

Perón Returns: Democratic Transition in Argentina, 1969-1976

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David Pion-Berlin suggests in the introduction to *Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: New Analytical Perspectives* that theories of regime transition should hold true whether or not they are applied to the rise or the fall of a democracy.<sup>1</sup> To extend this idea, I propose that transition theory should be applicable to both successful and unsuccessful transitions. For the purpose of this paper, I will narrow transition theory to strategic action and institutional approaches as defined in Pion-Berlin's introduction and apply these theories to the failed democratic transition in Argentina in 1973. Pion-Berlin describes strategic action as the view that political behavior is the result of self-interest. By using strategic action theory, an analyst can predict the behavior of a political actor given that the actor is rational and that the analyst knows the context, the options available, knowledge of the actor's personal interests and assuming that the actor will act rationally. For those who follow strategic action theory, political actors are therefore interchangeable. Institutional theory looks at the influence of rules and traditions on individual actors. According to the institutional approach, institutions can restrict an individual's actions by inducing behavior that may not be in an actor's self-interest. By using the events leading to the 1973 elections in Argentina as a counterexample, I want to show that strategic action and institutional theory are insufficient to explain all democratic transitions. I will argue that violence and social upheaval hindered the influence of institutions on the major actors of the period and that the ambiguity of Perón's position in the negotiations between the military regime and civilian political actors negates the proposal that one can predict an individual's actions and that political actors are interchangeable. First I will explain the historical scene, describing the upsurge of violence following the *Cordobazo* in 1969. Then I will investigate the armed forces' traditional attitude towards guerilla violence by examining the national security doctrine of the period. The next section will describe the events leading to the 1973 democratic elections, followed by a discussion of Perón's perplexing "pendular strategy." Finally, I will briefly address the period between 1973 and 1976 and the collapse of the short-lived democratic governments of Cámpora, Juan Perón and Isabel Perón.

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<sup>1</sup> Pion-Berlin, David. "Introduction." *Civil Military Relations in Latin America: New Analytical Perspectives*. ed. David Pion-Berlin. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 13.

### **The *Cordobazo***

In 1966, a military coup overthrew the government in Argentina in response to what O'Donnell calls a "crisis of accumulation."<sup>2</sup> For three years, the military regime, headed by General Juan Carlos Onganía, governed with relative ease. However, on May 29, 1969, thousands of workers and university students flooded the streets of Córdoba, the second largest city in Argentina, in a spontaneous protest against the government. In the words of General Alejandro Lanusse, the mass uprising "'blew up any ordered and administrative style that we had given to official procedure.'"<sup>3</sup> At the height of the *Cordobazo*, which lasted several days, dissidents occupied one hundred fifty city blocks, beating back the police with rocks, Molotov cocktails, barricades and snipers. Besieged by protestors, the city had to call in the army to put down the uprising. The army forced demonstrators off the street, the protests did not end; the *Cordobazo* served as a catalyst for future violent protest against the military regime in Argentina.<sup>4</sup> It marked a turning point for Argentine society and an end to the illusion of a utopia of law and order, inspiring new revolutionary groups and an increase in labor militancy, strikes and demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> The rebellion destroyed the image of order and authority that Onganía had established and ushered in a new era in which mass uprisings and collective violence became effective means to oppose the military regime. Radical guerilla groups saw in the *Cordobazo* the popular sector's eagerness to embrace violent revolution. The rebellion destroyed the silent consensus on which the armed forces justified their military government. As O'Donnell writes, "force of arms became the only way to defend one's position, and... any argument against violence was seen as a betrayal of some grandiose cause." According to O'Donnell, a "hyper radicalized interpretation" of the *Cordobazo* gave rise to organized guerilla movements and sustained guerilla activity. The mass uprising in Córdoba and in other cities in Argentina were "rhapsodized as preludes to an imminent revolution in search of an armed vanguard" by newly formed guerilla groups.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell, Guillermo. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966-1973, in a Comparative Perspective*. trans. James McGuire. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1988. 162

<sup>3</sup> quoted in De Riz, Liliana. *Retorno y derrumbe: el último gobierno peronist*. México: Folios Ediciones, 1981. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, William C. *Authoritarianism and the Crisis of the Argentine Political Economy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989. 127-128, 133, 135.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 133, 135.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 160, 165, 171, 323.

