

# **From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina**

*Edited by*

**Monica Peralta-Ramos and  
Carlos H. Waisman**



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to Liberal Democracy  
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## About the Book and Editors

Argentina has most of the characteristics that various theories of democracy postulate as prerequisites for achieving liberal democracy: an urban industrial economy, key economic resources under domestic control, the absence of a peasantry, the absence of ethnic or religious cleavages, relatively high levels of education, strong interest groups, and well-established political parties. Yet for most of the post-Depression period, the country has been ruled by nondemocratic regimes. As a result of the current process of democratization, however, a liberal-democratic political culture is emerging. The question is whether this process, which is strongly supported by all political parties and interest groups, can be consolidated in a context characterized by economic stagnation (and, in the past decade, retrogression), an inflation rate at the three-digit mark, growing unemployment, and the third-largest foreign debt in Latin America.

This collection of essays focuses on economic, political, and cultural aspects of the transition from military rule to liberal democracy in Argentina. Contributors discuss the factors leading to the demise of the military regime established in 1976, the electoral victory of the Radical Party in the 1983 elections, the most critical issues facing the Alfonsín administration, and the prospects for the institutionalization of democracy.

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edited by Monica Peralta-Ramos  
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# Introduction

This volume brings together the papers presented at a conference on the transition from military rule to liberal democracy in Argentina, held at the University of California, San Diego, on February 3–4, 1984.

Transitions to democracy took place in several South American countries in the early eighties, but the Argentine case is especially significant, for two reasons. First, the previous military regime was much more repressive in this country than in the other nations of the sub-continent in which democratic regimes were recently established (Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay). Second, conditions in Argentina are especially inauspicious for the legitimation of a high-participation competitive regime: the economy is stagnant and prospects for growth are bleak in the face of a foreign debt equal to over five years of exports; further, the institutional bases of authoritarianism—in particular, armed forces and a security apparatus imperfectly controlled by the government, powerful interest groups and weak political parties—is still in place.

The papers in this collection discuss economic, political, and cultural aspects of the transition, from different disciplinary perspectives and theoretical orientations. Taken together, these analyses present an awesome inventory of obstacles to the democratic transformation of the country. The authors focus on issues such as the combination of a structural economic crisis and an unpayable debt, the pattern of destructive conflict among different segments of the capitalist class, the decay of manufacturing and the expansion of the informal sector of the economy, a political culture based on a tradition of elite-led movements that control the subordinate classes, the need for the new democratic government to attain minimally satisfactory outcomes in all the major issues it faces, a culture ambivalent about capitalist values and national identity, the legacy of a culture of fear which corrupted large sectors of the society, even the rejection of science and technology, and the decline of the creative and critical potential of the intelligentsia.

And yet the radical nature of the crisis is in itself an element of hope for the consolidation of liberal democracy. The appearance of guerrillas and of state terror in the seventies were extreme manifestations of the crisis of legitimacy in which Argentina lived for decades, whose

consequence was the institutionalization of violence as the standard mechanism for conflict resolution. Because the situation was so extreme, non-democratic formulae and their carriers lost their legitimacy, and this includes not just the militaristic groups on the far left, but also the armed forces, the economic and political elites that supported authoritarian options, and the trade-unionists prone to corporatism. At the darkest point in Argentine history since the organization of the national state, a military regime practiced, in the name of life, liberty, property, and religious values, the abduction, torture, and killing of real and imagined opponents, the confiscation of their property, and even large-scale corruption. At the end of such a regime, Alfonsín and the Radical Party won elections by promising little more than a return to the rule of law, a government guided by the principles of conventional morality, and an equitable assignment of the burdens of reconstruction.

Herein lies the strength, as well as the weakness, of the Alfonsín administration. The different groups in Argentine society see the current attempt to restore democracy as the last chance to avoid chaos. This definition of the situation may help produce permanent changes in Argentine political culture and contribute to the institutionalization of pluralism, autonomous participation, moderation, and bargaining. However, politics at the edge of the abyss is never a good thing: if the new government does not fulfill to a minimum degree the modest expectations of the citizenry, the outcome will be the de-legitimation of the last road not taken, high-participation liberal democracy, and the intensification of the crisis to an unprecedented scale.

\* \* \*

The first set of papers focuses on the relationship between politics and the social and economic structure. David Rock's "Political Movements in Argentina: A Sketch from Past and Present" has a deceiving title. This article is more than an outline of the origins, organization and consequences of the political movements that have been a central feature of modern Argentine history, Yrigoyenism and Peronism in particular. It is an interpretation of Argentine politics, according to which the "movement" type of political organization, rooted in the Hispanic past and in Catholic doctrine, is the institutionalized pattern of interaction between elites and subordinate classes in Argentine society. This explains the impulse, in some segments of the now ruling Radical Party, toward multi-class coalitions and populist policies. It follows from this analysis that the consolidation of liberal democracy, whose mechanism for the organization of political inputs is the party rather than the movement, would require changes in deeply ingrained aspects of Argentine political culture.

