

Peronist Consumer Politics and the Problem of Domesticating Markets in Argentina, 1943–1955

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During a 1947 national radio broadcast, Argentine president Juan Domingo Perón explained to his listeners why the prices of goods at local shops and street markets were climbing higher. Perón noted that inflation was a worldwide problem in the postwar period, but he condemned in particular the “egotism, greediness, lack of human solidarity, and absence of patriotism” of certain Argentine business owners. “They are the ones,” the president exclaimed, “who stir up the river to reap gains as fishermen, who lay the foundations for black markets, who speculate and profit from the labor and blood of the immense majority of inhabitants.”¹ Perón’s moralistic distinction between the virtuous, laboring *pueblo* and a cabal of greedy adversaries seems familiar enough. Scholars have emphasized the importance of this type of political discourse in populist movements, and leaders like Perón are famed for their impassioned attacks on *vendepatrias*, oligarchs, corrupt politicians, imperialists, and other enemies of “the people.” In this case, however, Perón focused not on elite landowners or foreign trusts, but rather on the quotidian world of commerce and consumption—a dimension of the history of populism that has received far less attention. Throughout Perón’s presidency (1946–55), the national government buttressed this rhetoric with an

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1. República Argentina, Ministerio de Interior, *Leyes, decretos y revoluciones para normalizar precios y reprimir la especulación* (Buenos Aires, 1947), 4–5.

array of policies intended to impose order on market forces, punish commercial criminals, and uplift consumers. Likewise, Peronist authorities appealed to the population's concern with unfair exchange to build a partisan following; in the process, he elicited both widespread enthusiasm and intense resentment among Argentines.

This article investigates the political controversies of state campaigns to defend consumers against "unjust" commerce in the Peronist era—what can be called the period's consumer politics. As part of a larger project on the history of Peronism and consumption, the essay focuses on two major themes concerning state interventions in the marketplace. First, from the earliest days of Perón's presidency, public officials drew on existing cultural norms regarding the morality of commerce. Within their package of labor and social reforms, Peronist leaders adapted these traditions to justify expansive regulations on the supply, prices, and distribution of goods. Second, over time Juan and Eva Perón intensified their efforts to define the responsibilities of Argentine citizens as ethical consumers, encouraging men and women to adjust household spending to the needs of the nation and the partisan movement. The interplay between these two impulses—disciplining commerce and mobilizing consumers—offers new insights into the ways Peronism shaped roles for Argentine citizens as economic and political agents.

The righteous tone of Peronist attacks on commercial wrongdoing inevitably calls to mind E. P. Thompson's famous discussion of the "moral economy." There are, of course, obvious contrasts between the food riots of eighteenth-century England and Peronist attempts to regulate merchants—differences so great that they stretch Thompson's definition of the moral economy too far.² In the Argentine case, ideas about economic fairness formed part of a political landscape marked by greater state presence in working-class life, growing consumer aspirations, and modern mass politics. Nevertheless, Thompson's work provides a crucial point of departure, above all, in its insistence on exploring the cultural complexity of seemingly straightforward material struggles. Rather than presenting a portrait of a unified moral economy, this essay addresses the differing and often competing attitudes toward commercial morality that

2. Thompson argued that food riots could not be explained only as the product of hunger or rising prices, but rather were shaped by "a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor" (p. 79); E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (Feb. 1971): 76–136.

circulated throughout Argentine society. It focuses on the praxis of consumer politics, highlighting the divergences between discursive idealizations and state enforcement through various sources: internal government documents, news reports, Peronist propaganda, and public correspondence, among others. As we shall see, the Peronist approach to defending consumers evolved in relation to changing economic conditions, and Argentines responded to state initiatives in ways that ranged from pressuring authorities for deeper reforms to opposing public intrusions into private affairs.

Placing the issues of commerce and consumption at the center of analysis expands our understanding of Peronism and populism in new directions. At one level, complaints about price-gouging merchants can be viewed through the familiar lens of the regime's relationship with organized labor. Consumer policies were aimed primarily (though not exclusively) at the urban working class, and officials often treated "consumer" and "worker" as overlapping categories. Despite the extensive literature on union organizing and workplace conflicts, the impact of Peronism on the lives of laboring Argentines in other spheres—such as the marketplace and home—is still poorly understood.³ Moreover, Peronist authorities reached out across the country to a wide population of consumers, who were subsumed within Perón's favorite political keyword, "el pueblo," and which included lower-middle-class employees, self-employed artisans and traders, rural laborers, and, most importantly, housewives. Protecting the household economy became a key issue in carving out a partisan identity for Argentine women. Commercial management was no dry technocratic matter. As state authorities made their presence felt in the marketplace, the prosaic took on political significance, and mundane objects—a hunk of cheese, a square of cloth, a loaf of bread—became contested symbols of the achievements and failures of Peronist social justice. The seemingly unremarkable clutter of the street market offers access to the importance of Peronism in everyday life, as well as the social and gender dimension of populism more generally.

In addition, this study advances scholarly debates on the relationship

3. It would be impractical to enumerate the hundreds of works on Peronism. For a useful overview of the historiography, see Mariano Plotkin, "The Changing Perceptions of Peronism," in *Peronism and Argentina*, ed. James P. Brennan (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998), 29–54. On the equally massive literature on populism, see Alan Knight, "Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (1998): 223–48; and Michael L. Conniff, "Introduction: Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism," in *Populism in Latin America*, ed. Michael Conniff (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1999), 3–30. Research into Peronism's labor and business history is far from exhausted, as suggested by innovative work being currently done in these fields.

between national politics and consumption in the postwar world.⁴ The consolidation of commercial markets and the intensification of mass consumption in twentieth-century Latin America brought countless innovations—from changes in daily diets and novel forms of entertainment to shifts in domestic production and patterns of international trade—that altered, but by no means overturned, existing social orders. As a handful of recent works have suggested, commercial culture opened new avenues for self-expression to individuals from diverse backgrounds and served to recast (and in many cases, strengthen) national identities.⁵ A similar story can be told as well for Peronist Argentina.⁶ Yet commerce was also a profound source of anxiety and generated intense debate and political organizing around the dilemmas of economic fairness. Even as Latin Americans

4. There is, of course, vast scholarship on mass consumption in the United States and Europe, and my approach to Argentine consumer politics has been informed by a critical reading of these works. It is worth noting, however, that this historiography often propagates a form of Euro-U.S. exceptionalism, which demonstrates little awareness of how mass consumption featured in postwar visions of modernization across the “Third World.” Victoria de Grazia and E. Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Mathias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); Martin Daunton and Mathew Hilton, eds., *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

5. Much of this inquiry has focused on Mexican popular culture. For essays by key authors working in this vein, see Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001); and Néstor García Canclini, *Consumidores y ciudadanos: Conflictos multiculturales de la globalización* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1995). On social experiences of commercial markets more generally, see “Creating Markets in Latin America, 1750–1998,” special issue, ed. by Steven Topik, *Latin American Perspectives* 26, no. 1 (Jan. 1999); Arnold Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001); Lauren Derby, “Gringo Chickens with Worms: Food and Nationalism in the Dominican Republic,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert Joseph, Catherine Le Grand, and Ricardo Salvatore (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 449–93; Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home! Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003); Maureen O’Dougherty, *Consumption Intensified: The Politics of Middle-Class Daily Life in Brazil* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002); and Benjamin Orlove, ed., *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997).

6. I treat issues relating to the social history of consumption in my book project, titled “A Dignified Life: Consumption and the Social Politics of Peronism in Argentina.”

embraced novel commercial goods and services, many supported state action to regulate economic exchange—in part, because of their all-too-frequent inability to participate fully in the modern marketplace.

Peronist consumer politics represented, then, part of a broader drive toward “domesticating markets.” Domestication involved taming commercial exchange to benefit popular-sector families and, in turn, bringing household economies in line with national priorities. State authorities targeted both the suppliers of goods and their purchasers, in keeping with their overarching goals of increasing national autonomy, harnessing economic progress, and ameliorating social inequalities. Notwithstanding the distinctiveness of Peronist politics, Argentine officials were hardly alone in this pursuit, as populist, leftist, and revolutionary movements throughout the region regulated commerce and responded to social concerns about unfair markets.⁷ The Peronist case reveals the great challenges encountered in pursuing these objectives. Like many of his peers, Perón confronted the consequences of rapid social reform and the gap between making promises and altering social practices. Although his regime enjoyed majority support, there were constant tensions between state efforts to create loyal citizens and the behavior of the Argentine populace.⁸

While the subjects discussed in this essay—such as price controls and consumer-education propaganda—are important in their own right, they are even more valuable as a window into the crucial historical problem of how Argentines developed understandings of social injustice and, in certain contexts, sought political solutions. I begin by tracing the origins of the Peronist ideal of “just” consumption within a longer historical trajectory; I then examine government policies to eliminate the crime of commercial “speculation” and conclude with an analysis of state campaigns to inculcate thrifty habits. I do not wish to sug-

7. For comparative studies of similar economic policies in Allende’s Chile, Alan García’s Peru, Sandinista Nicaragua, and other cases, see Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, eds. *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991). These essays, however, tend to equate populism too broadly with fiscal irresponsibility, and their treatment of populist politics scratches the surface of the ideological factors that motivated regulation (114).

8. Daniel James has offered a stimulating analysis of how Peronism represented a form of social citizenship for working-class Argentines, which centered on class empowerment and a “heretical” cultural challenge to the status quo. I have adopted a similarly expansive definition that does not equate citizenship simply with formal rights or electoral politics; however, my approach in this essay focuses on the largely overlooked links between social entitlements and the ideal of “just” consumption. Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 7–40.

gest that all attempts at economic regulation are inherently flawed; as the debacle of neoliberalism in Argentina and elsewhere in the region clearly shows, the supposedly free hand of the market can cause as much damage as the grip of state planning. Rather, I seek to contribute a historical dimension to contemporary debates on the market economy, revealing how Argentine government authorities, social movements, and “ordinary” citizens grappled politically with the upheavals of ever-widening commerce.

Commerce and the Cost of Living

Perón liked to emphasize the groundbreaking nature of his reforms, contrasting the apathy of earlier governments with the vigor of his administration’s initiatives. Yet the fact that Perón inveighed against unfair commerce was not a novelty, nor was the fact that his administration attempted to manage economic activity. Concern with the ethics of exchange can be seen as a central theme in Argentine history, one that stretches back to merchant frustrations with the inequities of mercantilism on the eve of the 1810 revolution. Peronist consumer politics represented not so much a total departure from, as a significant reworking of, earlier traditions. Perón and his advisers adapted already-established discursive modes for criticizing the moral shortcomings of the market economy, while at the same time creating new institutions to control commerce. By combining these two elements, they shifted the balance of state commercial regulation from upholding merchant prerogatives toward defending the consumer interests of popular households. This strategy helped to generate partisan support for the Peronist movement, but it also raised expectations that political leaders had to meet.