In the aftermath of the *Cordobazo*, Argentine society became unmanageable as opposition groups took advantage of the regime's newfound vulnerability. High profile assassinations, such as the deaths of Augusto Vándor, a powerful union leader, and ex-president Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, as well as union strikes and other guerilla activity created a new atmosphere of internal warfare.<sup>7</sup> Violence became an acceptable political act, and the military regime could no longer guarantee social domination.

The guerilla movement in Argentina dates back to the *Resistencia Peronista* of the 1950s and the urban and rural *focos* inspired by the Cuban Revolution and Che Guevarra. Social protest and political violence, however, had declined during the first few years of Onganía's rule. After the *Cordobazo* in 1969, incidents of political violence, which included bombings, assassination attempts, kidnappings, robbery and acts of armed propaganda, radically increased.<sup>8</sup> According to data compiled from the daily newspaper *La Razón*, there were relatively few acts of political violence after the 1966 coup, numbering one hundred forty-six in 1967 and eighty-four in 1968. In 1969, however, acts of political violence jumped to three hundred forty-nine, and continued to increase: the time series data ends in 1972 with seven hundred forty-five acts of political violence. Prior to April 1969, most political violence was limited to bombings, but after the *Cordobazo*, other acts of political violence, such as assassination attempts and kidnappings, became more common. Political assassinations rose from an average of five per year from 1960 to 1968 to thirty-nine in 1969, peaking at sixty-four politically motivated assassinations in 1972.<sup>9</sup> Radical movements sprang up quickly after the *Cordobazo*; high profile guerilla groups included the Communist FAL (*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación*), the Peronist FAP (*Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas*), the Marxist-Leninist-Peronist FAR (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*), the radical Catholic Montoneros, and the Trotskyist ERP (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*). These guerilla organizations sought to raise political consciousness through violent spectacle, aimed not at defeating the military regime militarily but at building mass support for a revolution aimed at overthrowing the existing order.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> De Riz. *Retorno y derrumbe*. 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 140.

<sup>9</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 296, 299-300.

<sup>10</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 139-141, 184.

The upsurge of violence after the *Cordobazo* wreaked havoc on Argentine political and civil society. The state offered little protection to noncombatants from being kidnapped for ransom, shot in the street, or becoming a victim of bombings. A culture of violence and fear paralyzed the country. According to O'Donnell, guerillas, anti-guerillas, state officials and Argentine intellectuals began to see violence as the "supreme efficacy." Violence that served a higher cause justified almost any act and Argentine politics became a dialogue of reaction and counter-reaction. O'Donnell writes:

Each [group] felt its own opinion confirmed by the reactions that its own actions provoked. In this way what appeared initially as a bold expression of the people's grievances unleashed the monstrosity of widespread and ever-increasing violence that would become an element of Argentine daily life. From that point on, there is little that can be understood without taking into account the intense fear...that permeated all levels of Argentine society.<sup>11</sup>

The escalation of bank robberies, high profile assassinations, bombings and kidnappings endangered the military's internal cohesion and made the regime desperate for any solution.<sup>12</sup> In a paper on the culture of fear in Argentina, O'Donnell lists social and political factors that lead to the disintegration of political and societal norms. The list includes:

--The war of all against all--The myth of the efficacy of 'purifying' violence--The acceptance of death as political currency in everyday life--The para-institutional practices spreading to many sectors of social life--Violence and authoritarianism in both centers of power and opposition groups--The vicious circle of violence, and its erosion of civil practices.<sup>13</sup>

Violence and coercion came to replace many of the institutions of civil and political order that had held Argentine society together. This intense fear and omnipresent violence in the years that followed the *Cordobazo* contributed to the instability of the

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<sup>11</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 171-172.

<sup>12</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 161, 184.

<sup>13</sup> quoted in Corradi, Juan E. "The Culture of Fear in Civil Society." *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*. ed. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman. London: Westview Press, 1987. 115.

military regime, and allowed Perón to prepare the political scene for his return to Argentina.<sup>14</sup>

### **National Security Doctrine**

The Argentine government created the *Consejo de Defensa Nacional* in 1943, which defined national defense not only as a military affair, but also as "an elevated judgement on the nation's potential to defend the sacred interests of the country."<sup>15</sup> The objectives of national security became more inward looking after the Cuban Revolution, which brought Communism into Latin America. In 1962, a Navy document linked Communism with Peronism, an ideological association that gave the armed forces a new internal enemy. National security doctrine began to address this threat in the 1960s, and became more explicit after the military coup of 1966. Subversion and Communism became a top priority of the armed forces, who backed national security laws that prohibited Communism, outlawed Peronism, and gave the military authority over antiterrorist actions and the repression of strikes that questioned military power. The armed forces saw Communism as a "dangerous infiltration " that "substantially alters traditional Christian life" and set as their goal the neutralization of all types of extremism.<sup>16</sup>

