusion in society influenced by the characteristics of Argentina's capitalist order and emerging consumer society? How did political feelings of belonging translate into everyday ways of being, if they did at all? In short, the "social" component of citizenship warrants more thorough consideration.

We might begin probing these thorny questions surrounding citizenship in Peronist Argentina by taking a closer look at the era's political lexicon. Contemporaries spoke about citizenship in terms of rights. The Perón administration extended the franchise to the country's female majority and drafted a constitution in 1949 that proclaimed new social rights for workers, the elderly, and families. Yet rights talk complemented other ways of framing entitlement and membership in the national community. Peronist officials deployed the standard de vida and other developmentalist concepts with perhaps greater frequency in outlining their vision of a New Argentina.[12] They modified descriptions of the improved living standards enjoyed by the citizenry with expressions including *dignidad, bienestar* (well-being), *confort,* and above all, *justicia social.* (It was not mere coincidence that Peronists referred to their movement as *justicialismo.*) Keywords such as "dignity" are admittedly wooly terms, the type that make hardheaded social scientists cringe. Depending on the time, place, and observer, they can reflect various religious and ethical principles, economic circumstances, and political possibilities (to name but a few factors). Given their charged connotations and protean

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qualities, they are extremely difficult to handle, which provides another reason populist strains of nationalism have been called a "politician's delight and a historian's nightmare."[13]

Sometimes overlooked, however, is the fact that these seemingly eternal concepts have a specific history. Thus, we can attempt to historicize what contemporaries meant by, say, the term "social justice," which served as a focal point of state power and mass politics in the midcentury moment to an extent that it never had before (or ever would again). The content of this flexible concept varied from case to case, but certain issues attracted repeated attention in Argentina and elsewhere, principal among them, how to elevate the material living conditions of "vulnerable" families. References to the vida digna reveal how Peronists reformulated understandings of justice around an ideal of enhanced citizenship and elevated living standards. One need not accept actors' terms at face value to use them as a starting point for critical analysis. To be clear, I do *not* use the phrase "dignified life" in a normative sense or as an accurate description of the actual conditions of Peronist rule. Instead, it provides a useful way of organizing the era's field of debate over national inclusion and progress. A lingering uneasiness with "dignity," "justice," and other capacious terms should not prevent us from recognizing a basic fact: this looser language of entitlement was arguably more central to Peronism—and to the politics of midcentury Latin America more broadly—than the scholarly rhetoric of constitutionalism that prevails today was.

There was no unanimity as to what justice comprised among Peronists. Yet conceptions of social citizenship privileged ideals of class and gender comportment, and discussions of living standards focused on the needs of male-headed households and heterosexual, married unions. The vida digna encompassed more than consumer purchasing power; it required a *comprehensive* elevation in working-class standards that included everything from poor relief programs to public education. Labor featured prominently in these considerations—indeed, officials never tired of pointing out that all collective benefits and individual gains derived from productive sacrifice to the nation. The broader "dignification" of working people depended, in turn, on interventions to reshape everyday life along gender norms. The New Argentina's architects stressed that laboring men should occupy the role of economic breadwinners and women would serve primarily as wives, mothers, and household managers. While both men and women gained shared rights, their public and private responsibilities as citizens derived from distinct understandings of masculinity and femininity deemed natural by authorities. Peronist rule thus both opened new political opportunities for Argentina's female majority and imposed constraining expectations regarding their domestic duties.

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The freedoms associated with elevated standards rested on a model of gender relations that mirrored campaigns across the globe committed to the "modernization of patriarchy."[14]

In the struggle to define social citizenship, other factors, such as race and ethnicity, were by no means unimportant. As I will show, these issues structured assumptions about the specific populations that merited reformist attention, and they were brought to light in heated partisan confrontations (as in slurs about "*los negros peronistas*"). But the emphasis on interethnic harmony in the Peronist paradigm of the vida digna is notable. This may seem at first counterintuitive given the frequent comparisons between Peronism and fascism, not to mention the xenophobia of certain right-wing factions allied early on with the movement. Nevertheless, Peronist ideals of mass entitlement and assertions of pride aimed at maligned "creole" groups served much the same strategic political purpose as did talk of "racial democracy" in neighboring Latin American countries: it reinforced nationalist ideals of common purpose within unquestionably heterogeneous societies.

