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LAST100: VIDEO 10: “Power to the People”

Last time, we looked at the role of the United States in Latin America during the twentieth century. We talked about the way in which the USA enforced its “informal empire,” both through military interventions and in a complex dance of mutual seduction in which the power imbalance between North and South was not always as simple as it seems. The “Good Neighbor” films of the 1930s and 1940s stage the fantasy of what we could call “hegemony” (a mode of dominance that relies on consent as much as coercion) at the same time as they reveal that it is no more than that: a fantasy. They show us the spectacle *and* what lies behind it, daring us to suspend not so much our disbelief in the fiction they serve up as our *belief* in the economic and social realities that the fiction only ever half-obscures. Everyone knows, after all, that the American Dream is just that: a dream. But we all, and perhaps Latin Americans more than anyone, act as if it were otherwise. Hence perhaps the power of the US imaginary, even when it is inverted and the USA is portrayed as the bogeyman supposed to be the source of all the hemisphere’s discontent.

But Latin Americans are also quite capable of putting on their own spectacles, constructing their own mythologies that are almost convincing enough for those caught up in them to suspend all belief. And there is no more powerful or persistent spectacle in Latin American political history than populism, which stages of an entire people.

Defining the Undefinable

In recent years, around the world, there has been a lot of talk about populism,. Once you start looking for them, populist politics and politicians seem to turn up everywhere. Figures from the Left and the Right, from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders, Boris Johnson to Vladimir Putin, the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte to the Spanish Socialists of Podemos,

and many others, have all been described as populist leaders (or would-be leaders). Sometimes it feels as though a term that can be attached to so many diverse individuals or movements has lost all meaning. If everyone is populist now, then surely nobody is?

Part of the problem is that the label "populist" has also simply become a term of abuse: an insult to sling at your political enemies, to indicate that your opponent (or the object of your critique) is some kind of demagogue, who whips up popular emotions rather than presenting coherent policies. On the campaign trail and in the press, this means that the term has become fuzzy indeed. (And ironically, of course, calling someone else a populist can itself be a populist gesture, a shorthand rather than real analysis.)

But even among political theorists and historians, there has been dispute over what populism actually is. In fact, the fuzziness of the term and even of the category itself is as much a feature as a bug. Part of populism's power is that it is not easy to pin down, that it resists precise definition. We might even say that this indefiniteness, the slipperiness of the concept, is its calling card, and that a workable definition will have to account for the fact that populism always escapes any attempt to define it, that our definition will soon become unworkable.

The People and its Enemies

Another way of looking at the problem is to think less about what populism is, and more about what it does. Populism aims to construct a people, while denying that that people has to be constructed, in other words while denying that this is what it is doing. For populism takes for granted that the people already exists, and it does everything it can to project that notion of this prior existence, the notion that the people is the bedrock of politics rather than its effect. In fact, we all already know—populism tells us—who or what the people are, so it is not populism's job to articulate that knowledge with any great clarity. If pressed to answer who are the people, populism's response is that "we" are the people, and who are you (who are *they*) to question us?

A better question, then, might be to ask who are *not* the people. Populism has an answer to this, as slippery as all populism's answers: *They* are not the people. And "they" are

those who question the people, who do not trust the people, who go behind the people's backs, who swindle the people, who have got the people into the mess that they find themselves now. "They," in short, are the elite, who come in many shapes and forms: the financial elite, the political elite, the cultural elite; Wall Street, the Church, the universities, the Arts, Hollywood; bureaucrats, foreigners, liberals, experts, scientists, businessmen, investment bankers, politicians; hypocrites, liars, idlers, dandies, oligarchs, traitors, and so much more. Pick the right elite, and you have picked your flavor of populism. But in each case, the elite are those who guard their secrets, who are not what they seem, unlike the good old, plain old, honest and hard-working people.

Populism, to put this another way, trades in obviousness, in what we take for granted, in what everybody knows. This is why it is so hard to disagree with populism. For who in their right mind could find fault in what we already know to be true? But what it misses (or what it denies) is that what we take for granted is in fact the last thing we should take for granted; obviousness has first to be produced, and this construction of the plain and simple is the always unspoken (unspeakable) work of populism.

In sum, populism is a gesture that divides the social world into two: the people and the elite. And it identifies wholeheartedly with the people, a collective subject in the first-person plural ("we") that is the origin and foundation of society, but which for some reason has been denied its rights by *them*, by that illegitimate and untrustworthy elite. Then populism tells us it will put things back in their rightful place.

Populism and Latin America

Now we might understand why populism has been so attractive in Latin America. For we have noted over and over again that representation and identity are a problem for the region, which even lacks a proper or convincing name for itself (what is Latin America?). The populist gesture resolves that problem at a stroke, by denying that it even exists: "we" are who "we" are, it tells us tautologically, and that is not up for scrutiny or discussion. For these are questions that only "elites" are tempted to ask.