Anti-Peronism was a defining characteristic of the military regime that began in 1966, and this mistrust of Peronism inherent in national security doctrine was a strong undercurrent of the political proceedings of the 1960s through the 1980s. As violence began to permeate Argentine society, the polarization and radicalization of ideologies on both sides lead to heightened antagonism and hatred. The violence also created a crisis of hegemony when the state could no longer impose political stability through repression. The military regime faced the decision of either imposing harsher repression to reestablish social domination or lifting previously exclusive policies to give benefits to the opposition in an attempt at pacification.<sup>17</sup> On one side stood the military institution,

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<sup>14</sup> Ollier, María Matilde. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas: la ambigüedad de un desafío." *Perón: del exilio al poder*. ed. Samuel Amaral and Mariano Ben Plotkin. Buenos Aires: Cántaro Editores, 1993. 221-222

<sup>15</sup> García, Alicia S. *La Doctrina de la Seguridad Nacional (1958-1983)* vol. 1. Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Política Argentina, 1991. 19. (my translation)

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 21-22, 27, 32-33. (my translation) see "Políticas del Gobierno Nacional" in appendix.

<sup>17</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 160, 165, 302, 308.

which emphasized the need for political legitimacy in order to fight against guerillas and radical political parties. For example, in June of 1970, the government restored the death penalty for crimes of kidnapping and terrorism, which had been abolished in 1886.<sup>18</sup> The 1971 National Security Law, also called the Law of Terrorist Repression, gave free reign to the armed forces during a declared state of siege, authorizing any measures the military deemed necessary to prevent and repress subversion and terrorism. The law also set up a federal penal court to deal specifically with terrorist acts. The next year, a revised National Security Law extended military autonomy in matters relating to terrorism and subversion, deleting the phrase that limited such autonomy to a state of siege.<sup>19</sup> As General Alcides López Aufranc expressed:

We are a combat team... We have the arms of the country and we use these green uniforms to kill our enemies...our external enemies...and the ideological enemy composed of Argentines, of people born in the country but whose hearts and minds have been won over by ideologies foreign to our democratic and Christian sentiments and who are trying to exchange [Argentina's] blue and white flag for a red rage.<sup>20</sup>

However, a more liberal position represented by General Alejandro Lanusse saw political transition and a lessening of political repression as the answer to the guerilla problem.

Although military repression did not subside under Lanusse, who became president in 1971 through a military ouster, the military regime consciously chose democratic transition as the official means to end the political and social chaos of the period. In his memoir, Lanusse summarizes his strategy:

[Argentina] was chosen by an international subversive conspiracy to begin a revolutionary war that it planned to reach continental or, at least, subcontinental dimensions. If Argentina is able to contain the enemy and normalize itself constitutionally at the same time, making a strong, efficient and modern democracy function with the majority of public opinion identified with the system...the insurrection will give ground not only in Argentina but also in the area as a whole. But if the Republic were to depend on force alone, with weak laws and rulers, subversion would be propagated because it would have achieved the political desideratum it looked for, which would make any tactical victory of the forces of order only a circumstantial and relative matter.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Argentina and Perón, 1970-1975*. ed. Lester A. Sobel. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1975. 18.

<sup>19</sup> quoted in García. *Seguridad Nacional*. 134-136.

<sup>20</sup> quoted in Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 195.

<sup>21</sup> quoted in Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 185-186

Lanusse sought to save the integrity of the armed forces, but he saw no escape from the chaos without a political transition. According to Ollier, Lanusse's preoccupation with a return to democracy reinforced the fantasy that a new democratic system would lead to the disappearance of social tension and the end of guerilla terrorism. Many critics, such as former military president Juan Carlos Onganía, spoke out against Lanusse's policy, depicting it as a resurgence of the old politics that had led to the coup of 1966. In 1971, Onganía threatened that if the Lanusse did not rectify the direction of his policy, the military would be forced to take from the government responsibility for saving the nation.<sup>22</sup> Despite threats and coup attempts, Lanusse's government continued on the path to political transition; however, anti-Peronism and political polarization of the period regained dominance after the transition and contributed to the coup of 1976 and the repression that followed.

