

'The secret of Peronism is its ability to attract people from different backgrounds'

Professor of Latin American and Spanish History Dr. Raanan Rein speaks to the *Herald* about the figures in the shadows who helped shape Peronism as it rose to power

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An outsider with a deep understanding of Argentina, Israeli historian and academic Dr. Raanan Rein has made Peronism the central focus of his academic career. Speaking to the *Herald* during one of his many trips to Buenos Aires, when he travelled to receive an honorary doctorate from the Universidad Nacional de San Martín and to launch his new book, the vice-president of Tel Aviv University and professor of Latin American and Spanish history addressed some of the central figures from the rise of Peronism — including some of those which he feels have not received much academic attention.

What are your primary conclusions of your most recent book?

One of the conclusions of my 1998 book *Peronismo, populismo y política* ("Peronism, populism and politics") was that when we speak so much about (Juan Domingo) Perón and Evita (Eva Perón), we don't disentangle much of the dynamics within Peronism. And I focussed on the 1940s and 1950s, the first two Perón governments.

This trend, to personalise politics in Latin America in general, including Argentina, coupled with

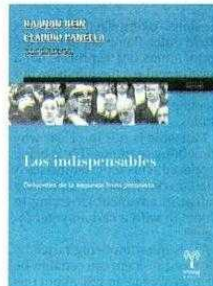
the theory about charisma promoted by German sociologist Max Weber, leads many to speak about the supposed direct link between the charismatic leader and the popular masses. I looked at this and argued that in the 20th century, in urban and modern societies, such a direct link is almost impossible. Intermediaries of all kinds are necessary to mobilise support in various sectors, to send messages, to elaborate ideology and doctrine, to consolidate the government once elections have been won. It's true that for the leader it is convenient to publicly ignore these intermediaries and to speak of a direct link, but it's our role as historians, political scientists, and sociologists to identify these actors.

In terms of Peronism, I have argued that there were leaders that came from five or six sectors and which had key roles. They were drawn from labour groups, businesses, the Armed Forces, academic and intellectual circles and the state bureaucracy. What is surprising is how little is known about some people who made a dramatic contribution to the success of Peronism in the 1940s and 1950s. I argued then that the only way to understand how heterogeneous Peronism has been is to study these various figures.

Tell me a little about 'second lines' in Peronism?

With Claudio Panella I published the first volume about these second lines three years ago, and now this is the second volume, *The Indispensables (Los Indispensables)*, published by the Universidad de San Martín.

What keeps on surprising me is that even for some important figures, we sometimes don't know basic biographical data such as dates of birth. In this book that we have just published, we include a chapter on Perón's first vice-president, Hortensio Quijano. Not much was known about him either, even though he's one of those who helped to mobilise



Los Indispensables, collated by Raanan Rein and Claudio Panella (Universidad Nacional de San Martín)

► **'Many have set aside complexity in favour of dichotomies and binary concepts that help to provoke passions but not to understand the political and social dynamics in this country.'**

support from some Radicals for burgeoning Peronism. For anti-Peronists, it wasn't convenient to point out that a Radical had joined Perón. And for the Peronists, the fact that Quijano was a conservative *caudillo* from Corrientes, who in some way represented the oligarchy and not the popular elements; they didn't want to underline his role.

To understand the influences in Peronism, you have to look at these people with different origins like Quijano or Angel Borlenghi. In this volume I examine Jerónimo Remorino, who was ambassador in Washington and later a foreign minister for Perón. In this case too it was difficult to find dates of birth and death, and it's another case of a conservative who joined Peronism from day one, and there you can see Perón's skill: to be able to sit down in one government people from various political and ideological origins. The secret of Peronism is this ability to create alliance and build coalitions, to attract people from different backgrounds. Remorino was the nephew of Julio Argentino Roca's son, who signed the infamous Roca-Runciman pact, and so you would think he would have been opposed to Peronism. And here he was with Perón, contributing to building the relationship with the United States.

Does the relative lack of knowledge about the second lines have to do specifically with Peronism or something beyond the movement?

No, it has to do with Argentine political culture. For Peronists, Perón was the *deus ex machina* and for the anti-Peronists he was the devil *ex machina*. For everyone, it was convenient to emphasise Perón's leadership, to blame him or play up his virtues. I think that this trend began before the rise of Peronism and continued afterwards, and that gives Argentine politics an arbitrary and capricious image, as if everything depended on the wishes and desires of the leader that happens to be in power. And it's never only about just Perón, or Frondizi, Illia, or Menem, or Néstor or Cristina. We need to stop talk-

ing about politics in such personal terms.

Politics is more complex than that. Leaders represent a series of interests of groups and sectors and this phenomenon doesn't apply only to Peronism. In other periods we don't know enough about other actors who played a role in coming to power and governing. Many have set aside complexity in favour of dichotomies and binary concepts that help to provoke passions but not to understand the political and social dynamics in this country.

