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Fronidizi and the Politics of Developmentalism in Argentina, 1955–62

Celia Szusterman

Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Law, Languages and Communication

University of Westminster

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To my mother and father
in Memoriam

and to Daniel
for the infinite joy he brings to my life

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Preface

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

T. S. Eliot's Thomas à Becket

Latin America's poor performance in recent decades was not caused by failing to get policies or prices *right*, but rather by not getting *politics* right, in the words of James Dietz and Dilmus James.¹ It will be my contention that Argentina's predicament has been the result of just such failure, and although I have chosen Frondizi's thwarted government to explore the reasons why this should have been so, I do not believe he was the only, nor the main culprit in an irritatingly long process during which Argentina appeared resolutely to have left a brilliant future behind her. The dilemma facing Argentina was the centuries-old one that so many countries are facing today – how to consolidate a new, democratic republic after a sudden rupture of the old corporatist regime lacking the necessary values and traditions of the desired republic. Perhaps the answer lies in doing what needs to be done rather than by dreaming of what ought to be done. What the Frondizi experience revealed was that the task of institution-building towards the consolidation of a liberal-democratic type of government and society which had been the hope of those who overthrew Perón in 1955 could not be carried out by sheer voluntarism and utilising undemocratic behaviour. The principles of corporatism, State dirigisme and xenophobic nationalism had to be discarded if a free, democratic, and just system could flourish on a sound economic base. With the benefit of hindsight, Frondizi can be regarded as a pioneer in terms of his economic policies. Alas, that was not how his contemporaries judged him.

Argentina in 1958 had not yet learnt the hard lesson of politics, that is to say the contrast between expectations and fulfilment. Finer has noted that 'when a government sets out to be faithful, it is frequently unwise; and when it has learned to be wise, it is frequently unfaithful'.² Frondizi acquired his wisdom just before taking over the presidency, thus his unfaithfulness was more readily seen as duplicitous and, given the passions arisen by Perón and Peronism, treacherous. The developmentalist experiment can be studied under a double focus: (a) as a developmentalist (economic) project, and (b) as a political project, and as such known as *integracionismo*. The fact that it is remembered as

developmentalism rather than integrationism reflects the fact that it was relatively more successful in the economic than in the political arena.

The aftermath of Perón's overthrow, including the government resulting from the elections held in 1958, seemed a promising period from the point of view of the revelation of clues to understand Argentina's predicament. Certain elements of a typically Argentine political tradition [and political culture, to use a term in vogue once again] can be traced back to that period (others, to even earlier ones). All in all, I hope this study of the years 1955–62 will contribute to an understanding of the reasons why Argentina only recently appears to have been able to place its future ahead, rather than behind.

When I submitted my thesis in 1986, the Public Records at Kew had just been made available for 1955. I have been able to consult the records up to and including 1961, and the Washington National Archives on Argentina for the years 1954–59. Regrettably the Foreign Office still sees fit to keep from historical scrutiny some documents that are over 30 years old. It is to be hoped that in the present world context, such secrecy will soon become obsolete.

The fact that 30 years after Frondzi's overthrow *the Unión Cívica Radical* – its division in 1956 obliterated as a passing aberration – is still struggling between a populist strand and a more modernising one highlights the difficulty of the task Frondizi faced. It took Alfonsín's victory in 1983 finally to prove to the whole country – and not just the Peronists – that they were not the whole people and thus representatives of the 'interests of the Nation'. The fact that only 30 years after Frondizi's presidency the country as a whole (including the military, business community, labour and politicians) seems to have learnt the harsh lessons of intolerance and ideological fundamentalism (of whichever sign) – and that this required the horror and traumas of thousands of deaths, political, ideological and State terrorism as well as of hyperinflation – exerts a humbling influence when looking at the country's past history. Perhaps all the horror, the pain and the misunderstandings were necessary to achieve that state of maturity Sir John Ward so sadly saw lacking in the whole of South America. A good friend of Argentina, whose despatches were always thorough, always fair, he despondently wrote what many would find insulting even today and yet rings so true. Shortly before leaving his posting he remarked that 'a complete and perfect solution of Argentina's economic problems can however hardly be expected in the foreseeable future, given the prevailing political conditions and the low levels of intelligence, morality and competence which are endemic to South America at this immature

stage of its development'.³ At least two of the indictments in the case of Argentina seem to have been overcome.

CELIA SZUSTERMAN

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There are two people to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude. One is Ezequiel Gallo, with whom, in Essex, Oxford, London and Buenos Aires, I have shared for twenty years worries, irritations and hopes in relation to our compatriots. The other is Juan Carlos Torre, who first suggested that the period 1955–58 could provide interesting clues in the understanding of contemporary Argentina. My colleague and good friend generously read several chapters to my great benefit. Throughout the years, be it in Oxford or in Buenos Aires, he patiently and critically read the first chapters offering comments that were consistently thought-provoking. Alas, the Atlantic Ocean made its presence felt, and for the last chapters I was regrettably unable to benefit from Juan Carlos Torre's views.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to those men and women who had supported Frondizi, and shared with me their memories of hopes and disenchantments. I have benefited from their personal recollections. Amongst them, my stepfather, Isak Radunsky and Juan Lozano. Nicolás Babini not only devoted hours to reminisce, but he shared with me his comprehensive collection of cuttings, short-lived publications, etc. My conversations with Ezequiel Gallo, Guido Di Tella, Natalio Botana, Tulio Halperín Donghi, Gustavo Ferrari, Félix Luna, Ernesto Laclau, Ismael Viñas, Ricardo Rojo and Silvia Sigal, in Oxford, London, Buenos Aires and Paris, were invaluable in helping me build a picture and recreate a feeling for the period.

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It is customary to thank one's spouse for her/his patience. In my case it is inappropriate to do so: my husband, Tono Masoliver, has none. But he did have something more important to offer, something which helped me enormously through the years: the example of what dedication to, and love for one's work is all about. Without such a companion, the solitary task of book-writing would have been much more difficult to fulfil.