### **Perón Vuelve**

As stated above, the military regime's power began to deteriorate due to the social rebellion and guerilla terrorism that followed the *Cordobazo*, leading the state to seek a negotiated political exit. According to O'Donnell, the first death throw of the regime was the fall of Onganía in 1970. In November of the same year, Peronists, Radicals and other minor parties signed a joint declaration *La Hora del Pueblo*, which called for a return to democracy and political stability and demanded the reentry of Peronism into official Argentine politics.<sup>23</sup> The installation of General Roberto Marcelo Levingston represented a final attempt to revive the Argentine Revolution started by the 1966 coup and an end to the illusion that a stable political scene was possible without Perón. Despite strong pressure from Peronist, Levingston declared war on the political arm of Peronism and banned all political parties that existed before the 1966 coup. Levingston set a tentative date for democratic elections, four or five years in the future, but the military made it clear that any democratic transition would not include Perón. However, social violence and guerilla activity forced the military to accept Perón into the political

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<sup>22</sup> Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 240-241.

<sup>23</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 187, 209.

game; no consensus existed in the military government or the military institution on how to put an end to the chaos the political violence created in Argentina. The military ousted Levingston in favor of the liberal policies of Lanusse in 1971.<sup>24</sup>

Lanusse inherited a country wracked by volatile social and political problems, including the threat of rebellion and collective violence, the continued presence of guerilla activity, the growing pressure of Peronism, and a political class that longed for an institutional exit to the military regime. As violence escalated, certain sectors of the armed forces also sought democracy as a way to defeat the guerilla threat. Once the military chose the path of democratic transition, the reinstatement of Peronism in the political sphere became a lesser evil when compared to the alternatives of social chaos. Perón became the point on which both sides of the political equation, anti-military and anti-guerilla, pinned their hopes for social and political stability.<sup>25</sup> In the words of Lanusse, "Perón is a reality whether we like it or not" and "if we choose to go ahead with institutionalizing the country, the results will be more solid with Perón and with Peronism."<sup>26</sup> Stating the problem in another way, José Rucci, secretary general of the *Confederación General de Trabajo* (CGT), the largest national union, said, "the choice is between elections with Perón...and civil war."<sup>27</sup> Negotiating with Perón, however, was not an easy task.

Once Lanusse committed Argentina to a democratic transition, he began courting Perón for support. Lanusse's government faced opposition from all sides, while Peronism enjoyed the support of the unions, the middle class, and most active guerilla organizations. Peronists made up a large part of the electorate, and Perón appeared to have direct control over his followers, including the more radical sectors and guerilla organizations.<sup>28</sup> To begin the move toward democracy, Lanusse proposed to legalize Peronism after seventeen years of prohibition and announced the *Gran Acuerdo Nacional* (GAN), a plan for negotiation between political parties, the military and the unions

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<sup>24</sup> Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 228-231, 234.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* 234-236, 259.

<sup>26</sup> quoted in Di Tella, Guido. *Perón-Perón 1973-1976*. trans. Luis Justo. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1983. 82. (my translation)

<sup>27</sup> quoted in O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 248.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 230

geared towards the implementation of democracy.<sup>29</sup> Lanusse sought to limit or reverse the effects of the *Cordobazo* on Argentine society by opposing revolutionary movements with a civil-military consensus.<sup>30</sup> At first, Lanusse also wanted to use the GAN as a means to become a candidate in the proposed democratic election. Under the GAN, political parties previously excluded could return to the political scene, but only if they followed the terms set down by the military. If the GAN was a success, Lanusse would have sufficient support to gain the presidency democratically, but, Lanusse warned, if the GAN did not succeed, the military might be forced to intercede instead of letting Peronism take control.<sup>31</sup> According to the GAN, the first elected government would be one of transition, most likely headed by Lanusse. In exchange for supporting the GAN, political parties would be able to field candidate in local and national elections, and compete for the presidency in the second democratic election. Political parties that agreed to the GAN would also be expected to openly support Lanusse's government prior to the first elections. The GAN, however, hinged on the participation of Perón and his denunciation of guerilla terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

By the spring of 1971, Lanusse had convinced high level Radical politicians, union leaders and the domestic political arm of Peronism to support the GAN. At the same time Perón met secretly with a representative of Lanusse's government to discuss Peronist support of the GAN; during the meeting, Perón agreed that democracy was the best way to stop the violent revolution in Argentina, but did not support a military brokered transition. Perón reiterated this rejection of the GAN when he dismissed his personal delegate in Argentina for offering the military government to institutionalize Peronism without Perón, replacing him with Héctor Cámpora, a militant known for his devotion to Perón. Two other major political groups as well as the largest national unions also reject the GAN at Perón's urging. Upon discovering the existence of these secret talks and other concessions to Perón, anti-Peronist sections of the armed forces pulled further to the right and protested Lanusse's policy in an abortive coup attempt.<sup>33</sup> By putting down the coup, Lanusse committed himself to a democratic transition, thereby

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<sup>29</sup> Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 242; O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 229.