The specific origins of Peronist consumer politics can be traced to turn-of-the-century attempts to address the legacies of Argentine liberalism. Following decades of postindependence civil strife, nineteenth-century liberals succeeded in consolidating the legal institutions of a new republic, which reflected the yearning of merchant capital to secure protections for their property. The 1853 constitution and 1859 commercial code established the formal rights of property owners and apparently neutral rules of economic exchange that would free merchants from ideological and partisan interference.⁹ The consolidation of this legal system did not, however, mean that commercial power went unchal-

9. On liberalism and Argentine commercial law, see Jeremy Adelman, *The Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 224–50.

lenged. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of movements that attacked the perceived immorality of traders and markets. Anarchists and other leftists drew attention to capitalist avarice that threatened workers and directed protests against “unscrupulous” merchants and “*especuladores*” (speculators) who created artificial shortages and raised prices on rent, food, and other necessities.¹⁰ The electoral reform of 1912 ushered in more-democratic politics, and the Socialist and Radical parties attempted to court working- and middle-class voters (especially in Buenos Aires and other littoral cities) with complaints about the high cost of living. From the other end of the ideological spectrum, right-wing nationalists and Catholics lamented the materialism of modern times and the vulnerability of the family to market pressures.

Despite these widespread complaints, there was little sustained commitment to government regulation on behalf of consumers. The electorally dominant Radical Party was best positioned politically to address consumer demands during the 1912–1930 period. They faced, however, a classic bind: in order to favor urban consumers in Argentina, they had to confront the rural producers whose beef, grains, fuel, and other staples represented a lion’s share of ordinary household consumption. Although Radical politicians complained that high prices threatened the pueblo, they took pains not to antagonize landowners—aside from tentative initiatives to reduce prices on goods such as sugar.¹¹ The Socialists offered forceful critiques of merchant profiteering, but they were suspicious of government economic regulation (at least as carried out by other parties), which they feared would benefit producers at the expense of consumers. Given these options, the Socialists favored the formation of consumer cooperatives and open trade to ensure competition that would push prices lower. Conservative and religious commentators backed limited reforms (like urban rent controls) but otherwise viewed proposals for greater economic management with intense skepticism.¹²

Notwithstanding these political obstacles, the 1930s witnessed a fitful increase in government regulation of the marketplace, typically in reaction to

10. Ricardo D. Salvatore, “The Normalization of Economic Life: Representations of the Economy in Golden-Age Buenos Aires, 1890–1913,” *HAHR* 81, no. 1 (2001): 1–44.

11. David Rock, *Politics in Argentina, 1890–1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), 115, 117–24, 203–9.

12. Richard J. Walter, *The Socialist Party of Argentina, 1890–1930* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1977), 40, 116–18, 140–42; Salvatore, “Normalization of Economic Life”; and James Baer, “Buenos Aires: Housing Reform and the Decline of the Liberal State in Argentina,” in *Cities of Hope: People, Projects, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870–1930*, ed. Ronn Pineo and James Baer (Boulder: Westview, 1998).

outside economic shocks. In response to the worldwide depression, Argentina's rulers established organizations such as the Banco Central and the Juntas Reguladoras (agencies that managed the trade of grains and other commodities) to retool the agro-export engine of liberal Argentina. Fearing wartime disruptions, in September 1939 congress also approved measures to establish emergency price controls on food and urban rents. These initiatives, however, were assailed from left-wing quarters as government handouts to producers or as simply ineffectual. During the early 1940s, for instance, the Confederación General de Trabajo (CGT) staged rallies in major cities and provincial union halls in their national "Campaign against the Cost of Living." Along similar lines, an organization called the Junta Popular Pro-Abaratamiento de la Vida y Contra los Monopolios (Popular Committee for Reduction in the Cost of Living and against Monopolies) held meetings in Buenos Aires city, including a "Congress against the High Cost of Living" in March 1943. Supported by leftist politicians, these critics heaped scorn on public officials for not implementing laws against price gouging and turning a blind eye to profiteers, who were denounced as the "sharks of capitalism" and the "Mafia of Lucre."¹³

In his dramatic rise to the presidency between 1943 and 1946, Perón drew on these traditions of growing state regulation and cost-of-living activism. He was a member of the "June Revolution" military government that founded new state agencies and expanded the scope of older bureaucracies to manage Argentina's economy. Military rulers employed existing price-control laws to ease pressure on urban shoppers and renters, even as they moved against organized labor and the Left. At the same time, Perón borrowed from traditions of criticizing commerce to forge his own political movement within the military government. Compared to his predecessors, Perón placed a heavier emphasis on the state's responsibility to meet material needs and spoke in appealing terms about the good life that awaited popular households, both as workers and consumers. During a July 1944 speech on the "popular economy," Labor Secretary Perón lamented that previous governments had failed to restrain the rising cost of living: "We are a dignified and proud country; and none of its children should have to tolerate ever again that Argentine workers be converted into shabby people [*gente astrosa*] so that a group of privileged individuals can hold onto their luxuries, their automobiles, and their excesses." Perón stressed that the "people"

13. For coverage of these protests, see *CGT: Periódico de la Confederación General del Trabajo*, July 10, 1942, 2; Jan. 8, 1943, 5; and Jan. 15, 1943, 5. See also the Socialist Party's daily, *La Vanguardia*, Apr. 25, 1942, 1; and May 24, 1943, 1; as well as *Noticias Gráficas*, Mar. 1, 1943.

merited greater access to the nation's economic bounty and proclaimed that his party was "convinced that the economic aim of a country should not be only profit [*lucro*], but rather the satisfaction of all the necessities of its inhabitants."¹⁴ In this manner, the Peronist critique of economic injustice linked the spheres of labor and consumption, contrasting the frivolous consumerist luxury of the rich with the public duty to satisfy the working population.

Throughout the 1943–46 period, the Peronist movement approached the issue of consumption from multiple angles. Perón painted a portrait of a socially just "New Argentina" where ordinary citizens, as a result of their productive contributions to society, would eat, dress, and live better. Unions seized upon these promises to demand better living standards, which in gender terms meant boosting the status of male breadwinners as household providers. Consumption was integral as well to the Peronist ideal of an inward-oriented national economy. Policy experts feared that the postwar transition would bring domestic unemployment, social unrest, and international disruptions to trade. In new planning agencies, officials mapped out strategies to augment national economic independence by deepening industrialization.¹⁵ The state's responsibility would be to guarantee that income flowed to members of the working class, who as laborers would raise production and as consumers would prop up domestic demand.

The specific social and economic characteristics of Argentina explain, in part, the importance of consumption as a political issue in the Peronist era. Compared to other Latin American societies, rural peasantries represented less of a social force in Argentina, where contract agriculture and proletarian harvest labor predominated in the countryside. For most Argentines, the precarious balance between wages and prices shaped daily experience. A large working and middle class was concentrated in the urban centers of the littoral region, especially the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, where one-third of the national population lived.¹⁶ The Argentine economy produced foodstuffs and

14. Juan Domingo Perón, *Obras completas*, vol. 8 (Buenos Aires: Ed. Docencia, 1985), 300.

15. Vicepresidencia de la Nación, Consejo Nacional de Posguerra, *Ordenamiento económico-social* (Buenos Aires, 1945); and Patricia Berrotarán, *Del plan a la planificación: El estado durante la época peronista* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2003), 45–64; On the Peronist state, see Patricia Berrotarán, Aníbal Jáuregui, and Marcelo Rougier, eds., *Sueños de bienestar en la Nueva Argentina: Estado y políticas públicas durante el peronismo (1946–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004).

16. According to sociological estimates, working-class and middle-class wage-earners represented 45.8 and 18.7 percent, respectively, of Argentina's economically active population in 1947. In contrast, the "self-employed" (*autónoma*) working and middle classes

light manufactures that were the core of everyday consumption—in contrast to the tropical fruits, coffee, or mineral ores that drove the economies of neighboring countries. Buenos Aires and other cities boasted an enormous variety of commercial enterprises: everything from foreign-owned department stores and movie palaces to corner groceries and dressmakers. These characteristics did not predetermine the actions of Perón's government, nor do they mean that politicians elsewhere in Latin America at this time were not also concerned with addressing the consumption needs of their populations. But the socioeconomic context of mid-1940s Argentina did condition the options available to Peronist leaders and presented clear incentives for satisfying the needs of predominately urban consumers.

Upon assuming office in June 1946, Perón moved quickly to realize his vision of a New Argentina. State officials pursued aggressive measures designed to increase workers' share of the national income and, by extension, their ability to consume goods and services. Real wages soared nearly 40 percent between 1946 and 1948, reaching all-time high levels, thanks largely to labor organizing and cooperation between unions and the government in contract negotiations.¹⁷ In addition to redistributing income, Perón's administration intervened to boost consumption among urban popular sectors. Federal agencies compelled producers to lower beef prices, subsidized meat packinghouses, and covered the deficits incurred in supplying beef to the city of Buenos Aires; they also offered subsidies to reduce prices on oil, sugar, and flour.¹⁸ In Buenos Aires city, federal authorities expanded a network of "*ferias francas*" (open-air municipal markets that sold food at reduced rates). The continuation of the rent freeze begun in 1943 meant that urban tenants in Buenos Aires and other cities had more disposable household income, and tenant farmers (*arrendatarios*) benefited from similar controls and antieviction measures.

The first few years of the Peronist rule were boom times. Near-full employ-

(of which merchants, large and small, formed part) represented 16.3 and 13.4 percent; Susana Torrado, *Estructura social de la Argentina, 1945–1983* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1992), 145–53.

17. A leading analysis of Peronist social policy suggests that workers' share of the national income grew between 1943 and 1950 from 44 to 55 percent but that inflation and paycheck deductions cut into spending power; Peter Ross, "Justicia social: Una evaluación del los logros del peronismo clásico," *Anuario IEHS*, vol. 8 (1993): 105–24. See also Guy Bourdè, *La classe ouvrière argentine (1929–1969)*, vol. 2 (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1987), 846–61.