Michael Monteón's "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?" discusses the economic situation the Alfonsín government encountered when it came to power at the end of 1983—stagnation, hyper-inflation, and a staggering debt. The paper traces the origins of this situation: Argentina's structural crisis, caused by the country's position in the international economy, and the disastrous economic policies implemented by the military regime established in 1976. The paper shows the inadequacy of the Alfonsín administration's indecisive and populist response to the economic crisis during the first year and a half, and it provides an excellent background for the understanding of the shift toward "stabilizing policies" (the Austral Plan) in mid-1985. These policies have reduced inflation, but the government has done little, so far, to restructure the Argentine economy and make growth possible again. The options in relation to the debt are still hotly debated, and Monteón's argument that repudiation need not be an unmitigated disaster runs counter to the conventional view, which equates default with chaos.

Monica Peralta-Ramos's paper, "Toward an Analysis of the Structural Basis of Coercion in Argentina: The Behavior of the Major Fractions of the Bourgeoisie, 1976–1983," deals with the social process leading to hyper-inflation in the seventies and eighties. She shows how, in the conflict over the distribution of the surplus, different fractions of industrial, financial, and agrarian capital resorted to speculative strategies in order to advance their interests and impose their demands. Hyper-inflation was one of the symptoms of this cleavage, which led to the deterioration of institutional mechanisms and ultimately to the decline of the legitimacy of the political system and of the social order in general. The paper analyzes this conflict during the Peronist administration of 1973–1976, and especially during the subsequent military regime, and reveals its role in the collapse of both. It follows from this argument that the survival of liberal democracy requires not just economic growth, but also a drastic re-organization of Argentine capitalism.

Juan M. Villarreal's contribution, "Changes in Argentine Society: The Heritage of the Dictatorship," claims that the most important determinant of the anti-industrial policies carried out by the military regime was not economic but political: these policies aimed at weakening labor and the segment of the industrial bourgeoisie that supported Peronism. The attempt was successful, and the relation of forces in Argentine society has definitively changed. The paper shows how the working class diminished in size and also in social and political weight, and it proposes that, in the new stage, white collar employees and other non-proletarian sectors will be the central subordinate political forces. Thus, Argentina finds itself in a paradoxical situation: the country, which

never was a mature industrial society, failed to develop the party system that is typical in that type of society; and yet it is making a transition of sorts to a backward type of post-industrial society. How will post-industrial politics look in a society with a large and impoverished state apparatus, an expanding informal sector, and large and frustrated professional, student, and intellectual strata? This is a true leap in the dark.

Finally, Carlos H. Waisman's paper, "The Legitimation of Democracy Under Adverse Conditions," discusses both the factors that hinder and the ones that contribute to the process of democratization. The negative factors are three: the economic crisis, the fact that the institutional basis of authoritarianism and corporatism (a partially autonomous state apparatus, strong interest groups, and weak parties) is still in place, and the weakness of liberal-democratic traditions. The favorable factors are: the de-legitimation of non-democratic formulae as a consequence of their failure, and the commitment by the Alfonsín administration to institutionalize the two dimensions of democracy, participation as well as contestation. These favorable factors may lose their efficacy as the different social and political forces pursue their interests in the context of the acute economic crisis. The success of the transition to democracy entails two processes: the weakening of the institutional infrastructure mentioned above, and the display of at least a modest degree of efficacy by the new political institutions. The first of these processes requires the effective subordination of the military and the security apparatus to the government and, especially, the transformation of Peronism into a party of democratic opposition. The second process, finally, presupposes some economic growth, and this in turn entails a need for industrial reconversion.

The second group of papers deals with the relationship between politics and culture. Juan E. Corradi's "The Culture of Fear in Civil Society" examines the effects of the widespread terror practiced by the recent military regime on social and cultural life. This piece contains Corradi's comments and conclusions about the papers contributed to a seminar on the subject. Three issues are particularly important: first, the discussion of how individuals who are the object of intimidation by a terrorist state respond, by either adapting or, less likely, by resisting governmental pressures; second, the analysis of the semantics of fear, in which official discourse focuses on a spurious opposition between "violence" and "order," that masks the underlying affinity between the two; and third, the description of the functioning of literary and journalistic life in contexts of institutionalized fear.