<sup>30</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 189-190.

<sup>31</sup> Ollier, "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 235-236.

<sup>32</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 238-240.

loosing any change to stage a coup in order to put off elections indefinitely if GAN was rejected.<sup>34</sup> The pressure of the coup attempt also led Lanusse to fix a date for the first election: May 25, 1973.<sup>35</sup>

Perón's refusal to abide by rules dictated by the armed forces combined with the continuing pressure of armed guerilla groups placed serious limitations on the armed forces' control over the transition. The military regime tried to make Perón define himself, condemn terrorism, and come to the negotiating table, but Perón saw the end of revolutionary conflict not with the military but in Peronism and refused to distance himself from the guerilla movements.<sup>36</sup> By 1972, the GAN lost all credibility and the most important issue was not the participation of Peronism in the coming election but the possible candidacy of Perón himself. In January, four Army Commanders announced publicly that the military would not tolerate Perón as a candidate, but when asked about Perón's plans, Perón's delegate Cámpora replied that Perón could not refuse if the people asked him to return to Argentina and run for president.<sup>37</sup> Unsure of Perón's position, the armed forces wanted to force Perón's voluntary renunciation of candidacy but were afraid that Perón would "kick over the negotiating table."<sup>38</sup> In an effort to block Perón from entering the presidential race, Lanusse announced in July that he would not prohibit Perón candidacy; he did, however, place restrictions on candidates in general, requiring them to resign any government positions and establish residency in Argentina by August 25. These restrictions prevented Lanusse himself from becoming a presidential candidate, but Lanusse believed it would either force Perón to play by the rules Lanusse set or prevent Perón's candidacy without formally forbidding it.

According to Smith, Lanusse's actions reflected a mix of overconfidence and desperation. More than anything else, Lanusse and the armed forces wanted Perón to declare one way or the other. The military began a campaign to try and demystify the image of Perón. As Lanusse stated during a speech that condemned Perón for his ambiguity,

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<sup>33</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 190-193, 211.

<sup>34</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 246.

<sup>35</sup> Ollier, "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 248.

<sup>36</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 212. (the complex relationship between Perón and the guerilla movements will be discussed in more detail in the next section)

<sup>37</sup> Ollier, "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 250.

[Perón] has enjoyed his mythical role and continues to benefit from ambiguity... He is either a political reality or he will only be a myth. I am not against the myth: even though it does not work out well for me, obviously he did not become a myth, at seventy-something years, for no reason. But under no circumstances must one allow him to presume to be both things: myth and reality. Either one or the other.<sup>39</sup>

Lanusse implied in public speeches that Perón was afraid to return to Argentina because he had betrayed his people. Lanusse challenged Perón to personal combat, declaring that Perón did not have the courage to come back.<sup>40</sup> Surprisingly, four days before the August deadline, Cámpora announced Perón's imminent return to Argentina as the only Justicialist (Peronist) candidate, although he would not arrive before the deadline.<sup>41</sup> By this time, Lanusse and the armed forces had lost any power they had had to control the transition. One of the few remaining supporters of the GAN, the unions that had backed a military controlled transition, broke their truce with Lanusse's government and threatened that if "the people find the road to peaceful revolution closed' they will be forced to follow 'the cruel road of violent revolution.'"<sup>42</sup> Perón's arrival in Argentina in November further upset the military regime's plans. Instead of implying submission to the GAN or other forced negotiations with the military regime, Perón's return defied Lanusse's attempts at discrediting him and consolidated an opposition plan for transition.<sup>43</sup>

Perón's return did not, however, mean that he would declare himself as a candidate. Instead, Peronists and other civilian political parties formed the *Frente Justicialista de Liberación* (FREJULI), a united civilian party, and Perón unexpectedly departed for Paraguay, leaving instructions naming Cámpora as the FREJULI candidate. Outmaneuvered, Lanusse accepted Cámpora's candidacy, reasoning that if he did not, Perón would call for a blank vote or provoke an even higher degree of political and social instability that would topple the government. The military regime, relieved that Perón was not a candidate, initially viewed the coming elections with optimism as informal

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<sup>38</sup> quoted in Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 209.