18. Susana Novick, *IAPI: Auge y decadencia* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1986), 39, 72–73.

ment extended the benefits of economic prosperity to nonunionized workers and sectors of the middle class. This growth did not affect all regions equally, but in areas such as the city and suburbs of Buenos Aires, spending power manifested itself in a vibrant commercial marketplace. Statistics on retail sales in metropolitan Buenos Aires indicate that businesses catering to the working and middle classes expanded during the initial 1946–49 period, and Argentines flocked to restaurants, clothing stores, and movie theaters.¹⁹ Peronist officials naturally took credit for these changes, taking every opportunity to extol the abundance enjoyed by the pueblo thanks to state planning.

Yet even for Buenos Aires residents at the height of the boom, the New Argentina was less than a consumer's paradise. Prosperity had its paradoxes: better salaries for the majority meant that individual consumers were often unable to find the products they could now afford. Shoppers encountered frequent shortages and long lines at stores, and high prices for textiles and other manufactured goods dampened the celebratory mood. Contemporaries used the metaphor of a "*carrera*" (race) to describe the unsettling competition between prices and wages. Increases in worker salaries fanned the fires of rising prices, in conjunction with other factors such as the rapid surge in government spending. Moreover, the pressures of postwar inflation were felt across the globe, and Argentina's increasingly inward-oriented economy was not entirely immune to these larger forces.²⁰ As a result of these causes, the cost of living climbed steadily between 1945 and 1951, with annual inflation ranging from 8 percent to a peak of 49 percent—a disquieting novelty at that time. Peronist leaders had the unenviable political task of refereeing this "race." With each increase in prices, newly empowered unions clamored for better contracts from employers and the government. Labor negotiations may have directly affected only worker paychecks, but all Argentines were subject to the consequences of inflation that could accompany wage increases.

The Peronists brought together traditions for criticizing economic exchange and an expanded regulatory apparatus when they burst onto Argentina's political stage. But unlike previous opponents of commercial greed, the Per-

19. Secretaría de Asuntos Técnicos, *Comercio minorista en la Capital Federal* (Buenos Aires, 1954), 5–15, and *Comercio minorista en los 17 partidos del gran Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1954), 6–19.

20. Governments across Europe and the Americas—including the United States—experimented with economic controls to manage inflation in the war's aftermath. See Meg Jacobs, "How About Some Meat? The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946," *Journal of American History* (Dec. 1997): 910–41.

onists were now in command of the central government, and they pledged to do more than issue declarations against the “Mafia of Lucre.” Salary increases and social policies were not enough; they required complementary efforts to restrain the rising cost of living. Perón’s government never declared a specific right of all citizens to protection from commercial exploitation.²¹ Yet this ideal constituted part of a looser set of entitlements to a “dignified life,” proclaimed as a public duty in Perón’s speeches, celebrated in propaganda, and asserted by labor unions and other social actors. Perón’s political self-image centered not only on promising reforms like traditional politicians but also on delivering concrete improvements—“*Perón cumple*,” the famous slogan went: Perón delivers. Would salaries keep pace with the growing cost of living? Would the government continue to provide new “social conquests”? How long would the prosperity last, and who would benefit? The inability to answer these questions created a growing climate of uncertainty.

The Specter of Speculation

Over the 1946–55 period, the Argentine government responded to these concerns by increasing its regulation of economic activity. But viewing these measures solely from the perspective of economic policymaking, as has been the norm, fails to appreciate their political and cultural dimensions. As framed by the metaphors of Peronist propaganda, commercial laws became weapons in a war against capitalist greed. The line between economic policy and mass politics was hard to distinguish in Peronist Argentina, and officials used government and media resources at their disposal to shape public opinion. Speeches and decrees presented national audiences with straightforward explanations of commercial wrongdoing; public enforcement of state regulations and visual propaganda reinforced official pronouncements. Although these actions were not always in sync, Peronists proclaimed a new balance of power in the marketplace, where the state and consumers banded together to defeat the commercial

21. The 1949 constitution sanctioned by Perón’s government did, however, establish vague rights to well-being (*bienestar*), protection of the family, and social improvement (*mejoramiento social*) that resonated with claims to defend popular households from commercial greed and satisfy basic consumption needs. The constitution’s “right to well-being” included the rights of workers (*trabajadores*) to “adequate food and clothing” and “to satisfy their families’ needs without distress, in a way that allows them to work with satisfaction.” Once again, Peronist officials connected consumption to labor and emphasized a gendered ideal of the male breadwinner who provided for his family. See Universidad de Buenos Aires, *Conoscamos nuestra constitución* (Buenos Aires: Kraft, 1950).

enemies of the people. Political authorities emphasized the importance of protecting consumption to the vitality of the nation, the ethics of a socially just order, and the triumph of the Peronist movement.

Peronist policymakers spun an imposing regulatory web over commerce. After assuming the presidency in June 1946, Perón immediately announced the “Sixty-Day Campaign,” a package of price controls limiting the cost of consumer “necessities,” including food, clothing, and household goods. Announcements of official prices filled the pages of daily newspapers, and the government backed the controls with calls for merchant compliance and police inspections of stores, initially only in the city of Buenos Aires.²² The campaign ended after two months, with Peronist officials claiming success; this was, however, a fleeting victory, and prices crept upward once again. Two laws passed by congress in August 1946 (12.830) and April 1947 (12.083) provided federal agencies with new price-control weapons. The first law gave the executive branch authority to fix maximum prices, restrict exports, and ration import permits. The second law allowed officials to freeze prices, seize merchandise, and detain suspected “speculators” for up to 90 days. In the years that followed, federal officials added to this legal arsenal, capping profit levels for manufacturers and imposing occasional price freezes.²³

As labor secretary, Perón had pledged the state’s responsibility to help Argentines meet basic subsistence needs. Once in office, however, the president’s ideal of “dignified” living standards encompassed additional spheres of consumption. Government agencies mandated that all food vendors—neighborhood dives and five-star restaurants alike—offer a special “economical menu” for their customers. By the end of Perón’s first term, regulations determined the prices of a haircut, a movie ticket, and a cup of coffee. This shift from satisfying basic material needs to indulging other commercial desires reflected the social reality of postwar Argentina, as higher incomes meant that more consumers could afford goods and services previously out of reach. State regulations kept pace with the rising consumer aspirations of popular households.

Each round of price controls was met with a flurry of speeches and public events. Propaganda about commercial regulation reached national audiences

22. *Noticias Gráficas* (Buenos Aires), June 11, 1946; and Aug. 14, 1946; *El Pueblo* (Buenos Aires), June 19, 1946, 3; and Aug. 14, 1946, 6–7.

23. Subsecretaría de Informaciones, Dirección General del Registro Nacional, *Abastecimiento y represión del agio*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires, 1950), 9; and Ministerio del Interior, *Conferencia de gobernadores de provincias y territorios nacionales, para la represión del agio, la especulación y los precios abusivos* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso, 1947), 85–87.

through multiple private and partisan channels: newspapers, radio, newsreels, pamphlets, and political party meetings. On the one hand, officials employed the technocratic language of economic efficiency in their public presentations of consumer-protection measures. Laws streamlined commerce by reducing “middlemen” (mainly wholesalers and transporters) suspected of hoarding goods and adding unnecessary costs to the traffic of commodities. Perón, however, made it clear that his government did not intend to eliminate private property altogether, and he argued that speculators were a minority of the otherwise respectable business community.²⁴ In practical terms, it made political sense not to alienate potential supporters among the countless traveling salesmen, kiosk and pushcart operators, and shop owners of Argentine society. Perhaps for this reason, officials did not resort to overt ethnic stereotyping of merchants—although Law 12.830 did allow specifically for the deportation of foreign lawbreakers, and there was a fine line between economic nationalism and xenophobia. Contrary to what one might suspect from a man who courted the fascist Right, Perón resisted engaging in anti-Semitism or immigrant baiting in his nationalist proclamations against cupidity.

On the other hand, measured arguments were overshadowed by the aggressive tone of Peronist propaganda. Reflecting his long career as an army officer, Perón often referred to commercial controls as the “War against Speculation” and “War against Usury.” These campaigns focused on the insatiable avarice that propelled businesses to prey on laboring men and women. Playing on the popular culture of their audiences, Peronist leaders described the problem of containing inflation as a battle between good and evil, blending military and religious imagery. During the initial Sixty-Day Campaign, for instance, Eva Perón prevailed on women to follow the state’s lead in stamping out high prices. “Our home, our sacred space [*recinto*], the altar of our emotions, is in danger,” warned Evita. “Over it hovers threateningly the unspeakable machinations [*incalificable maniobra*] of speculation and usury.”²⁵ The religious overtones of Evita’s statements highlighted the Manichean terms of consumer politics. There was a strong gothic quality to Peronist moralizing.²⁶ Commercial exploitation was ghostlike: the specter of speculation hid in every corner of the market-

24. Perón speech to Consejo Económico Social, June 11, 1947, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Colección del Ministerio de Asuntos Técnicos (MAT), leg. 425.

25. Eva Perón, *Discursos completos, 1946–1948*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Ed. Megafón, 1985), 9–12.

26. Mark Edmunson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

place and haunted the livelihoods of hardworking families. This spectral quality also explained why controls were needed in all areas of commerce; somewhere, behind a closed door, a merchant or manufacturer was scheming up an “unspeakable machination” to squeeze another peso from the pueblo.

In these calls for action, Peronist leaders reached out to Argentine audiences of various types. Women were considered crucial in the fight against commerce, a connection the Peronists shared with other twentieth-century efforts to mobilize the political power of consumers.²⁷ Shortly after Eva Perón’s 1946 speech, the Secretariat of Industry and Commerce took out full-page ads in women’s magazines urging readers, “Don’t Pay a Cent More.”²⁸ From the perspective of Peronist leaders, women were well suited to the task of ensuring compliance with price controls because of their presumed command of the purse strings and daily shopping decisions. Likewise, women were seen as an underused political resource, and consumption was one way that Peronists moved to win female Argentines over to their side, along with the extension of voting rights in 1947.²⁹ Evita accentuated the special spiritual and moral authority women had over male breadwinners as mothers, wives, and girlfriends. Peronist leaders, however, avoided presenting consumption as an entirely female sphere of influence, and the government made overtures to unions, cooperatives, and other traditionally male bastions of cost-of-living activism. All Argentines, in theory, could serve as potential weapons in the battle against usurious merchants.