State and party officials occupy a prominent place in this story, for they were responsible for producing and disseminating these visions of worker empowerment, family respectability, and national unity. But a "top-down" study of political power can take us only so far. Peronist initiatives were met with a mixture of enthusiasm and resistance among their intended subjects. Women identified themselves in ways that complemented Peronist authorities' notions of femininity, but they did not confine themselves to meeting domestic burdens. Likewise, ideals of masculinity that equated men with workers did not preclude them from expressing concerns related to purchasing and household provisioning. Individuals of diverse social backgrounds took advantage of opportunities to voice displeasure with living conditions and, on occasion, launch biting critiques of government inaction. Argentine populism must thus be considered from the perspectives of both the "regime" (the state-centered mechanisms of governance) and the "movement" (the web of networks among leaders and followers). This interplay tells us much about the location of Peronism in Argentine society—its configuration within the state, allied organizations, and autonomous associations—in ways that defy conventional definitions of mass mobilization and civil society.[15] At the same time, it is necessary to look beyond these internal dynamics. Anti-Peronist critics, too, deserve attention for influencing political outcomes through frontal resistance and surreptitious noncompliance.

Illuminating these controversies permits a consideration of Peronism in areas overlooked or at best partially considered in previous studies.[16] Over the past two decades, this field has witnessed an explosion of interest. New studies have built

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on pioneering works of labor history to examine the Perón government's ties with other key players, such as the Catholic Church, intellectuals, business organizations, and provincial parties. We now have, alongside older biographical treatments of Perón and Evita, a more detailed picture of their government, including efforts to forge consensus through cultural rituals and various ministerial-level initiatives. While new histories of Peronism have deepened our knowledge of the "regime," most have devoted far less analysis to the subaltern sectors that constituted the "movement" and, more generally, to the way popular organizations and individuals engaged with the overtures of the central state. The dearth of accessible sources is partially to blame, but so, too, are historical approaches that stress policymaking and cultural production over reception and social practice. We still know relatively little about the lives of laboring Argentines outside the factory floor or the majority of the population that was not unionized. Peronist authorities made appeals on strict class terms, but they also reached out to populations subsumed within the category of "el pueblo." The protagonists of my story here include familiar actors, such as the state authorities who designed propaganda and programs and the union members who clamored against high living costs. It features, however, a far wider spectrum of social types: neighborhood organizations railing against commercial "speculators," partisan critics lambasting consumer wastefulness and tackiness, impoverished families seeking access to Peronist networks, merchants attempting to elude regulations, and housewives balancing tight budgets against yearnings for a greater plenty. Focusing on these actors and the world of everyday consumption reveals an alternative path through the political history of Peronist Argentina and the key nodes of related activity, from the formulation of reformist knowledge about social need to the tactics pursued by sympathizers and detractors at the grassroots level.

Recasting Consumer Society

It is perhaps easy to see that Peronism challenged existing paradigms of citizenship, but the fact that these contests were waged in part around problems of consumption is less obvious. For all the attention lavished on the history of citizenship in the past two decades, the history of consumption in Argentina remains uncharted territory. In fact, this subject's relevance may strike some readers as immediately suspect. Consumption calls to mind other places—above all, the suburban landscape of the postwar United States and its glowing television sets, streamlined

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appliances, and wide-body cars. Histories of twentieth-century consumption have emphasized the rise of a distinctly modern acquisitive spirit ("consumerism") and innovations in retailing practices. Viewed in this light, societies such as Argentina seemingly have little to offer; at best, they appear to reflect trends first manifested elsewhere. The study of the consumer marketplace may be fine for the United States, Western Europe, or East Asia, so the argument goes, but isn't Latin America's problem fundamentally one of enduring poverty and the inability to achieve consumerist prosperity on a massive scale? These are issues worthy of consideration, but the geographical contrasts rest on false assumptions that reinforce global disparities, not to mention an excessively limited view of consumption's scope. There is no reason the history of consumption cannot tell us something about the relationship between abundance *and* scarcity, about models of economic progress that proved elusive, and about the commercialization of everyday life that stoked new desires while reproducing old material inequalities (and not just in societies south of the Rio Grande).