<sup>39</sup> quoted in Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 253. (my translation).

<sup>40</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 213-214.

<sup>41</sup> Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 254.

<sup>42</sup> quoted in Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 212-213.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 214.

polls predicted FREJULI's share of the vote to be just under the simple majority needed to proscribe a run-off election. This initial optimism fell, however, as guerilla violence and reactionary military repression rose, generating new civilian demands for change. Cámpora's campaign, organized and promoted by the radical sectors of Peronism, negated any illusion that Perón had distanced himself from domestic politics, rallying supporters under the slogan, "*Cámpora al gobierno, Perón al poder*" (Cámpora to the government, Perón to power). In a last minute attempt to maintain control over the elections, Lanusse made desperate appeals to both Perón and the leaders of the Radical party, only to be publicly rejected. Of the eighty-three percent of Argentines that turned out for the 1973 election nearly half voted for the FREJULI alliance. The vote fell short of the simple majority needed to declare an outright winner, but the Radical candidate conceded defeat and the military surrendered any control, declaring Cámpora the president elect.<sup>44</sup>

### **Pendular Strategies**

As discussed above, the escalation of social violence and guerilla activity following the *Cordobazo* gave Perón the opportunity to lay the groundwork for his acceptance back into Argentina. A pragmatist and a brilliant strategist, Perón employed political tactics similar to those used in military war games. The goal was to maintain unity within the ranks while penetrating the enemy's defenses through duplicity and deception, strategies that Smith describes as "posturing, artifice, and bluffing more appropriate to high stakes poker."<sup>45</sup> Perón had a talent for perceiving changes in Argentine society and acting on them, using tactical skill and flexibility to out maneuver his opponents. He cultivated ambiguity and used a "pendular strategy" to appeal to all sectors of society, portraying himself as the only hope for saving the country from anarchy. "I have two hands and I use them both," Perón declared, referring, as O'Donnell notes, not only to political strategy but also to the two currents within

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 215-217; O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 230.

<sup>45</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 209; Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 221-222.

Peronism, that of the traditional political and union sectors and the newer radicalized sections.<sup>46</sup>

Although Peronism never acquired a real institutional structure, depending instead on unconditional loyalty to Perón to hold the party together, the Peronist ranks expanded to include most of the working class, the middle class, most guerilla organizations, the CGT and other national unions and intellectuals from both the left and the right. After the *Cordobazo*, radical sectors of the middle class, university students and Catholic groups began to see Perón as a revolutionary leader who, with the help of guerilla organizations, would lead the popular sectors in the *Argentinazo*, a mass national uprising against the military regime. Seeing the strategic opportunities these revolutionary groups represented as a weapon against his political enemies, Perón supported the radical groups. O'Donnell writes, "Perón, by cultivating the revolutionary image that some of his followers bestowed on him, channeled toward himself most of the popular activation and violent radicalization of the period."<sup>47</sup> Guerilla activity and social revolution undermined the military regime's power, helped destabilize the military institution, provoked anti-military sentiment and pushed the armed forces towards negotiation with Perón, who many believed would be able to convince the popular sectors of a nonviolent solution.<sup>48</sup>

As Perón himself explains:

The path of armed struggle is indispensable. Each time the muchachos strike for our side, they strengthen those at the negotiating table who search for a clean and clear electoral solution. Without the increasing attacks of the Vietcong guerillas in the jungles, the Vietnamese delegation in Paris would have to pack their suitcases and return home.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the period between the *Cordobazo* and the 1973 elections, the armed forces accused Perón of being complicit to terrorism and frequently demanded that he condemn guerilla organizations and radical movements within Peronism. Perón, however, refused to denounce guerilla movements and, in public statements and letters, continued to encourage violent resistance.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> quoted in O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 232, 235, 311.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 306

<sup>48</sup> Ollier. "Perón y las fuerzas armadas." 237.

<sup>49</sup> quoted in O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 210

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 217, 311-313.