It is no surprise, then, that Latin America does populism well. However much the rest of the world may be becoming populists now (perhaps because the contagion of doubt over representation and identity has spread), Latin Americans are the past masters of populist politics. And among Latin Americans, none do populism better than the Argentines.

Politics without People

But before we move to discuss populism in Argentina, I have a couple of questions. First, given that the idea of the "people" is so engrained into political discourse, I wonder what it would take to imagine politics without it. What is politics without a people? And second, in that we assume that the people always already exists, it can be hard to think about the past without them. What would history, or the writing of history, look like without a people to fill it? Pause the video, and I will leave you pondering on that while I open an Irn Bru. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

I asked about politics and history without a people. In part, I want to leave these questions hanging, for us to return to later. One possibility is that what we will describe as "neoliberalism" is an attempt to remove the people from politics, to replace them with either markets or technicians, both of which offer their own forms of obviousness, brooking no debate. But perhaps this is not even politics; perhaps "neoliberal politics" is a contradiction in terms. We will come back to this. As for a "people-less" history, you might say that this is the traditional narrative of "great men" (less often, women), the Monarchs, Presidents, Statesmen, Generals, Explorers, Philosophers, Inventors whose names parade through old-fashioned school textbooks. And you might think that a "people's history" is a welcome corrective to all that. Maybe, but we would also have to track how peoples are first invented and constructed, consolidated and rendered eternal (outside of history) as well as the moments at which they (threaten to) fall apart.

There is no better chance to observe a moment at which a people is both constructed and falls apart than the so-called "Renunciamento" of Evita Perón, on August 22, 1951.

Evita's Renunciamento

Once a minor film starlet and radio personality, Evita was the wife of the Argentine president, Juan Perón. Perón, an army colonel, had been a member of a military government that had taken power in a coup in 1943. Assigned the position of Head of the Department of Labor, he had cultivated the growing Argentine working class, which was increasingly important as the country industrialized, urbanized, and accepted tens of thousands of migrants, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe, who were drawn to the factories and meat-packing plants of Greater Buenos Aires and environs. The more authority Perón accumulated, the more he was perceived as a threat by the rest of the military junta, who in October 1945 arrested and imprisoned him. In response, a massive and more or less spontaneous demonstration rallied in his support, with thousands of workers crowding the central square in front of the presidential palace in downtown Buenos Aires. The government backed down in the face of this pressure, and Perón, who went on to win with ease the elections organized for early the following year.

But it was less the election than the mobilization on the streets and in the plaza, of October 17, 1945, that was Peronism's founding moment. It was the point at which the people apparently came together and became visible, clamoring for Perón as their representative.

With Perón in power, such mobilizations were regularly and ritually re-staged as part of Peronism's effort to recreate and re-constitute the collective subject that gave the regime legitimacy. Every year, October 17, for instance, was a "day of loyalty," "*un día peronista*," as was May 1, the day of the workers, on which multitudinous rallies were held, from which the people were to emerge, their bond with the leader cemented and confirmed. In these re-stagings, Perón's wife Evita had a starring role, modelling the intimate and indissoluble relationship that the people were to have with their president. From the balcony, but also part of the crowd, she anchored the "we" that gives populism meaning. She both bridged and maintained the distance that separated the Peróns from the multitude down below, giving this mass of humanity form and name, and ensuring the mechanism of representation on which the regime's power depended.

The mass mobilization of August 1951 was, then, another instance of this compulsion to repeat the primal scene of the people made visible, legible, and comprehensible—literally comprehended, bounded by the populist *mise en scène*.

A huge stage had been set up across the Avenida 9 de Julio, one of the widest streets in the world. An excitable crowd of up to two million thronged the boulevard. Enormous portraits of Perón and Evita graced the screen above, on which the people were to project their hopes and desires. But on this occasion, the spectacle began to break down, the people began to fall apart—not out of indifference, on the contrary, but as the multitude made demands on Evita, that she run as vice-presidential candidate in the forthcoming elections, to which she could not respond. Overwhelmed, as the afternoon faded to dusk and then night, and as the raucous crowd continued to chant “Evita con Perón,” “Evita with Perón,” the first lady could no longer hold the spectacle together, as she could no longer maintain the separation required for the mechanism of representation to operate. Deferring, postponing an answer, she refused the immediacy demanded of her.

Peronism had hit its limit. Nine days later, on the radio, Evita formally turned down the vice-presidential nomination. Within a year, she was dead, aged 33, of ovarian cancer. In 1955, Perón was brought down in a military coup. But in death, during the long period of exile that followed, while Perón promised all things to all men if only he could come back to save the country from its woes, Evita was able to accomplish what she no longer could in life: make the mythical concept of the Argentine people cohere, because nobody would ever pin her down again.

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