At first glance, the bellicose posturing associated with antispeculation may make it difficult to take the regime’s commercial policies seriously. But enforcement of price controls did matter, especially for a political movement that staked its reputation on delivering substantive social improvements and whose economic strategy depended on sustaining domestic demand. These

27. For an analysis of gender and consumer politics, see the essays collected in Victoria De Grazia’s *The Sex of Things*, in particular de Grazia’s “Nationalizing Women: The Competition between Fascist and Commercial Cultural Modes in Mussolini’s Italy,” 337–58; see also Jacobs, “How About Some Meat”; and Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*.

28. *Para Ti*, Jan. 7, 1947.

29. On Peronist efforts to gain a female political following, see Marysa Navarro, *Evita* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1981); Estela dos Santos, *Las mujeres peronistas* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983); Susana Bianchi and Norma Sanchis, *El partido peronista femenino* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1988); Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: Propaganda, rituales políticos y educación en el régimen peronista (1946–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Ariel Historia Argentina, 1993), 256–74; and Silvana A. Palermo, “El sufragio femenino en el Congreso Nacional: Ideologías de género y ciudadanía en la Argentina (1916–1955),” *Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana “Dr. Emilio Ravignani,”* 16–17 (1997): 151–78.

pressures motivated government officials to conduct inspections, to fine and jail merchants, and to publicize their efforts to rid the nation of speculators. The orchestration of consumer-protection policies fell to several executive-branch bureaucracies like the Ministry of Technical Affairs, the Secretariat of Industry and Commerce, the Federal Police, and the Subsecretariat of Information—all of which were torn in countless other directions by Perón's policy agenda. Initially, price-control inspections were restricted to the city of Buenos Aires and its suburban region, thus excluding two-thirds of the Argentine population that lived in the "interior." Enforcement in the provinces picked up over time, as local officials created their own institutions to manage prices and as federal authorities increased their regulatory power.³⁰ The impact of the War against Speculation varied from province to province, even from one community to the next, contingent on the diligence of local, provincial, and national authorities.

In order to intensify enforcement, Perón founded the National Office of Price Surveillance (*Dirección Nacional de Vigilancia de Precios*) in 1948. The office handled complaints from citizens who wished to condemn merchants, and it also coordinated action with the Federal Police and provincial counterparts. A pamphlet published by the office provides an overview of antispeculation enforcement in 1948 and 1949. In these two years, the Office of Price Surveillance and the Federal Police conducted approximately 158,000 inspections. For metropolitan Buenos Aires, a crude average suggests that the inspectors would have visited the region's 90,000 commercial establishments less than two times each—not exactly the constant surveillance promised in Peronist propaganda. Nevertheless, in these two years the Office of Price Surveillance imprisoned 12,900 suspects in metropolitan Buenos Aires, and provincial authorities held an additional 1,830 businesspersons in custody.³¹ While enforcement failed to live up to the discourse of antispeculation, its impact on Argentine business was far from negligible.

Government legal records offer valuable, if impressionistic, insights into

30. For instance, the provincial government of Santa Fe established its own "Junta against Usury and Speculation" to coordinate efforts with national agencies and established local committees (each staffed by the chief of police or mayor, a representative from local unions, and a community representative) to monitor markets in cities and towns across the province. *Conferencia de gobernadores de provincias*, 39–45, 58. *Abastecimiento y represión del agio*, 45, 61; and Confederación General del Trabajo, *Anuario del Trabajo* (Buenos Aires: 1948), 33–34.

31. *Memoria de la Dirección Nacional de Vigilancia de Precios y Abastecimiento correspondiente al año 1949* (Buenos Aires, 1950), 95–97; and Dirección Nacional de Estadística y Censos, *Censo de Comercio 1954*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: 1959), 10–11, 17–19.

those who were prosecuted. In February 1948, for example, authorities processed 70 cases involving a range of “speculators”: butchers, restaurant owners, fruit and vegetable vendors, and ice sellers.³² Notwithstanding Perón’s promises to target big business, shopkeepers and retailers (*minoristas*) were major targets in the War on Speculation. Wholesalers (*mayoristas*) attracted additional attention from inspectors as potential profiteers and were assigned the most stringent price controls and minimal profit margins.³³ Typical punishments included a couple hundred pesos in fines, business closures for periods of 5–10 days, and jail sentences of 15–30 days (levied against male merchants alone). Roundups of alleged speculators occurred in working-class neighborhoods, but also in businesses located downtown and in the wealthy districts of Buenos Aires. Fines for restaurants in upscale Barrio Norte did little to improve the situation of the average consumer, who lived and shopped in other parts of town. But such actions communicated the regime’s commitment to standing up to commercial interests, even on the home turf of the affluent.

It is worth noting that “speculation” was not entirely a figment of Perón’s imagination. Merchants did indeed take advantage of high demand to create artificial scarcities and reap large profits. It is difficult to separate fact from the layers of propagandizing in the Peronist-era press, yet newspaper reports recount how scheming entrepreneurs stockpiled everything from consumer staples and textiles to gasoline and raw materials for manufacturing. These actions undoubtedly contributed to the high prices and shortages that threatened working-class households. However, those accused of speculation, whether guilty or innocent, encountered a legal system that illustrated the authoritarian side of the Peronist regime. Executive-branch agencies, and not the courts, investi-

32. The 70 cases of accused speculators for this month are as follows: 18 butchers, 12 fruit and vegetable stands, 10 restaurants, 8 pastry shops (*confiterías*), 5 bars and cafés, 3 construction-material stores, 3 groceries (*almacenes*), 3 bakeries, 3 ice sellers, 2 delis (*fiambrerías*), 1 fur wholesaler, 1 general wholesaler, and 1 general store. Geographically, 60 of the cases were from Buenos Aires city and 10 from the suburban region. List of accused speculators, Feb. 1948, AGN-MAT, leg. 427.

33. Officials went after manufacturers of consumer goods as well. The Office of Price Surveillance initiated legal proceedings against Argentine factory owners charged with a failure to label goods, hoarding raw materials, and violating price controls; in some cases it imposed fines in the hundreds of thousands of pesos for infractions. The threat of investigations compounded the anxieties of postwar industrialists; they depended, more than ever before, on the favor of state officials, who held both the carrot (import-export permits, access to raw materials, and state loans) and the stick (fines, jail sentences) to keep businesses in line.

gated the cases and handed down punishments. Most sentences given to retailers and wholesalers could not be appealed, and inspectors enjoyed ample leeway in conducting their searches; those sentenced to jail time ended up in the new wings of Villa Devoto prison in Buenos Aires city. Designed to expedite the campaign against avarice, these procedures placed the rights of the accused at odds with pressures to match the regime's promises of justice.

Yet the crime of "speculation" was more than a justification for economic policymaking or a flexing of state power over business. Its primary purpose was political, aimed at bringing popular-sector consumers into the Peronist fold. As a result, antispeculation controls were public events. Business inspections offered opportunities for state officials to translate the rhetoric of commercial justice into spectacles. Agents searched through stores, and if evidence of malfeasance was found, they tacked up signs proclaiming "*Clausurado*" (closed) over the doorways and carted speculators off to headquarters. Photographs from the period capture these tense moments: curious crowds of passersby and neighbors gathered on sidewalks to watch the commotion, the people in the back craning their necks to get a look at the "usurer."³⁴ With expressions ranging from uneasiness to elation, the public witnessed the planning state in action. These scenes were repeated thousands of times over the 1946–55 period, converting ordinary citizens walking down the street into actors and audiences of a Peronist morality play.

Press coverage reinforced official propaganda by assigning political meaning to the microlevel struggles of consumers. Progovernment newspapers published daily lists of merchants arrested or fined for violating price controls. Consider a series of stories published in *Noticias Gráficas* about the barrio of San Cristobal in Buenos Aires city. In May 1947 government inspectors had punished a local merchant, Alí Kichquie, for stockpiling a scarce household good—floor-cleaning rags—and for attempting to bribe a police officer. Fearing similar repression, merchants in the area lowered prices on floor-cleaning rags, causing neighbors to form long lines outside stores in search of the coveted item. Having challenged the authority of local merchants, the government inspections fostered a triumphant mood among neighbors, especially housewives who crowded together on sidewalks and with smiling faces held aloft the rags like victory flags. The newspaper evoked the Peronist leadership's bellicose rhetoric in explaining

34. AGN, Photography Department, box 1307, envelope 24, doc. 201471, Apr. 22, 1953; envelope 6, doc. 188496 (n.d.); and envelope 4, doc. 172881, May 9, 1947.



Figure 1. Closure of the “Mercado Paris” store located at 925 Charcas Street (now Marcelo T. de Alvear) in a posh Buenos Aires district. This photo highlights both the police and an audience of pedestrians, including a woman in a fur coat, implying that antispeculation was waged among the affluent as well. Courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento de Fotografía, box 1307, envelope 6, doc. 188496, n.d.

the joyfulness of consumers, exclaiming that the “battlefield has been left seeded with adversaries.” The caption to a photograph in another article read, “The struggle is hard, but the prize, a floor rag, justifies it.”³⁵

Representations of the conflicts between merchants and consumers reached wide audiences through the national media. Antispeculation references appeared in unexpected places, even in mass cultural expressions such as the cinema. One film titled *Arrabalera* (1950) tells the melodramatic story of Felisa (played by Tita Merelo, one of Argentina’s most famous actresses), who overcomes an abusive boyfriend to find happiness with her son and new husband. In one scene,

35. *Noticias Gráficas*, May 3 and 5, 1947.

Felisa goes to a street market to buy ingredients for a *carbonada* (a traditional stew) that her husband requested for dinner. Walking through the market, she wrangles with stall owners over prices and makes comical remarks about the quality of their goods. Eventually she comes across a vegetable stall and sighs with relief that the price of potatoes has fallen. But the merchant quickly flips over the price sign, almost doubling the cost, and in a heavily Italian-accented Spanish explains, “No *signora*, it’s only that the *inspectore* just passed by.” Felisa exclaims, “Nice example of a speculator [*agiotisa*]” and berates him thoroughly over his “gold-plated” produce. The film turns back suddenly to its main storyline, but the scene draws attention to essential features of consumption in this period. Confrontations between female shoppers and male merchants were a part of daily routines in an age before standardized prices and supermarkets. The scene was meant to entertain movie audiences by turning the tables on the usual gender and class norms, showing how a feisty heroine let businessmen have a piece of her mind, in the process representing audience members’ own frustrations with high prices and “unscrupulous” practices.