It is somewhat ironic that domestic consumption has featured so infrequently in studies of Latin America's past, given the region's fame as a global producer of consumables. The land and labor of its inhabitants enabled modern consumption: sugar became a staple of diets in industrializing nations; coffee allowed populations in the developed West to keep pace with frenetic times (while tobacco and cocaine provided a temporary escape); edible commodities, such as wheat, beef, and bananas, fed urban workforces; and copper, tin, nitrates, and other ores facilitated the rise of manufacturing empires. Nevertheless, the study of consumption *within* the region's societies is only now coming into its own. The prevailing wisdom (sometimes well founded) was that the average resident of Latin America was too poor to purchase much in the way of commercial products. The largely peasant populations of the colonial and early national eras devoted themselves primarily to subsistence and homespun goods, simply not earning the wages necessary to fuel mass consumption. Over the past decade, however, scholars have begun to reconsider this portrait and have used consumption to explore colonial encounters, the role of U.S. business in trends of "Americanization," and the impact of commercial mass culture on nation building.[17] As it does in other geographical areas, the twentieth century stands out as a period of seismic shifts that accelerated changes in commercial practices and consumer habits throughout Latin America.

Argentina presents an all-important case in this regard, for many of the transformations that characterized midcentury Latin America were felt there first and with particular intensity. The overlapping trends of "modernization"—explosive

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urban growth, industrialization, the spread of wage labor, a shrinking peasantry, and the integration of regional markets, among other forces—affected the region's societies, albeit in an uneven manner. Domestic manufacturing and large-scale agriculture unleashed a flow of new goods into the marketplace, where they joined foreign imports in altering everything from popular diets to recreation. Widely perceived as having the region's wealthiest economy, Argentina stood at the forefront of these changes. By 1930 a majority of its population already belonged to working and middle classes that depended on the exchange of wage income for commercial wares. Residents encountered an expanding variety of consumer offerings, especially in urban and suburban areas. Buenos Aires, then the biggest metropolis in Latin America, was an emporium that gathered the fruits of local industry, agriculture, and international trade. For travelers and local observers alike, the city's grand department stores and shopping avenues presented unquestionable signs of consumer society.

Yet the onset of mass consumption brought unease. Individuals may have embraced novel experiences and striven to satisfy desires, but many expressed frustrations with their powerlessness before the economic pressures that governed their lives. With constrained purchasing power, popular households in Argentina confronted an inability to enter the marketplace that lay tantalizingly before them. Social critics lamented the scandal of indigence in this celebrated land of opportunity and the economic gaps that paralleled the divide between urban and rural areas (and marked divisions within the modern metropolis itself). In turn, political leaders pledged to impose greater order on the chaotic swings of commerce. In nation after nation, debates about the standard of living ran up against similar dilemmas. To be clear, popular consumer spending was rarely the main, explicit object of attention. Demands for enhanced rights—especially those concerning labor and social protections—acted as a driving force behind reformist and revolutionary politics alike. Highly divisive matters of rural property and industrial production generated the greatest debate, and land reform was undoubtedly the region's most hotly contested topic, especially in rural societies with large peasantries, profitable export commodities, and powerful landholding elites. But for city residents and wage-earning populations dependent on the cash nexus of the marketplace, pocketbook issues could not be ignored. Latin America's rapid urbanization in these years only elevated the stakes: by 1950 nearly half the region's population lived in urban areas (a figure that has continued to increase, with roughly four out of five inhabitants now urbanized).

Peronist policies that affected consumer purchasing (e.g., price controls, subsidies, public credit, tariffs, and commercial inspections) were adopted simul-

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taneously in neighboring countries. Their ubiquity under both dictatorships and democracies, counterrevolutionary and socialist regimes, must not be taken as signs of timeless patrimonial tendencies or, as neoliberals would have it, a cultural predisposition to meddle in free markets. Rather, these measures represented political attempts to cope with the "maelstrom of modernity" as it swept through the region and created more commercialized and thus more unsettled societies.[18] The Peronist ideal of the vida digna illustrated the inroads made by changing consumer expectations. It represented an effort to remedy the insecurities of commercial exchange and to loosen the knot of needs that constrained households.

