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Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture by Natalia Milanesio

Cristian A. Harris
University of North Georgia

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Milanesio, Natalia. *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. xi + 307 pages. Cloth, \$55.00.

Workers Go Shopping in Argentina by historian Natalia Milanesio examines the mid-twentieth century transformation of the national market of Argentina as a result of the increased participation of the working population as mass consumers. The book does not focus on “the qualitative or quantitative aspects of working-class consumption” (p. 2), but on “the social and cultural consequences of the emergence of the working-class consumer as a powerful force that transformed modern Argentina” (p. 3). The book deals with the work of advertising agencies that targeted the workers, the redefinition of social relations and collective identities (and the fears these changes generated among the upper and middle-classes), and the transformation of the role of the state as a “mediator between business and consumers” (p. 3).

This book forms part of the recent scholarship on the history of popular culture of Peronism and joins such works as historian Eduardo Elena’s *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* and the volume edited by Matthew B. Karush and Oscar Chamosa, *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina*.

Milanesio follows a standard interpretation of Peronism and its place in Argentine historiography, which recognizes Peronism as a critical turning point in the country’s history. Before Perón’s rise to the presidency, Argentina was a society dominated by a landed oligarchy with close ties to Great Britain, an export-based economy dependent on agricultural commodities (wheat, beef, wool, hides), and an exclusionary political system built on fraudulent elections, corruption, and repression of labor. Perón’s presidency (1946-1955) was characterized by nationalist and populist policies, rapid industrialization behind the import-substitution model, incorporation of previously marginalized sectors into a multiclass social movement, and income redistribution policies which in 1954 saw wages as a proportion of the national income reach the highest level ever recorded in the country’s history. In not so subtle terms, the author claims that Peronism “unleashed the greatest transformations the country had seen since its independence from Spain” (p. 48). At the same time, however, remarkable continuities are highlighted. The author states that the working classes had participated in the consumer market in the past, that labor laws protecting workers’ rights were originally formulated by the Socialist Party, and that two of the most emblematic manufacturing enterprises of the period, Alpargatas and SIAM were founded in 1885 and 1911 respectively, thus predating Peronist efforts at industrialization.

The book’s most original contribution is to reveal how Peronist efforts to improve the living conditions of the working class or “the democratization of wellbeing” had a transformational impact on society, economy, and the state. The central chapters on the role of advertising constitute the core of the argument behind this transformation. While advertising professionals had previously ignored working-class consumers, they now had to learn about their audience. Ad-men, and the author emphasizes that they were mostly men, conducted surveys of consumer habits. They learned what working-class housewives bought and tried to educate women on how to be good consumers in terms of health, prices, and diet. Advertising was both an informational and educational tool for a newly empowered consumer. The state sought and encouraged the role of advertising as honest brokers between business and consumers. These changes became reflected in newspaper and magazine ads, packaging, and language examples of which the book reproduces to great effect.

This is not a book for a general reader. It requires previous knowledge of Argentine history, economy, and geography. For example, repeated references to the “interior,” Santa Fe, and the *pampean* region assume some basic understanding of Argentina’s geography. This is made even more complicated by the omission of a map in the book. We are reminded that the number of industrial workers swelled as a result of internal migrations during the 1930s. However, unless the reader is aware that in previous decades the supply of workers was mostly foreign or that more than half of industrial workers in the city of Buenos Aires in 1914 were foreigners, the relevance of this contrasting pattern is missed. The social and economic context of the 1930s is largely left unexamined.

As a political scientist interested in development issues, I was troubled by the interchangeable use of key terms such as “working class” with “low income” population, “wages” with “income,” and “consumer credit” with “income.” While the argument Milanesio makes that the government policies and social transformation brought about by Peronism resulted in a generalized increase in the standard of living of the working class in the formal sector, the evidence presented necessitates further investigation. The use of personal interviews is not sufficient to draw an explanation. An error appears on page 64 where in the context of a discussion of provinces, Santa Fe and Cordoba are identified as Argentina’s second and third largest “cities” in terms of number of businesses.

This book is an absorbing interpretation of the rise of the working class of Argentina as empowered citizens and consumers. In combination with general accounts of the rise of Peronism, I recommend it for upper level undergraduate and graduate level courses on the history of Argentina and Latin America.

Cristian A. Harris, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Political Science
University of North Georgia
Dahlonega, Georgia