O'Donnell is unsure as to why the radical sectors of society saw Perón as a revolutionary leader. Although he encouraged violence, Perón was ambiguous in espousing the rhetoric of revolution that fueled the ideology of his radical followers. O'Donnell speculates that,

...the reason [that these groups considered Perón a revolutionary leader] involves Perón's skill at adjusting his language to suit his audiences as well as the extreme ambiguity of the revolution these groups advocated, which consisted in not much more than the myth of violence as a revolutionary method. We are dealing with an extraordinary case of selective perception that may be understood as a compulsion to eliminate cognitive dissonance by those who had made an immense emotional investment in armed struggle.<sup>51</sup>

Perón's discourse could have been read to infer that once the military regime was defeated, Perón would censure guerilla organizations and denounce violent struggle. Yet before the elections, Perón remained a supporter of armed resistance. He urged the guerillas to "use all means available" and to "wage struggle on all fronts" in an effort to overthrow the regime. The guerilla cause became a revolutionary war in Perón's speeches and the "special formations" (Perón's euphemism for the guerilla organizations) became soldiers in that just war.<sup>52</sup> In a letter to the Monontero guerilla organization, Perón congratulates his *compañeros* for the kidnapping and assassination of ex-president Pedro Aramburu. He writes, "I completely agree with and praise all that you have done, nothing could be more wrong than to say that [by assassinating Aramburu] you ruined my tactical plans." The letter encourages the Montoneros to continue to use such tactics in the future, but also cautions them to remember that guerilla warfare is only a means to an end and not an end in itself.<sup>53</sup> In the infamous *Carta a la juventud*, Perón tells the youth of Argentina that they have a "inescapable obligation to fight" and that he has "absolute faith in our *muchachos* that have learned to die for their ideals." The Peronist youth should fight for the liberation of Argentina in any way possible; the political arm battling in the open through legal means while the "special formations" operate under the surface

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 217, 312.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 306.

<sup>53</sup> Perón, Juan Domingo. "Perón a Montoneros, 20 de febrero, 1971." *Documentos de la guerilla peronista al gobierno popular (1970-1973)*. comp. Roberto Baschetti. La Plata, Argentina: Editorial de la Campana, 1995. 129-132. (my translation).

through violent resistance. Perón emphasizes the need to learn how to manipulate disorder for the cause, as armed revolution intensifies social discord, giving an advantage to those who can use such confusion to their benefit. Once again, he dismisses the method by which the guerilla organizations defy the military regime, stating that the end justifies the means and that "no one can deny us the right to lead the fight against...the military political clique that is bringing the country to ruin."<sup>54</sup> Yet at the same time, Perón called for peaceful measures in a statement given before his brief return to Argentina in 1972:

I feel neither hatred nor rancor. This is no time to be thinking of revenge. I return as a peacemaker.... They call me, I come. Whoever believes I have a taste for discord is mistake. I have no taste for discord and no thirst for power. It matters little whether I become President; I only seek to serve my country in whatever way I can, in whatever capacity I am needed. The discord must end.<sup>55</sup>

By remaining ambiguous in his support of the social violence Perón convinced the radical sectors that he supported their cause without reservation and persuaded the moderate sectors of society that only he would be able to put an end to social chaos.

### **Perón to Power**

Just after the 1973 elections, Perón publicly came out against terrorism, condemning guerilla aggravation of social instability. The social revolution Perón had seemingly promised the guerillas never appeared, as the Peronist government turned back to a more moderate stance. Instead of laying down their weapons in the aftermath of a victorious overthrow of the military regime, guerilla organizations continued to fight, focussing their attacks on rival guerilla groups and certain factions within the military. In the months following Cámpora's assumption of the presidency, violent acts continued to plague the country. Peronist youth movements attacked the ERP, vowing to kill ten ERP guerillas for every Peronist militant killed in political conflict, and the ERP, FAR and the Montoneros issued statements that reaffirmed their battle against the military institution

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<sup>54</sup> Perón, Juan Domingo. "Mensaje del general Perón a la juventud reunida en el Congreso de la Federación Nacional de Estudiantes en Rosario." *Documentos de la guerilla peronista al gobierno popular (1970-1973)*. comp. Roberto Baschetti. La Plata, Argentina: Editorial de la Campana, 1995. 286-290. (my translation).

and threatened any armed group that opposed the Cámpora government.<sup>56</sup> The radical groups that were had once united under Peronism against a common enemy began to fight among themselves. Peronism had internalized the conflicts of Argentine society.<sup>57</sup> When Perón returned to Argentina in June of 1973, a Peronist rally staged at the Ezeiza airport to meet Perón's plane turned into a massacre as guerilla groups opened fire in a crowd of over two million people. Machine gun and handgun fire and the riot that followed took the lives of more than twenty people and wounded over three hundred; witnesses reported that snipers terrorized thousands of bystanders as rival Peronist groups attacked each other.<sup>58</sup> The next day, Perón condemned the revolutionary violence and called for an end to popular mobilization.