Peronist antispeculation propaganda intended a similar effect, which *Arrabalera*, consciously or not, reinforced through its choice of language, social stereotypes, and gendered depiction of the marketplace. While the film also implied that speculation controls were ineffectual, and thus differed from state propaganda, it nevertheless underscored the fundamental moral assumptions of “just” consumption.³⁶ As these media representations suggest, there was more at stake in antispeculation enforcement than price levels. The public rituals of the War on Speculation challenged social hierarchies, above all the conventional balance of power between shopkeeper and customer. They allowed supporters to vent their frustrations, proclaim their status as citizens in the New Argentina, and, in cooperation with the government, score victories against the forces of immorality and greed.³⁷ Overblown as some news reports were, mass media offered Argentines tools for thinking about state commercial regulation. These representations, combined with the ceremony of inspections, sought to

36. *Arrabalera*, directed by Tulio Demicheli, 80 min. (1950). Another Tita Merello film, *Mercado de abasto* (directed by Lucas Demare, 76 min., 1954), dealt more extensively with the world of everyday commerce; although this film made familiar criticisms of commercial greed, it offered a surprisingly positive portrait of merchants in the late Peronist years.

37. Moreover, the regime’s tirades against merchants could have easily fed the xenophobia of some supporters against foreign shopkeepers. If ethnically motivated confrontations did occur, the Peronist-controlled press was careful to avoid reporting them in this manner.

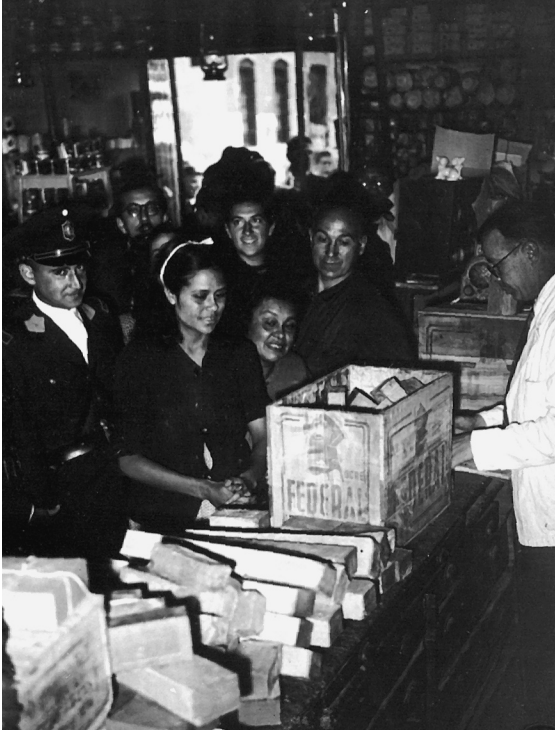


Figure 2. This photo captures the aftermath of a raid on the hardware store "La Defensa," located a few blocks south of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires. In this case, the police detained a merchant for hoarding bars of soap, which were immediately seized and sold to smiling women and other consumers that crowded the shop. Courtesy of the AGN, Departamento de Fotografía, box 1307, envelope 4, doc. 172881 (May 9, 1947).

convince popular audiences that daily shopping was a political act. Newspaper reports illustrated how even a cleaning rag could take on significance as an example of Peronist social justice in action.

Peronist leaders wanted Argentines to perceive market relations within a particular ideological framework, and they deployed state, party, and media resources at their disposal to mold consumer consciousness. But the question remains: how successful were they in shaping the opinions of their audience? Gauging public reactions to state initiatives is a complicated task, but based on the available evidence, it is clear that the quest to domesticate markets provoked polarizing reactions. At one end of the spectrum, organizations with traditions of consumer activism were among the most vocal supporters of Peronist anti-speculation. The political alliance among the Peronist leadership, the CGT, and Argentina's principal unions facilitated the flow of consumer politics: for state officials, unions represented a means to channel propaganda about speculation to working-class audiences, and for the union rank and file, close ties with the government provided a mechanism to amplify grassroots demands.

The lobbying of labor groups helped to expand price controls and other consumer-protection policies outside the Buenos Aires region. In their calls for greater enforcement, union members employed the same class-based contrasts between producers and parasites as earlier labor protestors but infused them with Peronist nationalism and partisanship. For instance, workers from Tucumán raised the problem of commercial controls at a provincial CGT congress in June 1948. Delegates approved a resolution calling for the appointment of new inspectors; some even proposed deputizing workers to form a “union police” to inspect stores. The resolution targeted merchants, the provincial “oligarchy,” and corrupt officials, who, rather than follow the “patriotic spirit of the laws and the efforts to humanize capital,” instead imposed “their unlimited avarice and unequivocally exploit[ed] working people.” The union’s complaints produced immediate action: the provincial government reacted with a wave of well-publicized inspections and arrests.³⁸ Although not all demands were met—government officials passed on the suggestion to constitute a union police—organized labor placed direct pressure on public officials.

Other popular organizations enlisted in the ranks of the War on Speculation, and in these cases as well, consumers walked the line between supporting the Peronist campaign for moral commerce and complaining about inaction. In Buenos Aires city, delegations representing middle- and working-class neighborhoods asked the municipal government to increase antispeculation efforts. In nearby Avellaneda, town council members requested greater assistance from national inspectors, while in the suburb of Quilmes, residents established a “Committee for Social Improvement” to denounce merchants and price-law violations to the press. Consumers worked through local Peronist party institutions to address the problem of high prices and to meet the subsistence needs of their communities (most typically, in “*unidades básicas*,” neighborhood-level organizations divided into male and female branches).³⁹

Argentines also sent letters to government officials that offer rare glimpses into how individuals perceived the problem of consumption in Perón’s Argentina. Salvador G., a man from the city of Rosario, wrote to the Ministry of Technical Affairs suggesting that the government create an organization to look into the causes of the rising cost of living, which he felt were clear examples of “extortionist piracy.” For Salvador, consumption and commerce had an unde-

38. *La Gaceta* (Tucumán), Jan. 27, 1947, 5; June 14, 1948, 9; June 18, 1948, 5.

39. *Noticias Gráficas*, May 4, 1947, n.p.; letter from Augustin Giovanelli, president of the Bloque Peronista of the Consejo Deliberante of Avellaneda, Nov. 16, 1948, AGN-MAT, leg. 426; and *Norte* (Quilmes), Apr. 9, 1947, 1; and May 6, 1 and 7.

niable partisan dimension. Those responsible for high prices were “not only inspired by unspeakable [*incalificables*] yearnings for lucre, but also by the deliberate objective of disparaging the ‘real and evident Social Justice in progress,’ supporting themselves with unspecific theories about ‘inflation,’ ‘devaluation of the currency,’ etc.”⁴⁰ As Salvador’s letter makes clear, Perón’s vision of the machinations of extortionists, and not classical economic theory, made greater sense to his experiences as a consumer. He expressed a political narrative like-minded to that advanced by Peronist leaders, depicting in typically populist terms a struggle between a greedy elite and an honest people. It is striking that this petitioner employed a vocabulary similar to Peronist leaders, echoing Evita’s use of “unspeakable.” Whether this was an example of propaganda’s direct influence, a clever tactic to curry favor with policymakers, or an overlapping of moral worldviews is uncertain, but in any event the commonality reflects the wider resonance of Peronist antispeculation discourse.

Other letter writers, however, were more critical of Peronist consumer politics. While proclaiming their willingness to aid antispeculation campaigns, petitioners described how price controls failed to improve conditions. One letter writer grumbled that merchants stocked only limited supplies of price-controlled goods; when these were gone, they offered more expensive, unregulated items. If one asks the local cheese seller for price-controlled goods, the petitioner wrote, he offers you a chunk of dried-out cheese (“*un trozo reseco*”) and exclaims, “Here, you want some of this Perón cheese.”⁴¹ The average consumer was forced to choose between expensive and second-rate goods, not to mention enduring the jibes of insolent merchants. Unlike the floor rags of propagandistic newspaper reports, in this case a prosaic object epitomized merchant resistance to Peronism. Supporters may have smiled in official photographs of price inspections, but in the more intimate setting of their letters to political authorities, they expressed their frustrations with daily conditions. For some, goods such as the “Perón cheese” were daily reminders that merchants still held the upper hand and that the national government had not yet made its “domesticating” presence felt at the local level. Yet even if conditions on the ground did not match the official rhetoric, the government’s vision of moral commerce provided a goal to strive for, a description of the well-being that the working people, the “*pueblo trabajador*,” would enjoy, once internal enemies were eliminated.

40. Letter from Salvador G., Jan. 18, 1947, AGN-MAT, leg. 597. I have identified the authors of letters by their first name to protect their identity. In translating the letters into English, I have also standardized the unconventional spelling used by some petitioners.

41. AGN-MAT, leg. 583, doc. 771 (July 1946).

These reactions to antispeculation measures were counterbalanced by the opposition of diverse actors, who represented the full range of political ideologies and social classes of the “anti-Peronist” bloc. Opponents of Peronist commercial regulation saw their material interests threatened, but also at stake were basic understandings of the boundaries between private and public authority in a capitalist society. Regulation affronted the rights and social status of some property owners. For others, the problem was not state management per se, but instead what they perceived as the shrill chicanery of the War on Speculation. Representatives of Argentina’s business community were among the most vocal critics of Peronist consumer politics. Relations between businesses and the state under Peronist rule defy easy categorization.⁴² Business owners responded to state planning in multiple ways: allying with the regime, backing opposition parties, or, perhaps most commonly, making the most of new opportunities but resisting the state’s encroachment on day-to-day practices. Argentine industrialists and merchants shared at least one thing in common: namely, anger at the Peronist approach to enforcing antispeculation controls. State policies presented businesses with a tangle of commercial regulations that made it easy to slip into illegality, intentionally or not, and that raised anxieties regarding the loss of social standing.

With the rules of commerce in flux, the difference between the usual truck and barter of business and the crime of speculation was far from clear. A September 1947 letter sent by the Argentine director of International Telephone and Telegraph to its U.S. headquarters describes a supposedly “typical” encounter with a price inspector. The multinational’s representative writes that inspections were “carried on in the atmosphere of a raid on criminals” by shouting policemen, who threatened to detain merchants “incommunicado” if they did not cooperate: “Virtually every large retail store and textile or clothing manufacturer is operating under a sword of Damocles, as it is almost impossible to do business without violating one or another of the many laws and regulations, and the police and inspectors have been raiding one place after another, apparently

42. James P. Brennan, “Industrialists and *Bolicheros*: Business and the Peronist Populist Alliance, 1943–1976,” in Brennan, *Peronism and Argentina*; Christina Luccini, *Apoyo empresarial en los orígenes del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1990); Judith Teichman, “Interest Conflict and Entrepreneurial Support for Perón,” *Latin American Research Review* 16, no. 1 (1981); Jorge Schvarzer, *Empresarios del pasado: La Unión Industrial Argentina* (Buenos Aires: CISEA / Imago Mundi, 1991); and Peter Birle, *Los empresarios y la democracia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Belgrano, 1997).

hoping to unearth some violation by big business that will really be worth publicizing."⁴³ The representative clearly considers the inspections an invasion of the private commercial sphere by public authorities. He is troubled by the sudden unpredictability of doing business in Perón's Argentina; the partisan politics of price controls and nationalism have trumped the rule of law. The letter presents the inversion of older patterns of social deference, celebrated by the Peronist press, in a negative light: instead of the usual respect afforded to entrepreneurial elites by political authorities, businessmen have now become criminal suspects inhabiting an underworld of outlaws.