A certain "double movement" characterized state responses to issues concerning the standard of living in Peronist Argentina.[19] On the one hand, officials sought to shield predominately working-class sectors from the ever-present risks associated with illness, old age, overwork, and accident. The goal of domestic policy was to defend and regulate, to remove certain areas of life from market exchange. On the other hand, political authorities strove to incorporate ordinary citizens more fully into the nation as economic actors. In the mid-1940s the Peronist leadership supported a redistribution of income to wage earners on a scale unprecedented in Latin American history, a move that contributed to a rapid surge in consumer spending power. But Perón's regime did not tame market forces along purely socialist lines. Rather, its officials saw themselves as charting a "third way" between the extremes of laissez-faire liberalism and Soviet-bloc communism. They aimed to domesticate markets, to bring capitalist forces in line with nationalist priorities, and to erect protections for laboring Argentines as producers while enhancing their capacity as consumers.

The Peronists' hybrid approach demands a flexible use of consumption as a category of analysis, which some readers may find initially disorienting. "Consumption" is itself a deceptively simple term. Although the tendency is to equate it with retail purchasing, there is virtually no limit to the way members of a given society consume—that is, acquire, use, and display goods and services. When contemporaries referenced consumo in Argentina, they did so in varied ways: in references to retail sales, in reformist discussions of worker nutritional deficiencies, in reports on macroeconomic planning, and in statements on social programs. Tracing the winding route of the standard of living requires trespassing across conventional categories to reveal historical connections among different facets of consumption and addressing topics typical to most histories of consumption but also touching on matters that fall under the purview of social policy, such as housing, subsidized leisure, and health care. (For clarity's sake, I will refer to these areas as "collective consumption" or "nonmarket consumption" to distinguish them from

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retail spending or mass consumption.)[20] Recent scholarly calls to move "beyond consumerism" to issues other than individual acquisitiveness encourage greater appreciation of the full spectrum of consumer acts.[21] While there is something to be said for preserving this tradition, which grants us welcome respite from the din of the commercialized present, consumption lends itself to other ends in exploring the past. Looking backward, historians have created two parallel literatures (one on the rise of mass consumption and the other on the welfare state) that flatten the complexity of debates about living standards in midcentury politics. Latin American populists and their peers had no reason to heed these artificial scholarly barriers.

The Peronist vida digna therefore spanned various spheres of consumption (individual and collective, commercial and nonmarket) but by no means erased the differences among them. Elements of so-called ordinary consumption (food, clothing, simple household products, and the cheap amusements of commercial entertainment) preoccupied reformers and, naturally, the members of popular households themselves. Consumer politics extended up the chain of acquisition, too. By the early 1950s the Peronist regime was experimenting with new forms of retailing (creating its own department stores and shops) and the manufacturing of technologically complex products (most famously, in the mass production of a *coche justicialista,* a Peronist automobile). Partisan institutions were tasked with using nonmarket channels to deliver goods and services judged too important to leave to supply and demand. In other areas, the designers of welfare programs looked to the marketplace, adapting prevailing aesthetics and distinctions of taste and at times emulating discourses of consumer pleasure associated with the private sector. In this sense, Peronist living standards were about satisfying an elastic range of needs, delivering basic justice *and* a higher order of comfort.

The problem, however, lay in striking a stable balance between these impulses, for the Peronist double movement was rife with contradictions. Although officials celebrated working-class spending, they perceived mass consumption as a potential threat. Perón and Evita attacked oligarchic elites but also reprimanded popular consumers for their supposed wastefulness and indiscipline, essentially offering their own variation on midcentury criticisms of consumerism. Over the 1950s state policymakers retreated from their initial commitment to augmenting purchasing power. This move did not mean an abandonment of commercial regulation; nevertheless, it added to tensions between authorities seeking to manage market relations and consumers faced with incomplete citizenship. In this manner, Peronist-era contests over consumption summoned a range of aspirations and anxieties—dreams of upward mobility, fears of falling, class resentments, myths of plenty—that charged national politics with an intense energy.