Julie M. Taylor's "Technocracy and National Identity: Attitudes Toward Economic Policy" explores the cultural dimension of the intense abhorrence, in current Argentina, for the pseudo "free market" economic

policies carried out by the Martínez de Hoz team in the late seventies. In Taylor's view, the strength of this opposition reveals, in addition to the explicit economic and political reasons, the deep ambivalence that exists in the country's culture about technical or universalistic values, and ultimately about Argentine identity. These economic policies were defined as the manifestation of capitalist and foreign interests, in a nation whose members doubt as to whether they belong to the first or to the third worlds; at the same time, the members of the Martínez de Hoz team were perceived as "the best and the brightest," and thus the failure of their policies could be interpreted as the failure of the Argentines.

Hector J. Sussmann's "Culture, Ideology, and Science" poses the question of the country's scientific backwardness. This is not a trivial issue, given the fact that Argentine levels of development, standards of living, and enrollments in higher education were, in the first half of the century, higher than in much of Europe. He finds an answer in the cultural sphere, rather than in economic and political factors. From 1870 to World War II, Argentina was transformed by mass immigration, the development of agriculture and of industry, urbanization, the expansion of education, and the extension and decay of liberal democracy, but these changes failed to destroy, he argues, the traditional Hispanic antagonism to science and technology. He documents this hostility under different political regimes (oligarchic, Peronist, military) and brings up the contrasting example of Japan, a country which, being less developed than Argentina until the beginning of the century, strove hard to acquire foreign science and technology.

Finally, Noé Jitrik's "Elements for an Analysis of Argentine Culture" contains provocative observations about the deterioration of Argentine culture, not only as the result of the repressive policies applied in 1976-1983, but also as a consequence of the conceptions and practices of different intellectual and political groups in the period preceding the military regime. He stresses the complicity of sectors of the official establishment and the political intelligentsia in the adoption of policies that deepened the cultural crisis and rendered it chronic. Repression under the military aggravated this situation, by impairing the creative and critical capacities of Argentine society, and by producing a form of culture based on counter-values such as repression, self-censorship, and vigilance.

\* \* \*

Some of the papers were revised and completed during 1985. In addition to these authors, other participants at the conference were Mirta Botzman, Aaron Cicourel, David Collier, Ruth Collier, Jaime Concha, Emilio De Ippola, Benjamin F. Hadis, Tulio Halperin-Donghi,



Tim McDaniel, and Miguel Murmis. The conference was supported by the Organization of American States and by three units at the University of California, San Diego: the Chancellor's Associates, the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies (CILAS), and the Third College. Publication of the papers was made possible by a grant from CILAS. In particular, we acknowledge the support and encouragement given to the project by the late Roberto Etchepareborda, of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the OAS; Michael P. Monteón and Paul W. Drake, directors of CILAS; and Faustina Solís, Provost of Third College. Mary Cooper and Carolyn A. Morrissey translated the chapters by Villarreal and by Jitrik and Peralta-Ramos, respectively. Elizabeth Burford typed the manuscript with her usual efficiency and cheerfulness.

*Monica Peralta-Ramos*  
*Carlos H. Waisman*

PART ONE

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**Politics, the Economy,  
and Society**



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# 1

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## Political Movements in Argentina: A Sketch from Past and Present

*David Rock*

In late January 1984 *La Prensa* reported on the newly elected Alfonsín government's plan to create a National Forum of Workers (*Encuentro Nacional de Trabajadores*). The exact form and functions of this body—indeed whether it was any more than just an idea—remained uncertain. But it was widely understood the new government intended to make a determined bid for trade union backing: faced by an enormous foreign debt and by a domestic recession it could hope at best to mitigate but could scarcely avoid, the regime had to act fast to broaden and consolidate its support. The National Forum thus marked the inception of an effort to coopt or divide Peronism, and as the recession deepened to prevent the Peronists from mobilizing a mass working class opposition. Among members of the government memories were still fresh of the events of 1963–1966. At that time a Peronist trade union “Battle Plan” (*Plan de Lucha*)—mass strikes, street demonstrations, and civil disobedience—had paved the way for a military coup and the downfall of the last Radical constitutional government led by Arturo Illia.

*La Prensa*, however, regarded the *Encuentro Nacional* as something more than a mere political tactic, inspired by the lesson of past errors. It interpreted the proposal as signaling the metamorphosis of *Alfonsinismo* from its base in the Radical Party, (the *Unión Cívica Radical*), into a “movement,” drawing its support from much broader political forces. *La Prensa* also predicted that this movement would be launched by exploiting the deep-rooted popular antimilitarism that stemmed from “*la guerra sucia*” of the late 1970s. *La Prensa* understood a “movement” to imply a form of populist corporatism. “*Movimientismo*,” it declared, is a response to “crisis,” and also a transitional political order “while democracy is maturing”; it is typical of a “political culture like the