These complaints were echoed by a host of other critics who chafed under Peronist rule. Argentine retailers advanced policy-oriented critiques of Peronist regulations, publishing their grievances either in the mainstream press or in specialized journals. They supported an alternative model of consumer society, one based on the energy of entrepreneurs, international trade, and encouragement of the profit motive, but which did not preclude ample state support for business. Shopkeeper representatives maintained that only through the logic of universal economic laws could stable mass consumption be achieved.⁴⁴ In addition, liberal newspapers such as *La Nación* and *La Prensa* rejected the belligerent terms of Perón's War on Speculation, which they felt worsened class antagonisms. Instead of solely blaming inflation on speculators, media outlets pointed to ballooning government spending and counterproductive regulations as the true causes of climbing prices.⁴⁵ Political organizations like the Socialist Party went a step further, lambasting Peronist antispeculation as a farce designed to whip up partisan support. They agreed that profiteering was a grave problem but stressed that overspending and corruption were the factors behind escalating prices. It was the "consumer masses," they contended, who would pay dearly for Peronist "demagoguery and wastefulness."⁴⁶

For all its intensity, however, the antagonism toward Peronist commer-

43. U.S. State Department Central Files, Argentina: Internal Affairs, 1945–1949, microfilm reel 4, part 2, document 2959, Sept. 8, 1947.

44. The Cámara de Grandes Tiendas y Anexos argued this case in an open letter sent to Perón's government in 1948. See *El Mundo*, July 25, 1948, 4. For similar complaints made by the Federación Argentina de Centros de Almaceneros, see *El Mundo*, May 7, 1947, 6.

45. In a typical editorial of this period, *La Prensa* acknowledged the existence of profiteering and worldwide inflationary conditions, but concluded that in Argentina "one of the most powerful causes inflation . . . is the increase in State expenditures"; *La Prensa*, May 13, 1947, 4.

46. Partido Socialista, *Hacia la bancarota* (Buenos Aires: Ed. La Vanguardia, 1948), n.p.

cial regulation never erupted into cohesive action during the 1946–55 period. Critics found little common ground for unified opposition; fear of reprisals and increasing state control of the media thwarted collective resistance. Moreover, Perón's government was neither willing nor able to directly regulate all business activity. The New Argentina still depended on businesses to provide the jobs, to manufacture the products, and to distribute the goods essential to creating a society of well-paid workers and satisfied consumers. Commercial controls may have impinged upon the property rights of business owners, but they did not seek to erase private enterprise. Resentment grew as the Peronist regime broadened the scope of economic management, yet it was more often than not confined to discussions in the backrooms of retail stores, company boardrooms, and around kitchen tables. Even as antispeculation alienated many individuals, the regime's policies infused popular understandings of citizenship with a nascent language of consumer rights. Argentines looked increasingly to Peronist authorities as guarantors of their prosperity against dishonest profiteers, corrupt merchants, and other enemies of the people.

Calling on Consumers

With the War on Speculation, the regime's authorities placed themselves in the tricky position of satisfying the political expectations of supporters. As economic conditions worsened in the early 1950s, Perón's administration would find the contradictions at the heart of antispeculation more difficult to resolve: increased spending power for working Argentines helped to fuel higher inflation (which reached nearly 50 percent in 1951), and commercial regulations discouraged some entrepreneurs. Over time, officials launched a concerted effort to establish an overtly political role for popular-sector consumers. While the old focus on moral markets remained intact, Perón and Evita shifted emphasis from the evils of commerce to the patriotic and partisan duties of consumers. As with many other political initiatives to craft "citizen-consumers," Peronist authorities articulated new connections among the home, marketplace, and nation. This strategy involved casting a spotlight on women's authority over the domestic economy and male family members.⁴⁷ Speculators were still blamed for conspiring against the collective good, but now public officials accused Argen-

47. For historical investigations into the formation of "citizen-consumers," see De Grazia, *Sex of Things*, 275–86; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*; and Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunton, "Material Politics: An Introduction," in Daunton and Hilton, *The Politics of Consumption*, 1–32.

tines of putting their own needs above those of the nation and sought to educate them in more “rational” consumption. Rather than open a rift between Peronist leaders and grassroots supporters, this second thrust of consumer politics had a more ambiguous impact: strengthening, on the one hand, shared perceptions of injustice, while on the other confirming the role of state regulation as a means for controlling, and not just defending, popular-sector Argentines.

It was clear by the late 1940s that the regime’s commercial policies had conquered neither the high cost of living nor speculative practices. Although inspections temporarily reduced prices in some areas, inflation continued to cut into spending power. Sales of consumer retail goods dropped off in major cities, and shortages of food, clothing, and other staples mounted as a result of weak agricultural harvests and bottlenecks in production. As in other Latin American attempts at inward-oriented development, the drive to foment domestic industry and consumer markets in Argentina succeeded at first but soon ran into obstacles: declining agro-exports set off a cycle of yawning trade deficits, foreign-exchange scarcities, and barriers to further industrialization.⁴⁸

In terms of mass consumption, Argentina’s vanishing prosperity posed two problems for government officials. First, price controls had the unintended impact of making “illegal” commerce a profitable pursuit. As state regulations grew, a wider swath of daily commercial activity became dominated by the black market or “*bolsa negra*”—in essence, illegal trading that took place everywhere, from street fairs to warehouses. From the perspective of Peronist leaders, the ubiquity of the *bolsa negra* was a political challenge: the flaunting of regulations tested partisans’ faith and lent credence to opponents’ arguments that antispeculation was a sham. These pressures added to a second conflict. In the “race” between wages and prices, the labor movement was not content only to issue calls for greater price-control enforcement. Labor activists pressed for higher wage contracts from employers, and unions looked for backing from the government. The friction between these two allies—one fighting to stop the slide in spending power and the other hoping to restrain inflation and increase business investment—flared during strikes and contract negotiations in the late 1940s.⁴⁹ Perón responded to these dilemmas by appointing a team of economic advisers

48. See Dornbusch and Edwards, *Macroeconomics of Populism*, 7–44.

49. Louise M. Doyon, “Conflictos obreros durante el régimen peronista (1946–1955),” in *La formación del sindicalismo peronista*, ed. Juan Carlos Torre (Buenos Aires: Ed. Legasa, 1988), 223–63; Michael Snodgrass, “Topics Not Suitable for Propaganda: Working-Class Resistance under Peronism,” in *Workers’ Control in Latin America*, ed. Jonathan C. Brown (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Samuel L. Baily, *Labor, Nationalism, and Politics in Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1967), 121–61.

in 1949 and reversing earlier strategies (most notably, creating incentives for foreign investment). The emphasis on educating consumers was part of a larger initiative to slow domestic spending, boost growth, and contain inflation.

Peronist propaganda-makers shaped the ideal citizen-consumer throughout the early 1950s. One pamphlet, titled *Fight to the Death against Speculators, Says Perón*, compiled speeches given during a September 1950 conference about the problem of high prices.⁵⁰ As the title suggests, Perón continued to lash out at the “vulgar thieves” and “economic delinquents” behind speculative conspiracies. However, he focused on the shortcomings of Argentine shoppers, who he suggested had become complacent with the material benefits of Peronist rule. He criticized in particular the “*rastacuero*” behavior of fellow Argentines—the custom of living beyond one’s means and publicly displaying the illusion of wealth and high status, or as Perón put it, the need to “give the appearance that we are more than we are.” He argued that people threw money around at restaurants and stores without checking to see if they were being ripped off. The president suggested that there were too many “loafers” (*barraganes*) and “fools” (*zonzos*) who complained about inflation but spent money recklessly or on needless vices (such as gambling at the horse track). Using an example that he would repeat frequently, Perón bemoaned all the perfectly good meat and bread that he saw dumped in the trash on his way to work in the morning; while postwar Europe languished in penury, the president noted, many Argentines failed to appreciate their land of plenty.⁵¹

These statements illustrate the ambivalence with which Peronist leaders viewed mass consumption. It was an integral facet of social justice but also a potentially corrupting force that threatened the nation and the “*revolución justicialista*.” Enticed by sudden spending power, popular households could become obsessed with luxury and satisfying consumerist desires. At a basic level, officials were correct in their assessment: price controls failed because shoppers accepted the higher than official prices offered by merchants. But the motivations behind this fact were more complicated. Some consumers paid no heed to Peronist price controls out of a lack of concern or even spite, but many Argentines simply lacked the time, energy, and resources to track down goods at official prices or had no alternative than to buy black-market products. Rather than admitting the government’s own responsibility for inflation, Perón created a

50. Presidencia de la Nación, Subsecretaría de Informaciones, *Guerra a muerte a los especuladores dijo Perón* (Buenos Aires, 1950); and Organización de Consumidores, *Defienda sus Pesos! Vigile los precios! No pague un centavo más!* (Buenos Aires, 1950).

51. *Guerra a muerte*, 4–11.

new persona—the negligent consumer—to stand alongside the speculator in the rogues' gallery of the people's enemies.