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Nations and Frameworks

As these examples suggest, the nation-state looms large in this story of midcentury citizenship and consumption. In Peronist Argentina conceptions of social justice were yoked tightly to ideas of national liberation, premised on throwing off the shackles of foreign economic imperialism and pursuing an independent path in the emerging cold war order. Perón and Evita can be grouped alongside a generation of leaders who pursued similar projects, including not only Latin American populists but also a cohort of iconic nationalists in Asia and Africa. The terms of national politics were by no means identical across the Global South. Whereas Perón and his Latin American peers sought to carve out greater autonomy for their flawed republics, their counterparts elsewhere faced the daunting task of creating entirely new nations from the remnants of empire. In political style Perón differed markedly from Third World liberators, certainly from progressive figures, such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and India's Jawaharlal Nehru, and even from uniformed contemporaries, such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Yet sovereignty was their shared preoccupation, a problem that cried out for greater state intervention in society and for better organization of national resources to elevate standards. The fact that this generation became a lightning rod for such controversy, remaining to this day larger-than-life historical figures, should alert us to certain commonalities. Midcentury nationalist movements threw open existing political orders, usually under pressure from a hopeful populace. Excluded majorities assumed a larger presence in the public arena in country after country, both as voters and rights-bearing citizens and as participants in mass movements and agents of national development.

Despite the shadow cast by the legendary figures of this era, the nation has fallen out of favor in certain academic fields. Historians in the United States especially have come under increasing fire for their parochialism and complicity in reinforcing narrow ideas of national exceptionalism.[22] The cosmopolitanism of newer transnational approaches is long overdue, even if it runs the risk of minimizing the nation-state's historical significance in the twentieth century. Yet the study of national politics need not confine itself to nationalist ways of thinking. It can, for example, situate Argentina within trends beyond its borders by tracing transnational flows of knowledge, especially by illustrating how the social policies of the New Argentina emerged out of global debates about the state's responsibility in managing market forces. Perón's advisers borrowed ideas from Argentine reformist circles and Atlantic currents of thought, ranging from techniques of measuring living standards to projects of postwar planning. Similarly, Peronist politics had

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national ambitions and were, in fact, felt across the country's territory, from remote rural areas to urban slums. But the nation did not experience justicialista rule uniformly; one must therefore look critically at Peronism's variegated impact at the local level. Although issues of consumption extended to the countryside, small towns, and provincial cities of Argentina's vast territory, this study concentrates primarily on the largest population centers. The forces of commercialization were most concentrated in the urban and suburban areas of the littoral region, especially in the metropolis of Buenos Aires; not coincidentally, Peronist consumer politics had the greatest visibility and intensity in these areas.

Adopting this framework on national politics requires drawing on a range of sources. The obstacles faced are familiar to specialists; even by standards of collections elsewhere in Latin America, archival materials for midcentury Argentina are especially fragmented. The country's infamous institutional volatility has caused the destruction of state documents, while waves of anti-Peronist purges over the past sixty-five years have taken a toll on private papers and other sources. Partisan appointees who serve as gatekeepers over surviving collections and the chronic lack of funding for archival preservation—verging on a conscious attempt to eliminate traces of a fractious past—present additional hindrances. The sources for this book were gathered from multiple sites, and they include social scientific tracts, business publications, commercial films, mass-market periodicals, and government materials. My analysis draws on the archives of the Ministry of Technical Affairs just recently opened to researchers. This set of internal reports and other documents provides a wealth of insights into Peronist planning. It includes an unexpected cache of materials: thousands of letters to Perón's government mailed by individuals and local groups across the country. This public correspondence offers glimpses into the political imaginations of "ordinary" Argentine men and women. When augmented by neighborhood newspapers, labor publications, and other rare ephemera, the letters help us move beyond state-centric concerns with policymaking and propaganda.

At the center of this investigation lies a question pondered in Argentina and across midcentury Latin America: what does it mean to live with dignity in a modern society? The answers to this problem varied tremendously, as commentators in each country took stock of the political opportunities open to them, the social conditions that surrounded them, and their places in the world. Some launched projects that addressed the failings of liberal orders and set new thresholds of citizen entitlement. For those living in places that, as did Argentina, included extremes of wealth and indigence but saw a growing majority of their populations

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marching to the rhythms of a consumer society, the "deficiencies" of popular households carried particular political significance. Perón and his ilk spoke as never before to the economic frustrations and aspirations that characterized life in these societies. The search for a more substantive, inclusive citizenship in the region was not limited to matters of redistribution and purchasing power alone. But without paying closer attention to the realm of popular consumption, one cannot comprehend the potency of nationalist politics in this era, the strategies pursued by leaders such as Perón, or the resonance of appeals to "liberty and dignity" for Hilda Benítez de Maldonado and her contemporaries.

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