

Influence, Identity and Autonomy: The Transformation of Womanhood and the Workforce under
Eva Perón

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Introduction

The year 2022 marks the seventieth anniversary of Eva Duarte de Perón's death. Remembered for her lavish dress, her unapologetic and unprecedented political stances, and her devotion to both her husband President General Juan Domingo Perón and her people, Eva Perón remains one of the most-studied and most-beloved figures of twentieth-century Argentina. Upon her death on July 26, 1952, the Vatican received more than forty thousand requests for her canonization and, in October of 2019, *La Confederación General del Trabajo* (the General Confederation of Labour) sent a request to begin the process of her beatification.¹ In the timeline of women's rights, Argentine women have since overcome hurdles and faced opposition. These include, but are certainly not limited to, two female heads of state, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* movement, the 1987 right to divorce, the anti-femicide #NiUnaMenos movement and, just over a year ago, the right to safe abortion. This paper seeks to analyze

place within the society around her, this paper focuses on Eva's intended *portrayal* of such

The Many Personas of Eva Perón

María Eva Duarte was born in 1919 to seamstress Juana Ibarburen and wealthy but already-married father Juan Duarte in Los Toldos, Argentina. There, after the death of her father at age six and the social ostracism that followed her illegitimate birth, she was raised in poverty until she finished her primary education. At the age of fifteen, Eva left home to pursue a career in acting. Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, she experienced firsthand the wealth inequalities that divided the city and, years later, reported spending those first few winters cold and hungry.⁹ Her experience was no different from the thousands of rural Argentines relocating to Buenos Aires in the 1930s, following the global depression that “crippled” the agricultural field. Early twentieth-

in the city.¹² Despite the economic growth in the last years of the 1920s, the Great Depression affected Argentina in 1932, and immigration restrictions prevented immigrants from arrival without a pre-established labour contract or proof of finances.¹³ Eva's struggles aligned with the rest of Argentina, and she was later able to use this shared experience to connect with the most underrepresented in society, where social welfare campaigns led to the nickname "Santa Evita."¹⁴

Though she found little success on the stage, by 1939 she headed her own radio soap-opera company under her stage name "Evita." The use of the name Evita at both the height of her radio career and when interacting with the public as First Lady is relevant because it demonstrates a link between the types of characters she portrayed. She recorded that each of her names felt like "roles," and each time one was used, she assumed its persona; the difference was that she felt Eva Perón to be a role *played* while Evita became a role *lived*.¹⁵ Historian Marysa Navarro, who has written extensively on Eva Perón, claims that the "evitista" mythology began shortly after Evita's earliest relationship with Juan Domingo Perón, in January of 1944.¹⁶ This evitista mythology occurs when two seemingly "diametrically opposed versions" of the same person, María Eva Duarte de Perón, exist concurrently.¹⁷ While the term itself was not seriously studied as a phenomenon until her death in 1952, contemporary literature published works with polarized titles such as *Evita: Alma inspiradora de la justicia social en América* (*Evita: An Inspiration for Social Justice in America*) or *La mística social de Eva Perón* (*The Social*

¹²Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser. (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2003), 4.

Mystique of Eva Perón); the use of either name signalled which of Eva's personas they were praising or criticizing.

Evita's affair with then-Colonel Juan Perón began in 1944. Upper-class gossip gave her the nickname of the "colonel's mistress."¹⁸ Just two months following their first meeting at a benefit, the pair moved in together, an act that was particularly unacceptable for a political figure and his romantic partner. In June of 1944, only half a year into their acquaintance, Evita began a daily radio program where she defended Perón's principles and commended the work he had

speech, on the anniversary of the the 1945 descamisado mass-demonstration that liberated Perón from imprisonment by the military power, Evita addressed the descamisados and proclaimed: “I know that God is with us because he is with the humble and despises the arrogance of the oligarchy.”³⁰

Juan Perón did not need the support of the individual worker to win his fi

rebranded the party as the *Partido Único de la Revolución* (Only Party of the Revolution). By 1947 it was duly operating as the *Partido Peronista*, with tensions struck between Perón and the leaders he had dismissed and displaced from the original labour movement.³⁴

Eva Perón assumed the role of both “madre” and “Spiritual Leader” of the nation, just as Peronist women assumed them in their own households.³⁵ Eva was a model of the new Argentine woman, who performed her “womanly” domestic duties while pursuing a career outside of the home. Peronist deputy Dominga Ortiz de Sosa Vivas, in her recording of the Chamber of Deputies’ sessions, stated:

We know that Eva Perón represents all women of our people and that the exact measure of her soul can only be compared with the immense multitude gathered from the souls of all women worthy of being called women and mothers of this earth, where God has wanted to perform the miracle of this century: Eva Perón!³⁶

Peronist legislators reportedly claimed that even within Peronist spaces, women resisted their own political participation.³⁷ This almost objectification, or rather tokenization, of Eva as representative of “all women” because of her role as one of the only female politicians was one of the reasons she had so much success in her embodiment of Argentine values. Numerous roles were imposed upon the Argentine woman— the “productive” worker, submissive wife, loyal Peronist, mother, teacher, and caretaker, among others. Politics remained a male-dominated space.³⁸ While Eva Perón held more traditional views of womanhood, domesticity and familial duties, she herself did not partake in many of them: Eva never had children and was not

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Sara Perrig, “Las mujeres antiperonistas: los derechos políticos femeninos y las elecciones de 1951 en Argentina,” *Ciencia Política* 13, no.26 (2018), 85.

³⁶“Nosotras sabemos que Eva Perón representa a todas las mujeres de nuestro pueblo y que la exacta medida de su alma solamente puede compararse con la inmensa multitud reunida de las almas de todas las mujeres dignas de llamarse mujeres y madres de esta tierra, donde Dios ha querido realizar el milagro de este siglo: ¡Eva Perón!” Dominga I. Ortiz de Sosa Vivas, “Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados-Año1952,” (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso de la Nación Argentina, 1953), 492.

³⁷Perrig, “Las mujeres antiperonistas,” 86.

³⁸Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 203.

circumscribed to the family home. Many of the Argentines who condemned her based their disdain on an “imaginary” or traditional idea of femininity, with women as the centre and protector of the home.³⁹ This same stereotype worked in Eva’s favour as she constructed and adapted the official Peronist narrative to suit the needs of the broadest range of women. In each of her speeches, texts or public addresses, she at once portrays traditionally masculine attributes in politics, thought and stature, and yet simultaneously sets herself to the side of Perón. She assumes a supportive role and perpetuates conservative imagery of the patriarchal husband-wife dynamic.⁴⁰ Eva then appeased the sensibilities of both conservative religious women and the more liberal ideals of changing ideas of femininity, including holding space for women in masculine sectors like politics and the workforce.

Eva reportedly realized that her responsibility towards the descamisados was not just to remedy a prevailing situation,” with the same make-shift, individualized acts of charity that previous social aid groups had done. Instead of the “demeaning relationships” and imbalance of power that occurred in charity functions performed by wealthy ladies or the Church, Eva believed in cleansing the system of such notions of “superiority” by renaming the process of giving and receiving assistance “social justice” over “charity.”⁴¹ She instead sought to promote a total change of environment, a “revolution within the revolutionary process of Peronism.”⁴² Latin American sociologist Javier Auyero described the legacy of this change of internal revolution as he analyzed a 1996 Peronist rally in the small municipality of Cospito, where one thousand

³⁹Rosano, *Rostros y máscaras de Eva Perón*, 18.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 201.

⁴²“...una revolución dentro del proceso revolucionario del peronismo.” Alberto Franco, *La mística social de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: Subsecretaría de Informaciones, 1953), chapter V.

First Lady, traditionally intended only to host the occasional fundraiser and remain firmly in the background, Eva Perón met with foreign diplomats and chaired meetings. Evita embodied a form of state propaganda that made her inseparable from “the cause.”⁵¹ The “charismatic *abanderada de los descamisados*” (standard-bearer of the descamisados), through her work in the field, meeting with and giving aid to her people, she became the direct *physical* contact between the masses and the regime. Her two main organizations, the *Fundación Eva Perón* and the *Partido Peronista Femenino*, and her roles within them, benefitted the disadvantaged but also acted as intentional Peronist imagery. It is here that she gained the majority of her personal political power— the politicization of the working woman. The former Fundación, as a mediator of social assistance, both fulfilled the regime’s welfare duties as an “independent” establishment and was publicized as Evita’s passion project— her reason for being.

In 1949, parliament member Virgilio Filippo nominated Evita alongside Juan Perón for

The Eva Perón Foundation

La Fundación Ayuda Social 'María Eva Duarte de Perón' is above all an agency of selfless action, with a noble and comprehensive approach to those who suffer, regardless of creed or borders, that shows itself through concrete deeds of human solidarity and timely relief wherever it is needed.⁵⁷

- Secretary of the Information of the Presidency of the Nation, 1950.