Criticisms of unpatriotic consumer behavior played on supporters' guilt and sought to spur them into action. Peronist leaders presented themselves as tutors who would instruct Argentines in the proper habits of everyday consumption. "Home economics" (*economía doméstica*) became a political buzzword, and several branches of the Peronist regime aimed to inculcate thrift among popular households. The didactic tone was evident in Perón's speeches. Asserting that now "every Argentine should be his own price inspector," the president gave his public practical advice on how to shop: when one goes to buy socks, he recommended, carry a list of price controls in your pocket; offer the store owner the official price, and if he does not accept, call the police and have him carted off to Villa Devoto. If every citizen did this, Perón concluded, speculation would be eliminated in a mere 48 hours.⁵² Federal agencies published manuals for families on home economics that applied the techniques of state planning to the household budget, including estimating and prioritizing daily expenditures. Perón's populist discourse pushed outward at the boundaries of traditional political distinctions between the public and private. Earlier Argentine governments had launched modest campaigns to encourage savings, but no previous president had taken household economics to the extreme of offering citizens advice on how to shop for socks.⁵³

These efforts paid special notice to women, above all housewives. If women were seen as instrumental in the crusade against speculators, they were even more important "weapons" in reducing wastefulness. It fell upon housewives, Perón contended, to act as "tutelary angels of home economics" by ridiculing the wild spending of the men in their households and honing their skills at managing family budgets.⁵⁴ By focusing on the significance of housewives, state officials highlighted the political importance of women—and not only as maternal agents of reproduction and childrearing. Peronist authorities linked the activities associated with the household economy—shopping, food preparation, and forms of self-sufficient production (tending gardens, making clothes, and so on)—to the vitality of the national economy as a whole. In rhetorical terms at least, housewives were depicted as analogous to state planners, employ-

52. *Noticias Gráficas*, Sept. 29, 1950, n.p.

53. For state credit policies, see Marcelo Rougier and Martín Fiszbein, "De Don Derrochín a Maese Ahorrín: El fomento del ahorro durante la economía peronista," in Rougier et al., *Sueños de bienestar*, 107–44.

54. *Guerra a muerte*, 11–13.

ing similarly rational techniques to ensure maximum efficiency in the use of national resources. Propaganda-makers replaced the emphasis on sensual pleasure and satisfaction associated with advertising depictions of female consumers with a more somber tone, one that presented consumption as a serious business of civic duty.

This political role for women, however, had obvious limitations. By equating women with housewives, Peronist leaders backed a restrictive paradigm of gender relations in which the home and marketplace were the primary, legitimate spheres for Argentine women. They helped to propagate a contrast between the male breadwinner and female homemaker, strengthening a division of labor depicted in mass culture and to which at least some popular-sector households aspired.⁵⁵ There was a clear paternalism to the regime's brand of consumer politics. Women were presented as loyal agents who would follow the instructions of the state, and who unlike feckless male wage earners were assumed to be not only more responsible but perhaps more malleable to partisan instruction.

The reeducation of female consumers fell mainly under the control of Eva Perón and her agencies. This dimension of consumer politics grew out of the social-assistance activities carried out by Evita's branches of the Peronist movement, the Partido Peronista Femenino and the Fundación Eva Perón. Neighborhood-level *unidades básicas* offered women classes on home economics and distributed propaganda on household thrift. The Fundación Eva Perón went one step further and opened a chain of approximately 200 *provedurias* (retail stores modeled on union cooperatives) that sold subsidized food and household goods.⁵⁶ In addition to economic motives, the courting of female consumers responded to internal partisan politics. Historians have argued that from the late 1940s onward, Perón's regime sought to offset the influence of organized labor by reaching out to women, children, the poor, and other unorganized sectors.⁵⁷

55. Barbara Weinstein has explored similar dynamics in Brazil. In São Paulo, state and business officials teamed up through vocational programs to mold the proper roles for male and female workers. Barbara Weinstein, "Unskilled Worker, Skilled Housewife: Constructing the Working-Class Woman in São Paulo, Brazil," in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 72–99.

56. Néstor Ferioli, *La Fundación Eva Perón*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1990), 139; and Mónica Campins, Horacio Gaggero, and Alicia Garro, "La Fundación Eva Perón," in *Estado, corporativismo y acción social en Brasil, Argentina y Uruguay*, ed. Castro Gomes et al. (Buenos Aires: Biblos, Fundación Simón Rodríguez, 1992), 98–99.

Officials did not ignore male consumers or union members entirely in their reeducation efforts; antispeculation speeches were reprinted in union newspapers, and handbooks on home economics were written in gender-neutral terms with illustrations of both husbands and wives.⁵⁸ But legions of thrifty and loyal female consumers would provide an alternative ally to the predominately male unions demanding higher wages. This distinction may explain why Peronist authorities focused mainly on consumer education and forging patron-client relationships. Perón and Evita's regime was less interested in building independent consumer-rights organizations than in molding the consciousness of shoppers at the household level through controllable partisan channels.⁵⁹

The campaign to forge thrifty consumers met its greatest challenge in February 1952, with the announcement of the government's economic recovery package, the Plan Económico. After months of closed-door discussions among his ministers, Perón introduced a plan to avert a full-blown economic crisis. To check inflation, the government would reduce expenditures and freeze salaries for two years, but only after raising them between 40 and 80 percent. Stricter antispeculation controls would protect this adjusted standard of living.⁶⁰ The national government launched a propaganda blitz about the Plan Económico. It depicted these policies as a trimming of unneeded luxuries, as an austerity plan without discomfort. The Subsecretariat of Information outlined the emergency measures supporters could take to discipline their consumption. Newsreels instructed moviegoing audiences on how to fulfill the "duty of the pueblo" by economizing on purchases and reducing expenditures on utilities. Magazines were filled with photographs and testimonials that profiled the "Peronist home economics" joyfully adopted by women: mending old clothes instead of buying new ones, finding creative recipes for leftovers, and planting backyard vegetable gardens. The Ministry of Public Health promoted these "health gardens" (*buer-*

57. For the most thorough exploration of this theme, see Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 211–96.

58. Caja Nacional de Ahorro Postal, *Economía familiar* (Buenos Aires, 1950); and *Obrero ferroviario*, Oct. 1950, 12; and Nov. 1950, 11.

59. For instance, at the 1950 press conference, María Rosa Calviño de Gómez, a close friend of Evita's, was appointed to head a new Organización de Consumidores. Yet this group almost immediately faded from sight; it never came close to matching the union movement's more contentious cost-of-living activism.

60. Farmers received immediate relief with higher prices for crops and pledges for more credit and technical support. Subsecretaria de Informaciones, *Perón anuncia el Plan Económico de 1952 y los precios de la cosecha* (Buenos Aires, 1952), 7.

tas de salud) by distributing thousands of packets of seeds, even to city residents in Buenos Aires.⁶¹

In practice, the Plan Económico placed more hardship on working Argentines than originally promised. The average wage increase for industrial laborers was around 20 percent (half the amount demanded by CGT leaders), and by September 1952 inflation had wiped out these gains. Moreover, the National Economic Council (Consejo Económico Nacional) adopted policies to restrict consumption directly. Across the nation, the federal government prohibited the sale of beef in stores and restaurants on one day each week in order to help Argentina meet an export contract with Britain. Grain shortages and the pressure to increase agro-exports led the government to approve the sale of *pan negro*—“black bread” made with lower-quality flour and millet. The Ministry of Public Health justified the two measures on nutritional grounds, a hard sell in a society where meat and white bread were eaten daily in vast quantities.

Although the economy would never regain the robustness of the immediate postwar boom, the plan restored modest growth and allayed fears of collapse. By 1953 inflation dropped to 4 percent a year. Intended as an emergency measure, the Plan Económico set a foundation for national economic policy. During the last three years of Peronist rule, the federal government turned away from its early commitment to jump-starting mass consumption, favoring business growth and managing the “wage-price equilibrium.” Consumer spending power of popular households grew once again between 1953 and 1955 but fell short of its postwar zenith.

Argentines reacted in many ways to education campaigns, economic adjustments, and other official measures to reduce and control consumption. Some anti-Peronists were vindicated by the government’s turn toward restoring agriculture and attracting foreign investment. But skeptics argued that years of clumsy government planning had done long-term economic damage. For many critics, the *pan negro* symbolized the penury brought on by Peronist economic regulation. In his recollections of this era, one cultural commentator mocked the infamous “black bread” as a “hard dough, yellowish, ugly, which nobody is disposed to chew” and which some called “*pan de perro*” (dog’s bread).⁶² Business owners encountered some relief, but antispeculation measures remained in

61. *Sucesos argentinos*, no. 694, 1952, and *Noticiero panamericano* no. 621, 1952, AGN, Departamento de Cine, Audio y Video; *Mundo Peronista*, Apr. 1, 1952, 22–23; and Ernesto Goldar, *Buenos Aires: Vida cotidiana en la década del 50* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Plus Ultra, 1980), 19.

62. Goldar, *Vida Cotidiana*, 21; and *La Nación*, Mar. 5, 1952, 2.

effect, and the government by no means abandoned planning. Individuals who considered Peronism oppressive demagoguery did not change their opinions of Perón and Evita's regime because of the emphasis on thrifty habits.

From the available evidence, Peronist sympathizers had a more complex set of reactions. At one extreme, supporters concurred with Perón's analysis of the problems facing Argentine society. In a collection of letters sent to the federal planning agency in late 1951, just prior to the announcement of the Plan Económico, some petitioners evoked official judgments that citizens had been degraded by consumerist pleasures. One woman asserted that fellow workers in her town had squandered salary increases, wasting their wages on "continual drunkenness." It was these men, she argued, who were directly responsible for "economic disequilibrium of which almost all us housewives know too well."⁶³ For other *amas de casa*, however, the blame for high prices lay elsewhere. Hilda, a woman married to a union farm worker from a small town in Mendoza, directed her ire toward ineffective local inspectors, who she claimed were bought off by local merchants and were complicit with the rise in prices.⁶⁴ Seizing on the active role assigned to consumers by Peronist officials, petitioners coupled their complaints with recommendations and demands for more active involvement in the War on Speculation. Male and female petitioners, unions, and other popular organizations wrote to Perón requesting that they be put directly in charge of inspecting commercial establishments in their communities. One group petition from suburban Buenos Aires exclaimed, "As Argentines and firm Peronists we solicit you to issue us Identification Cards to combat these Individuals [speculators], who with the sole objective of obtaining bigger profits care not for the damage they cause to the working class of this community."⁶⁵

These Peronist sympathizers may have agreed with pronouncements about the need for controlled spending, but they did not abandon their support for antispeculation. For some, thrift was less of a choice than something imposed by financial hardship or by venal inspectors who neglected their public duty. Yet the letter writers still saw the value of working with Peronist institutions; through these channels they expressed their continued enthusiasm for Perón and his cause, but they also demanded that the War on Speculation be more ambitious in scope and more successful in practice. These popular demands

63. AGN-MAT, leg. 307, doc. 13024 (1951). For more on this letter-writing event, see my article "What the People Want: State Planning and Political Participation in Peronist Argentina," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 81–108.