Violence, however, continued to escalate, and it became obvious that Cámpora's government could not control the extreme polarization of Peronism. After only seven weeks in office, Cámpora and his Vice President resigned. The new elections that followed allowed Perón to become president for a third time, but his ascension to the presidency did not calm the warring Peronist factions. Bombings, gun battles, riots, and assassinations crippled the country as Peronist left and Peronist right mercilessly attacked each other. Guerilla groups also maintained their battle against military officers and the unions, and the police continued their campaign of repression.<sup>59</sup> To add to the chaos, Perón's private secretary, José López Rega, used his position as Minister of Social Welfare to create a new neo-fascist paramilitary group, the *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* (AAA), which declared war on revolutionaries, progressive politicians and leftist intellectuals in an effort to eliminate any left wing or Marxist infiltrators in the Peronist ranks.<sup>60</sup> Di Tella writes that the role of subversion and terrorism changed during this period. Before 1973, the guerilla organizations fought against an illegitimate government; the return to democratic government should have inspired the guerillas to lay down their weapons. Against all expectation, however, the situation deteriorated as

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<sup>55</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 214.

<sup>56</sup> *Argentina and Perón*. 83-84.

<sup>57</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 313.

<sup>58</sup> *Argentina and Perón*. 86-87.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* 103-113

<sup>60</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 226-228.

guerillas refused to commit to nonviolence.<sup>61</sup> When Perón died in July of 1974, Argentina was on the brink of anarchy. The politics of López Rega, which dominated the government of Perón's successor, María Estela Martínez de Perón, were unable to curb the violence, and the armed forces staged a successful coup in 1976. The military saw the political and social unrest in Argentina as a threat to the survival of the state, and justified the coup as an emergency action to save the nation.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

The 1973 democratic transition in Argentina failed. Although elections were held, the violence and social upheaval that precipitated the need for a transition continued unabated after democracy was established, and the military quickly reversed its support of a democratic solution by staging the 1976 coup. In this paper, I hope to show how this failed outcome cannot be fully understood when analyzed through the lenses of strategic action and institutional transition theories. The political strategy of Perón and the nature of negotiations between Perón and Lanusse question the main premise of strategic action theory, that a well-informed analyst can predict a political actor's behavior. Perón's use of ambiguity and misdirection made it virtually impossible for other political and social actors to predict his behavior. Perón's success depended on his unpredictability; his decisions did not seem to be motivated by self-interest. If Lanusse had been dealing with someone other than Perón in the negotiations that led to the transition, the outcome would have been quite different. Institutional transition theory suggests that political actor's behavior's are bound by institutions, and that a study of these governing norms will lead to an understanding of a regime transition. However, a study of institutions does not fully explain the 1973 transition. The social instability and collective violence that surrounded the transition destroyed or replaced institutional and societal norms, creating an atmosphere of near anarchy. A culture of violence and fear took the fate of the transition out of the influence of institutions; political actors were no longer constrained by political rules. The various actors involved in the transition did not seem to be playing by any set of rules at all.

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<sup>61</sup> Di Tella. *Perón-Perón*. 323.

<sup>62</sup> Smith. *Authoritarianism and Crisis*. 230-231.

I do not wish to argue that strategic action and institutional transition theories have no value in the study of democratic transition. I do, however, want to point out the flaws of these theories when used to understand a failed transition. Given the events of the 1973 Argentine transition, I do not think that actors will necessarily act rationally, or that institutional norms can restrict behavior when the rule of law has been replaced by a culture of violence. It is this combination of a lack of institutions and a lack of predictability that defines the 1973 transition. O'Donnell's assertion that the transition's failure is due to a lack of commitment to democracy on all sides also helps to shed light on the subject. The armed forces were reluctant to admit that democracy was the most promising solution; even when Lanusse officially set Argentina on the path to democracy, the military was unwilling to give up control and sought to set limits on the transition. Although Perón was obviously in favor of a transition, he did not come out in support of democracy itself until after the elections. As O'Donnell writes, "With violence imposing itself on society, and in the absence of political actors and intellectual who stood publicly and explicitly for other values, the rancor inherited from Argentine history eliminated the last chances of avoiding the precipice."<sup>63</sup> In my opinion, focusing only on institutions or strategic action will not lead to a true understanding of political transition. In the case of the 1973 Argentine democratic transition, one must look at the culture of violence and how each actor reacted to or manipulated that violence to understand the failure of the transition and the reign of terror that followed.

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<sup>63</sup> O'Donnell. *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. 232.

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