These differing sectors that you mention, to what extent was there cooperation or competition between them with Perón in power?

Due to their heterogeneous nature, the Peronist movement was characterised by its internal struggles. It's true that Perón was able to manoeuvre between the various positions and passions, but there were always internal battles. As the Peronist government became increasingly authoritarian in the decade that it was in power, there were efforts to transform Peronism into a social-democratic movement that was more plural and more tolerant. Domingo Mercante in the province of Buenos Aires tried that. And once that attempt became a challenge to Perón, Mercante is ejected.

If you look at the Peronists who joined Perón in 1944, 1945, within a few years many of them were ejected. Almost the only one to stay through the decade was Borlenghi. There were constant struggles and some of them exploded after the Perón's government was overthrown in 1955. Throughout Perón's exile those struggles are visible, and sometimes they were violent. Perón returned and tried to revitalise the alliances, but he managed only for a short time and once he died, those struggles explode again and that leads to the series of events and context that lead up to the dictatorship that began in 1976. There was never harmony within this movement that represented so many classes.



Dr. Rein accepts an honorary doctorate from the Universidad Nacional de San Martín

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Perón succeeded, so to speak, in keeping a tenuous coalition together while he was alive.

Exactly, and excluding from this coalition revolutionaries of all kinds and the so-called "oligarchy." At the same time (while) seeking to include the political, economic and ethnic groups in Argentina.

There are also some Peronist elements within Let's Change (Cambios) such as "Momo" Venegas and Macri cited Perón last May Day. How do you assess that?

I think that it was a very correct decision by the president, who also has his populist side. Not necessarily by conviction, but because he understands the need to get close to various sectors with these kinds of messages.

How do you perceive President Macri's political relationship with Peronism, given his anti-Peronist message?

First, we mustn't look only at the discourse, but also the measures, and decisions in his government. And in that way there is a populist side to the economic and social policies of the Macri government, and which also has its tensions and internal struggles. Yes, sometimes you can see contradictory measures but that is part of what Macrismo is, and those tensions will continue. For Macri to guarantee his political future he must maintain this populist side. Macri's instincts push him in this direction.

What explains that?

It has to do with the kind of person that Macri is. And it has to do with the enormous social inequality that exists in this country. It's impossible to ignore that inequality and to ignore the need to make it smaller and to strengthen the middle class. Historically, Argentina had a strong middle class and in recent decades the middle class has almost disappeared. No president could ignore these worrying trends and I think that Macri understands that.

Turning to Peronism after the restoration of democracy, there are plenty of those second lines who take turns accompanying various Peronist presidents with very different policies. Do you see a difference in the competition within those factions compared to when Perón was alive?

No, first you observe tensions between the willingness and ability of various factions to build alliances and coalitions. And one of the big flaws, if you like, of the previous government was to close itself off in a limited circle and not to build a broader coalition that represented various sectors. Peronism was never revolutionary because it sought to represent different social sectors. At certain times, certain leaders had illusions that Peronism and revolution were synonyms but that wasn't possible. We know how Perón reacted to the C ampora government in 1973 and how he pressured him to leave power so that he could stand again. So in that case we see a difference between the Peronist leaders who proclaim themselves to be the "authentic" heir to Per on. But each one of them has taken the movement in various directions.

What is it like to be an outsider, researching and writing about such an important topic?

I don't identify with any political group, nor do I participate actively nor passively in Argentine politics. I don't vote, I'm not going to be affiliated to any political party and therefore I think that I can analyse certain political phenomena and their nuances. The studies that I publish are less partial than the majority of works on Peronism that are written either by Peronists seeking to glorify and praise any policy implemented by Peronist governments or those

anti-Peronists who will portray any decision very negatively.

For some every problem in Argentina can be traced back to the rise of Peronism in the 1940s and for others Peronism is, and continues to be, the only solution for this country. I seek to shed light, on one hand, on the democratising impulses that Peronism has had, as well as the authoritarian impulses that Peronism has always had. Sometimes these things don't sit well with Peronists and anti-Peronists but they do appreciate the effort.

Of course, I have my own opin-

ions. Any historian approaches a matter with a certain amount of intellectual baggage. But as a non-Argentine, even if I do have a part of me that identifies with Argentina without having been here or having an Argentine passport, I can tackle this subject without the emotional elements that characterises Argentine historians, sociologists, political scientists that have worked on various elements of Peronism.

Would you say you are indifferent to the political ramifications of your research?

In terms of politics and partisanship, without a doubt, I remember that when I published a book two years ago, in the middle of the campaign for the presidency, some people accused me of publishing the book to help Scioli. That's nonsense. I'm not indifferent to what is happening in this country, at all. I also publish things about the Jewish experience in this country, and I get asked sometimes if that won't affect the fortunes of Jewish groups. I am a researcher, I seek to shed light on issues that have not been researched by others and to contribute to debate. *