LATIN AMERICAN

II—The New Argentina[1]

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

AS you approach Buenos Aires, sailing slowly through the dredged channel of the vast brown River Plate, you are aware of a skyline that is exceedingly strange. It is not just the fact of the towering skyscrapers. This is America, and north and south alike seem committed to this monolithic invasion of the sky. What is extraordinary is that you can see through so many of these blocks of stone: the blue that fills the window-spaces is innocent air. It is bomb-damage in reverse, or even, you may think, in anticipation. Later you will be reassured. Here, it appears, building goes on as long as the money lasts, and work can be suspended for years at a time. (In a suburb one saw a completed ferro-concrete steeple, improbably balanced on the bare skeleton of a church yet to be built.)

Building is a South American disease, or, more accurately, it is the symptom of a disease. In Argentina, as in Brazil, the fantastic growth of the cities has gravely disturbed the national equilibrium. Buenos Aires, the largest city in the southern hemisphere, has a population of four million, and including the province of the same name, accounts for half the total for the whole republic. Even though Argentina were far more developed industrially than she is (and the facts of nature have determined the primary role of the country as one of the greatest food-producing areas of the world), so disproportionate a head for such a body induces a sort of vertigo whose effects are immediately seen. The very traffic of Buenos Aires is a neurotic protest against so unnatural a concentration of the human race.

The city has the clarity of an articulated map. You need never be lost for long in these identically divided blocks of streets, running out for miles, with never a hill, and the huge river as the constant point of return. But many names are changed, especially

1 It need hardly be said that any opinions expressed in this article are entirely those of the author, and are in no sense to be attributed to the many friends who made it possible for him to learn so much of Argentina in so short a time.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1954.tb01950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

beyond the city, so that La Plata is now Ciudad Eva Perón, and the comfortable names of the former English railway systems ('Great Central' and so on) have given place to those of Argentine generals. Yet the English influence remains (there are suburbs called Hurlingham, Temperley, Ranelagh), and the restaurant at the Retiro station might be Liverpool Street about 1910. Whole areas of the city have been hacked away to create broad new avenues, with vistas of equestrian statues and elegant gardens. There is little left of the earlier city: an occasional colonnade, three or four churches, the Cabildo in the Plaza Mayo (the seat of Government in Spanish viceregal days). All seems exposed, even raw, and the protecting skin of time and a lasting tradition seems lacking here.

Perón cumple: Evita dignifica! Such is the theme that you see proclaimed from a thousand hoardings. Perón keeps his word, and his wife has given a new nobility to the workers. Argentina's real destiny, you must suppose, began with the Revolution of 1947, and the General's much advertised second five-year plan (the subject of compulsory instruction in all schools) is concerned with the consolidation of an economically independent country in which social justice shall be achieved. There is much here that is baffling to a European mind, and there could be no greater fallacy than to apply univocally the judgments of Western democracy to any South American republic. The gradual evolution of political compromise is far from the experience of this vast and troubled territory, with its roots in the Spanish past as modified by the constant stress of military revolution. More than a century of independence has not been long enough to resolve the strains within a society always in transition—new lands, new people; and now a new mystique intends to build up the 'new Argentina'.

In the reformed National Constitution of 1949 the aim of the Peronist movement is defined as 'justicialist'. 'We ratify our irrevocable decision to constitute a nation that shall be socially just, economically free and politically stable, invoking the protection of God who is the fount of all right and justice.' The official emphasis is above all on the rights of the poor and the unprivileged, the 'shirtless' whom Eva Perón, in her brief and extraordinary career, was to evoke with such passion and with such effect.

The contrast between rich and poor was (and still is) far more violent than anything Western Europe knows. Here, as in Brazil,

the extremes of wealth and destitution exist without the tempering influence of a middle class. You have or you have not, and an appeal to class hatred is a tempting weapon for impatient politicians. It is a dangerous simplification, therefore, to think of 'the new Argentina' (or indeed of any South American country) simply in terms of what may seem like European models—Fascist or otherwise. The situation which Perón (and even more his wife) exploited was a real and local one, and many of the regime's achievements in raising workers' wages and improving their condition of life through new housing, schools and social services, seem to be a matter of simple justice. That they were also politically inspired is not to be denied, but political disinterestedness is rare enough in any land.

One is drawn immediately to consider what is newest in Argentinian life, such is the effect of propaganda on even the passing visitor. But the sense of the past is in any case less imperative in Buenos Aires than, one imagines, anywhere else in Latin America. There are monuments enough to national heroes, and the ubiquitous names of the present do not exclude those of San Martín, Belgrano, Bolívar and Sarmiento.[2] Nevertheless the impact of an experiment in the making is very powerful, and the tourist in any case soon grows accustomed to the neutral avenues and the trams. There are show-places to see (though they are not in fact easily visible: Argentina is a land where permits matter very much). Such is the Ciudad Infantil, the children's city, the principal evidence of Perón's statement that 'in the new Argentina the only privileged ones are the children'. It is gay and altogether charming, like enough to many a European nursery school. But before one smiles at the naïve pride in this village of tiny houses, shops—with even a little gaol and a miniature church—one must remember its novelty here. So, too, the Ciudad Estudiantil nearby, an admirably equipped hostel for poor boys from every part of Argentina, brought here, in Eva Perón's words, 'that they might live like kings'. Once more,

2 And it is a little disconcerting for a Dominican (at least for one who belongs to the English Province of the Order) to find that one of the treasures of the splendid baroque church of San Domingo is a collection of captured English flags, framed in marble and enthusiastically displayed. They date from the unsuccessful British attempts at capturing Buenos Aires made by Beresford in 1806 and by Whitelocke in 1808, and the colonists' victory undoubtedly strengthened their confidence, triumphantly asserted later in the war of independence from Spain.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1954.tb01950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

whatever reservations the sceptic might want to make, the purpose is a good and a necessary one—to give the unprivileged opportunities for higher education in a country where they have been hard to find.