64. AGN-MAT, leg. 331, doc. 12806, n.d.

65. AGN-MAT, leg. 181, doc. 9407 (1951)



Figure 3. The War on Speculation continues during times of consumer austerity, as revealed in this scene of the closure of a corner market (*almacén*) in a popular Buenos Aires neighborhood. Notice in this carefully posed photograph the diversity of the "pueblo," which includes male workers in overalls, women, and other passersby. Courtesy of the AGN, Departamento de Fotografía, box 1307, envelope 24, doc. 201471 (April 22, 1953).

suggest how Peronists developed their own expectations as citizens in the New Argentina, which, in the case of consumption, did not always match the priorities of state authorities. Despite the enormous weight of propaganda that hung over Argentina in the 1950s, the regime's supporters wrestled with the political means available to influence state officials.

Evidence points to at least tacit compliance with the stipulations of the Plan Económico. There were no major protests by either organized labor or other Peronist allies in the crucial recovery year of 1952, in spite of ephemeral wage increases. The death of Eva Perón in August 1952 brought an outpouring of partisan sentiment, further unifying the government and its sympathizers. This relative calm was punctuated with periodic outbursts of protest against high living costs during the 1953–55 period. Public expressions of displeasure, however, did not lead to major divisions among the government, unions, and other Peronist supporters.

Without surrendering his model of state economic management, Perón made concessions to some grassroots demands. In April 1953, the executive branch responded to union grievances about inflation with stricter price-control decrees, and shipments of meat to Europe were suspended temporarily. For the next few weeks, reports of antispeculation enforcement filled newspapers, and police agents jailed, fined, and seized the property of thousands of merchants in the capital and provincial cities—although the government stopped short of deputizing supporters to arrest profiteers themselves.⁶⁶ Moreover, Peronist leaders continued to employ a moral-economic discourse, even as material conditions and state policies changed. In a 1953 speech, Perón compared recent profiteering by retailers to a national disease: “[W]e have to extirpate this cancer or the cancer will extirpate us” (a metaphor made all the more potent in light of Evita’s own fatal cancer). He reminded audiences as well of the need for disciplined spending, chastising the public for being “too comfortable and lacking character” when it came to shopping.⁶⁷ Public funding of social programs and support for labor unions eased tensions between the regime and its social base. Popular-sector Argentines continued to reward the Peronist Party at the polls, as witnessed in the clear victory of the party’s candidates in the 1954 congressional elections. The regime’s consumer politics achieved, then, the main economic objectives of government officials but had mixed social and political consequences.

Looking over the 1946–55 period, we can detect a clear shift in strategy from regulating commerce to managing consumers, although the latter impulse never completely replaced the former. The underlying continuity between these two goals was the emphasis that Peronist authorities placed on creating a more moral marketplace, which would be achieved both by punishing the speculators who supplied goods and by educating the shoppers who purchased them. The Peronist drive to domesticate markets sheds light on some central contradictions of populist politics in Argentina: between growing popular participation and mounting authoritarianism, between expanding the political role of women and reinforcing restrictive gender norms, between emphasizing the state’s responsibility to protect consumer well-being and calling on citizens to restrain household consumption.

66. *Democracia*, Apr. 10–16, 1953; U.S. State Department, Confidential Files, 1950–1954, Economic and Financial Review, reel 12, Apr. 2, 1953, July 27, 1953, 3–5; and Félix Luna, *Perón y su tiempo: La comunidad organizada, 1950–1952*, vol. 3 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1984), 28–30.

67. *La Gaceta* (Tucumán), Apr. 2, 1953, 1.

The intensely polarizing impact of the antispeculation campaigns and other state policies exacerbated partisan antagonisms. Commercial regulation was one issue among many that helped swell the ranks of the anti-Peronist bloc, a faction of which would eventually topple the president in September 1955. In the years that followed, a succession of civilian and military governments would attempt to erase the memory of Peronism, either by promoting economic development through deepening industrialization or by returning to Argentina's liberal past. State officials retreated from the Peronists' early guiding principle that the production and consumption of goods by the working class should be the nation's main engine of economic progress. In the end, one enduring consequence of Peronist policies may well be, paradoxically, the opposition they promoted for decades to follow.

Yet this is by no means the sole legacy of the era's consumer politics. Indeed, the Peronist regime shaped expectations of "socially just" consumption that endured during the post-1955 period and may explain, along with many other factors, the remarkable longevity of Peronism in Argentina. In the decades after Perón's fall, the Peronist party and its union allies continued to serve as forceful advocates against high living costs. The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s is often seen as a reaction against the populist past, but neoliberal proponents, too, responded to concerns regarding unruly market forces. Peronist president Carlos Menem's initial popularity derived, in no small measure, from his ability to address the crisis of hyperinflation, which echoed his forebears' attacks on the evils of rising prices (although in this case it was a different form of state intervention—the one-to-one currency peg—that was touted as the miracle cure). Peronist political organizations still play a crucial role in controlling access to food and essential consumer staples among the poor through patronage networks; partisan activists and supporters at the grassroots have also channeled anger at economic conditions in food riots and other protests.⁶⁸ As recently as March 2005, current Peronist president Néstor Kirchner called for all citizens to boycott Shell gas stations for raising prices against his administration's wishes. Peronism, for better or worse, remains identified with a popular entitlement to a decent standard of living, one that encompasses a right to work, as well as the satisfaction of material needs and consumer aspirations.

Peronist consumer politics in the 1943–55 period offer insights into the significance of the moral economy under populism—or perhaps better put, into

68. Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), and *Contentious Lives: Two Argentine Women, Two Protests, and the Quest for Recognition* (Duke: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).

the competing economic moralities of postwar Argentina. There was more at stake in the era's consumer controversies than a need to consolidate partisan control or a self-interested concern for one's pocketbook on the part of consumers. These issues were crucial, but they were enmeshed within cultural norms regarding the ethics of commercial exchange. It is easier, of course, to assess how officials described and combated "speculation" than to uncover the views of those affected by state policies. From the sources examined in this article, one can better understand popular-sector Argentines' perceptions of injustice and their political consciousness as economic actors. The War on Speculation involved a countless series of negotiations between shopkeepers and customers over not only prices but also respect and social status. Viewing material struggles from this cultural perspective explains how everyday objects like floor-cleaning rags, cheese, and black bread became infused with meaning for the regime's sympathizers and opponents. They were daily reminders of Peronism in action: evidence of popular empowerment under a new, "socially just" order, nagging signs of the gap between propaganda and quotidian conditions, and proof of national decline.

These reactions point to a thornier historical problem: how do attempts to regulate the commercial sphere and mass consumption affect social understandings of citizenship? As this essay has suggested, anti-Peronists expressed frustration that their property rights and civil liberties had been abrogated by the central state. At the same time, however, consumer demands permeated Peronist supporters' sense of social rights. The regime's leaders played a crucial role in molding expectations about the responsibilities of national government and the duties of citizens. Was this model of citizenship at the core of Peronist consumer politics mainly a form of political control orchestrated by the state? To be sure, the regime relied heavily on state manipulation of the media and repression of dissenters. Yet Perón's skill lay in crafting a paradigm of "just" consumption that took into account popular culture, protest traditions, and individual psychology—offering an idea of a moral marketplace that, ultimately, resonated with the experiences of many consumers. Supporters did not always behave as the citizen-consumers that Perón and his economic policymakers intended, but they remained largely within the Peronist camp even as state leaders pursued more-restrictive economic policies. Individuals continued to express their wish for greater commitment to taming prices, as best they could, through the available partisan channels.

This experiment with consumer politics reflected the socioeconomic characteristics of Argentina and the particular dynamics of Peronism. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Peronist Argentina is an exceptional case with little relevance to the rest of Latin America. Diverse social movements have

engaged in cost-of-living protests that stress working households' vulnerability to market forces; these include familiar actors such as organized labor but also shantytown dweller associations, antipoverty advocates, and other "new social movements." Across the region, governments of various ideological stripes adopted price controls and other economic-planning measures, spent resources on educating households in proper consumption habits, and encouraged collaboration with fiscal *ajustes* (austerity measures). Mid-twentieth-century populists and their leftist counterparts offered vocal condemnations of commercial exploitation.⁶⁹ These politicians did not address consumption in exactly the same manner as Perón, and they employed different approaches to regulating merchant property. Yet they tapped into similar anxieties concerning the difficulty of staying afloat in increasingly commercialized societies and the inability of popular majorities to participate fully as economic actors.⁷⁰ Although these political leaders' promises often outstripped their actual reforms, they articulated visions of social justice on a national scale that stirred hope for fairer and more-humane market relations.

While the specific issues addressed by Peronist consumer policies were often mundane, they shed light on a larger set of dilemmas associated with populist politics. Argentine officials faced the all-too-familiar challenge of imposing order on something so massive and shifting as the commercial flows of the market. The Peronist regime's nationalization of foreign-owned infrastructure and social legislation had a much higher profile than antispeculation controls,

69. On the discursive similarities between populists and leftists, see Ernesto Laclau, *Populism and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1977), 143–98.

70. Brazil's Getúlio Vargas, for instance, complained in 1954 about the "spirit of easy profits and speculative fortunes" and promised to defend workers against high prices. Vargas was responding, in part, to pressure from unions and other social movements involved in the "Movimento contra a Carestia da Vida" begun in the early 1950s. Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 85, 119; and Maria da Glória Cohn, *História dos movimentos e lutas sociais* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1995), 92–95, 108. Lázaro Cárdenas created the State Food Agency in 1937 to distribute subsidized goods to urban consumers in Mexico, and he complained about merchants "who generally speculate with the basic needs of the poor." The PRI struggled to balance the political imperative of satisfying popular-sector consumers with increasingly liberal economic policies; Enrique C. Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910* (Wilmington: SR Books, 2000), 49. Salvador Allende and other leftist leaders in Chile likewise considered inflation as an attack on the nation and pueblo, linking rising prices to hoarding and other exploitative practices of unpatriotic merchants; Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarrur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 229–35.

but the problem of managing consumption was unavoidable in the drive to elevate living standards. It is worth remembering that economic strategy, in this case, was often subordinated to the political objective of consolidating a mass following. This period's consumer politics were many things at once: a remedy for high prices, an effort to deflect attention from government responsibility for inflation, a struggle to defend social gains, and a tactic for organizing and controlling supporters. Peronist attitudes toward commercial exchange were complex, encompassing a drive to distribute the bounty of capitalism and a strident critique of economic immorality. Given this mixture of objectives, it is not surprising that the goal of domesticated markets remained powerfully alluring and elusive.