On June 19th, 1948, Evita established *La Fundación Ayuda Social 'María Eva Duarte de Perón,'* (the María Eva Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation), more commonly referred to as *La Fundación Eva Perón* or simply *La Fundación*. Foreign media portrayed it as a controversial means of bribing the nation's vote through deliverance of social aid, while Peronist media portrayed it as the necessary progression of social assistance for a modern nation. Juan Perón reportedly knew that charity could not last in his Argentina; instead, it needed to be phased out as Peronism eliminated the very concept of "want."⁵⁸ Peronists generally recognized charitable work from Argentina's past as "meritorious," but outdated and neither "adequate nor ideologically correct" for the modern era.⁵⁹ During the phasing-out, social assistance was prioritized as a state responsibility: "social welfare has to be integral to be effective."⁶⁰ The *Fundación*, however, was not a state-run organization. It was self-funded, independently staffed, and the state had neither input nor oversight on its operations. Perón's comments of "state responsibility," however, aligned with public perception of the organization. Pre-Peronist social

⁵⁷ "La Fundación Ayuda Social

services were largely church-run or individual charity by elite women. The Fundación, headed by the First Lady, promoted Peronism and lived in public memory as governmental.⁶¹

The Fundación provided Argentines with “direct social assistance” through material benefits handed to them personally by Evita or her representatives. It is an example of clientelism, in which upper-class elites trade products, goods and services in exchange for support, typically political in nature.⁶² While the government challenged the “machinelike character” of political enticement and its uncontested social authorities, they still maintained a fundamentally hierarchal method of the distribution of goods.⁶³ Peronism thus both condemned the “old” clientelist methods and perpetuated them. Historian Peter Ross, in his work on Peronist policy, dubbed this “the fraud of the *Fundación Eva Perón*.”⁶⁴ The Fundación controversially handled significant finances without external control or review and was structurally lacking; it was completely under Eva’s control and she regularly made decisions without consulting anyone.⁶⁵ Its private character and Evita’s ultimate authority allowed the Fundación a level of independence in hiring staff, deciding wages, allocating funding and signing off on any decisions that arose. Pre-Perón society deemed that women should only hold a job when they *had* to, either as widows to support themselves or because their husband was ill or injured. Even then, the two “proper” sectors outside of the home for a woman were either in education or charity.

honorary president and allowed her the honour of hosting fundraisers or banquets in their name. Contemporary speculation and modern critics alike claim that when the Sociedad withheld her “rightful” leadership position, Eva Perón began a quest for vengeance to overthrow its power and thus created the Fundación Eva Perón.⁶⁸ It hardly helped that Peronist press almost immediately discredited the Sociedad by denouncing its oligarchic character, exposing its poor working

While it is true that her illegitimate birth, poverty-stricken upbringing, career in the arts

with her concerns and discussing strategies to come together and support the president that was bettering each of their lives.

Few official records survived the military takeover of the Perón regime, and those that have are mainly located in private collections. The indirect citation and reference to material on the Fundación in secondary literature is heavily biased with either pro- or anti-Peronist narratives, making internal operations incredibly difficult to analyze, especially in terms of the myths surrounding the organization.⁷⁵ According to an article in a 1949 American “for everybody” magazine, *Liberty*, the “hushed-up truth about Eva Perón” was that she was worshipped by “millions of Argentin[e]s, who call her lady Madonna, and hated by business men and society women, who call her by other names.”⁷⁶ While anti-Peronist in its almost satirical attempt at description, this quoting is a clear example of the duality of public opinion: the optimistic lower classes that saw a new Argentina in Evita against the “disillusioned” conservatives that saw through Evita’s facade to the politician underneath. In the image *Liberty* provides, Evita is modelling high fashion, dressed head to toe in Christian Dior as “she tells ‘her people’ they, too will one day wear fine clothes if they back her.”⁷⁷ There is, of course, a level of irony in her promotion of a “one-of-us” image as she handed out charitable benefits to the poor while wearing an outfit worth thousands of dollars. At the same time, however, Evita stood as a rags-to-riches example of the potential held by the new Argentina they— Perón, women, workers, descamisados, and descamisadas alike— were actively building.

⁷⁵Ibid., 137.

⁷⁶Steven Casey Williams, “The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón,” *Liberty* 26, no.6 (June 1, 1949), 18.

⁷⁷Williams, “The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón,” 18.