These, and similar establishments, together with a whole range of social services, are part of the Fundación Eva Perón, whose imposing building, with its white columns and classical façade, is one of the more ambitious of the recent architectural additions to Buenos Aires. The Fundación is a super charity, financed largely by contributions from industry, and its methods are not those of social insurance as we know it. It was—and is—the creation of Eva Perón, and its benefactions are made to seem most intimately hers.[3] For the Perón system is highly personal in its impact: Perón is a father, faithful and true, and Evita is a bountiful mother (a modern one, of course, with make-up and beautiful clothes) who, though dead, continues to be at hand, for she is officially described as *la jefa espiritual de la Nación*, the nation's spiritual leader.

It would be easy to explore the implications of such a title, but it would be misleading to do so from the viewpoint of the 'democratic' West with its embarrassment at the involvement of religion in political device. Misleading, because Argentina, although today a cosmopolitan society (with its large minorities of Italian, English, German and Slav origin, as well as its many Jews), is Spanish in more than linguistic allegiance. It is true that the wars of independence were directed against Spain, and the nineteenth century in Argentina, as in the other republics, saw government (or lack of government) that owed much more to the secular and anti-clerical ideas of the French Revolution than to those of Catholic Spain. Beneath the struggles of the generals, surviving even the domination of foreign (and especially British) capital investment, there was a sense of the wholly inevitable function of the Church as the symbol of continuity. Nowhere can the Gospel have seemed less revolutionary. In a subsequent article something will be said of the prospect for the Church in Latin America. Here it may be enough to suggest that to draw any certain conclusions from the religious policy of the Perón

3 A children's primer tells us of a child's postcard 'to Evita', asking for a bicycle. A picture shows the little girl's delight as her mother shows her the bicycle that has mysteriously been delivered at the door.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1954.tb01950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

regime (it introduced compulsory religious instruction in the schools: is it therefore 'Catholic'?) is to misunderstand its special character, and is, too, to misunderstand the whole history of Latin America to which in so many ways it is the corollary.

The most obvious mark of Argentina today is the stress on national autonomy. This is not only a matter of economic self-sufficiency, though such developments as the building of a large merchant-shipping fleet, the nationalization of the railways and the inauguration of important heavy industries, are evident proof of it. It has its human repercussions. Industrial workers have increased from 452,000 in 1935 to well over a million in 1953, and the growth of the cities, and especially of Buenos Aires, dramatically reflects the revolution that is taking place. Nationalism must seem a vague enough idea in the vast areas of the pampa, but the solidarity (if only in the sense of life at close quarters in a town) of the workers makes for a sense of common purpose which General Perón has not been slow to exploit. The propaganda of the all-powerful General Confederation of Labour is more than an affair of wages and holidays with pay. It is directly concerned with the destiny of Argentina, under the leadership of Perón and faithful to the teaching of Evita; *independencia económica y soberanía política*, as one finds it so often stated.

Inevitably this means an attitude of national pride which can seem naïve to the European onlooker. But he is witnessing a rapid change, skilfully publicized, which in his own country and culture was the growth of centuries. Easy to smile at a regulation which requires that every concert should include a fixed proportion of Argentinian music (does it exist? he wonders). He may smile, too (though sardonically enough) at the frequent boast that the nationalized railway system is the best in South America (built by British engineers and the fruit of British investment, he will add). He may not smile at all when he hears of the 'cold war' between Argentina and Uruguay, due nominally to the Uruguayan recognition of the British sovereignty of the Falkland Islands, but certainly not unaffected by the presence and propaganda of Perón's political enemies in Montevideo. The growing-pains of national independence can scarcely be pleasant, but it is fair to suppose that they can grow less.

Yet it must be mere fantasy to think that the old order can return. The modalities of Perón's regime owe everything to his

own (and of course to his wife's) genius, an evil genius though his opponents think it to be. But the situation which it has exploited is not the creation of a political ideology. In varying degrees throughout Latin America the same evolution is to be seen, however different may be the means used to foster (or obstruct) it. The restlessness, the impatience at a lingering foreign attitude that still regards a whole continent as 'colonial', the desire for economic independence as the guarantee of national dignity—all this, combined with growing political awareness and infinitely improved communications (a factor of enormous importance where geography itself has up to now made unity so hard to achieve), must be remembered when one is tempted to make quick generalisations about *Peronismo*. A process, which in Europe took centuries to come to its term, is in Latin America happening overnight, as it were.

Speculation about the future must be more than usually precarious where Argentina is in question. But exasperation and the condescension bred of other lands and other traditions can hardly make for understanding. You will scarcely like the hysteria and the muddle, and humour, you may think, would sometimes restore a true sense of proportion. But one's own problems are never a matter for laughter, and the onlooker sees least of some games.

NOTICE

The February issue of BLACKFRIARS will include 'Second Thoughts on the Priest Workers', by John Fitzsimons, 'Moral Dilemmas—VI: Judgment on War', by Conrad Pepler, O.P., and 'Latin American—III: The Prospect for the Church', by Illtud Evans, O.P.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1954.tb01950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press