

Chapter 7: Power to the People

Scholars have long used the term *populism* to describe a series of political phenomena that emerged with the onset of the Great Depression in Latin America. The term reminds us of something several nations shared in common, but it has also proved somewhat unsatisfying. Given the ideological heterodoxy of the so-called populists, it is difficult to give the concept any concrete substance. We address this problem by focusing not on populism but on the ways that the larger social and political crises of the era at the end of the export boom were accompanied by the development of new sonic technologies, particularly the radio and amplified sound. The politicians who dominated this era were the ones who proved most effective at taking advantage of the opportunities these new technologies afforded. In part, this meant adopting economic policies favoring a growing urban industrial working class, but it also entailed developing rhetorical skills that had never before been necessary.

This chapter suggests that radio and electronic microphones both allowed politicians to speak to (and assemble) larger crowds than ever before, and helped give those crowds a sense of their power as “the people.” The three cases that the chapter explores most carefully are the stories of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico, and Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina. These three are among the most commonly cited populists of the era, and were notable for their efforts to use the new technologies to enhance their power. One notable difference, however, was that Vargas and Cárdenas seem to have been less adept at using radio than the Peróns. This may help us to understand the different historical legacies of these regimes, and particularly the polarizing power the Peróns have in Argentina to this day.

The primary texts included in this chapter are several different renderings of an event that was singularly iconic in Peronism, Evita’s *renunciamento* (resignation) on August 22, 1951. The *renunciamento* began as a speech before a large crowd she had assembled to press Perón to nominate her for the vice-presidency in the upcoming elections, but descended into a near riot when Perón refused to support her and she tried to announce she would not run. The assembled audience refused to accept her decision, and would not disperse until she promised that she would do their bidding.

As a spontaneous event that took place before high-quality sound recording devices were widespread, we have only a limited ability to know what happened, and many stories of the event differ as to what was said and why it was said. Our first account is the *New York Times* article published on the following day, written by a reporter who was allegedly in attendance. The second comes from a transcript of this speech that can be found on the website of the Buenos Aires branch of the Peronist Party. The third is a version cobbled together from various newsreels, an approximation by the scholar Mónica Amare (NoDo, the Spanish newsreel company that apparently filmed the event, does not have a copy of the footage in its archive, so Amare has relied on bits and pieces). The final document comes from a radio address Evita gave ten days later, for which we do have a recording. It is exactly what she said.

We have a number of opportunities to engage in interpretation and critique as we work with these sources. The differing accounts leave us with questions about how and why stories of the same event come to differ. They also alert us to the frailties of memory, and the fraught nature of historical research. Even more, in studying the differences in rhetoric between a written transcript of the speech (probably reflecting the words of a speechwriter), her own words as informed by a dialogue with the crowd, and her recorded words on the radio, we have an opportunity to really interrogate and compare these different versions of Evita.

Questions to Consider when Reading the Documents

Why do you suppose that the *New York Times* got the story so wrong? How else did the *New York Times* report on events in Argentina during the June–August 1951 (students will have to do this research), and what can this tell us about the role of ideology in newspaper reporting?

Why would the Peronist party's version of the speech be so different from what was actually said? What does this tell us about archives, libraries, and the Internet? What does it tell us about the difference between the written and spoken word?

Do you trust Amare's rendering of the speech? What does this kind of rendering offer us? Who seems in control of the event? What is happening here?

Do her words and speech seem compelling, captivating? Can you see yourself drawn along with the crowd? Why or why not?

Are the words in the August 31 Speech Evita's? Can other renderings of these events help us determine this?

What do we gain by reading all these renderings together, rather than separately?