The Fundación Eva Perón's quantifiable impacts and outcomes are difficult to accurately measure, due to the post-Perón destruction of official sources, the lack of internal organization,

support the elderly who could no longer work and *Hogar-Escuelas* (Home Schools), where children who lived too far from a public school could board and receive a public education. The state prioritized enrolment for the children of workers, and children from the ages of two through fourteen attended.⁸¹

Following the rise of inflation and the economic crisis the Peronist government inherited, the state-promoted *Mundo Peronista* magazine published articles promoting a lifestyle of communal “austerity” in the same space as they posted images of more “plentiful” years where Argentines enjoyed disposable income and recreational activities. The latter were placed side-by-side with pictures of Evita performing charity, physically handing objects to visibly working-class recipients or hosting ill people in her office, thus turning her welfare into one of their “weapons of political persuasion” as it was connected with prosperity. The Fundación ran *proveedurías*, grocery stores managed by unions that followed strict state pricing regulations and offered a more comprehensive shopping experience in an early version of a box store. These

inexpensive organization for the state because of its private nature, absorbing and centralizing charity and completing the majority of the state's welfare responsibilities without using up state resources. The only cash donation that Congress proposed, Perón himself vetoed in 1949. Though Congress made no direct contributions to the *Fundación*, to allow the organization its claims to independence, they provided significant indirect support. Congress implemented a three percent tax on horse races to be donated to the *Fundación*, along with the yield of fines on illegal gambling and any surpluses in the ministries' budgets.⁸⁴ Following Eva's death, the *New York Times* alleged that her will expressed a desire for her wealth to be used to "grant loans to persons wanting to build homes."⁸⁵ Perón decided shortly after her passing that the revenue from Eva's autobiography was to be redistributed into a supplementary and notably tax-free institution, the *Fundación Evita*, to help fund the work of the *Fundación Eva Perón*.⁸⁶ Perón announced this on October 17th, on the anniversary of the labour demonstration that had freed him from jail in 1945, which was a success the Peronist government later attributed to Eva's individual actions. The announcement demonstrates the date as symbolic of Evita's popular politics and of her unyielding devotion to "the cause," or Perón.

The *Fundación Eva Perón* and the *Partido Peronista Femenino* both represented Eva's personal interest in modernizing, politicizing and publicizing welfare. Iliana Cepero, in her work on photographic propaganda, outlined how each organization served as powerful "weapons of political persuasion." First, through their proximity and popular association with the state, they

⁸⁴Ibid., 144, 149

⁸⁵"Eva Peron Fund Aided: Tax-Free Foundation Formed to Administer Fortune," *New York Times*, (June 27, 1954) Special to the *New York Times*: 13.

⁸⁶"Eva Peron's Fortune to Go to Foundation," *New York Times*, (October 18, 1952) Special to the *New York Times*: 3

proved personal and governmental interest in the forgotten Argentine's individual experiences.⁸⁷ The Fundación, in particular, acted as a link between state and the "weakest and least structured elements of society." This included the poorest Argentines, only recently-enfranchised women, youth, and the un- and underemployed.

situations. It is through this direct contact that Evita began receiving individual petitions from towns, groups, and households, requesting assistance for specific items or services. According to one source, the ability to contact the state and trust they would be heard was unprecedented: “before it was only in dreams that one could imagine that a simple resident of a lost place could ask something of the National Government.”⁹³ Evita created an intimate letter-writing campaign where people sent her their immediate and private concerns and requests; Evita thus performed the role of the physical embodiment of state welfare. If official estimates can be relied upon, the letter-writing campaign was immensely popular; her assistants, interviewed after the fact, remember Evita receiving upwards of ten thousand letters every day.⁹⁴

“Social justice” and the idea that social assistance was a liberal democratic right quickly replaced charity, “benevolence” and philanthropy— reportedly, the poor could “change their social conditions by fighting the aristocracy.”⁹⁵ The link between the state and the *Fundación* solidified as Peronism allowed the working class a new identity and a “major transformation in the nature, capability and strategy of labour organizations.”⁹⁶ Between economic exclusion, especially following the depression, and the “political marginality” that stemmed from the increased immigration and migration of unskilled workers, the rise of populism saw community in these shared experiences as an opportunity to bring together underrepresented people and politicize the working class. It was the birth of a collective sense of identity, where workers felt

existing labour organizations, trade unions became the pillars of support for the early Peronist government, to the extent that the organizations' leadership held vetoing powers over some policies. This pressure on the government to fulfil the needs of individual labour organizations was a threat to Juan's personal politics, and his government quickly recognized the benefit in controlling a more centralized social assistance program. The Fundación Eva Perón became the

Members of the original feminist movement were not impressed with Evita's level of commitment to women's rights. Instead, there was a level of "humiliation" as their lifetime struggle for enfranchisement was quickly ended by an authoritarian government that they did not support.¹⁰⁵ They were in opposition to Perón's version of suffrage, which both Eva and Perón always presented in the quintessential Peronist fashion— with two conflicting reasonings. Suffrage was "granted" with the narrative that it was something Argentine women had *earned*, in a purported acknowledgement of their long fight for equality. On the other hand, it was presented as a novel stance on the rights of liberal citizens of democracy, again "granted," thanks to the efforts of Evita in voicing the needs of Argentine women.¹⁰⁶ From the nation's economic difficulties, thanks to export culture and agriculture along with Perón's second election approaching, this second narrative of Evita as the patron of suffrage became the government's preferred method of highlighting the integral role women had in the regime. In a 1952 interview in the Peronist magazine *Mundo Peronista*, a woman described the path to suffrage: "While the Peronist doctrine has granted us age-old rights, rights that the oligarchy never wanted to acknowledge, we have also acquired new obligations."¹⁰⁷ In describing the vote as an "age-old" right, she is alluding age-o

This added to the almost indistinguishable nature of both organizations, with testimonies recounting a widespread inability to distinguish between PPF and the Fundación.¹⁰⁹ The Unidades were simultaneously part of the PPF and extensions of the Fundación Eva Perón, and this inability to isolate not just the perception of the organizations but the establishments themselves, which traded staff between each other, yet again demonstrates the complete integration of Peronism into everyday life and of Evita as emissary of social support. As centres of political interaction, the Unidades Básicas supplemented the Partido Peronista Femenino's

presumably representing a motherly Evita, holding up a doll and playing with children as a boy in the doorway runs up, holding a letter addressed to Evita.¹¹² The short and simple phrases that taught children how to write in cursive included: “Perón loves kids,” “my mother,” “my father,”

quoting Evita's spoken word, she outlines this militancy theory and the relationship between doctrine and frugality with the intent that ![e]ach Peronist woman will be, within the home, a

Perón and Peronism. As contemporary Jesuit writer John Murray resolved, “*Peronismo* means Perón,” and so there can be no Peronism, no for-the-people populism, should Argentines not dedicate themselves to the man as much as to the cause. Murray imagines a necessary attack upon the Church to prevent the formation of a Catholic opposition party. He named this incompatibility after Perón and Evita’s undermining of the Church’s influence within trade unions and “*Acción Católica*,” or Catholic charity.¹²¹

The party granted women an avenue for political mobilization while finding utility within the Peronist state. The apolitical label was a way to integrate women into governmental structures without sacrifici

to the workforce, as such due to their status as a “mother more than that of a citizen.”¹²³ Women,

Conclusion

Given Peronist control of the news and strict Congress-backed libel laws, censorship prevented the majority of critics from publishing anti-Peronist texts until after the military coup of 1955. Critiques of Evita began circulating following Perón's loss of power, and anti-Peronist literature almost immediately sought to uncover, or rather "expose," the "true Evita."¹²⁶ These texts scorn her, belittle her acting career, and link it to her political performance, naming her "deprived" upbringing as the reason for her power-hungry and social-climbing attitude. Peronist scholarship, even post-1955, is just as heavily tainted with speculation and personal opinion. They praise *their* Evita, honouring her memory fondly and "echoing" the symbology and the icon that the state and press created during her lifetime.¹²⁷

organization.”¹³² Though contemporary critics condemned the Fundación’s clientelist tendencies, as poor Argentines lined up to “beg for something,”¹³³ others recognized the plentiful life the average Argentine lived because of these methods and because of Evita: “Now, years later, I recognize that there was never a first lady like her. Who committed herself to others, the weakest, those who had nothing.”¹³⁴

Perhaps this analysis will read more as a venture into each of Eva’s personas in an attempt to uncover who, how, and why she was. In a way, this paper is simply a case study of Evita and her legacy, outlining her obstacles, successes and policies in an attempt to determine her authenticity and her legitimacy because that is what the topic lends itself to becoming. Despite her personas and despite her politics, she was undeniably devoted to Peronism and the people of Argentina: “Everything I am, everything I have, everything I think and everything that I feel, belongs to Perón.”¹³⁵

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