



**Glenn J. Dorn, “Perón’s Gambit: The United States and the Argentine Challenge to the Inter-American Order, 1946-1948,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 2002): 1-20.**

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### An Economic Epilogue to “Perón or Braden”

Argentina has often appointed itself as the counter-weight to the United States in the Western Hemisphere. From the turn-of-the-century Calvo and Drago doctrines that limited the reach of foreign investment, through flirtations with the Axis during World War II, and even up to the current financial meltdown that has prompted a rejection of U.S.-style monetary policies, Argentines from the left and right have used their relative wealth, cultural presence, and distance from the United States to defend, as Guatemala’s Juan José Arévalo would have said, the “sardines” from the “shark.”

Foremost among those bravely wading in those waters was, of course, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, who first got the opportunity as Argentina’s president in 1946. In most accounts of U.S.-Argentine relations, Perón figures as the populist who in 1945-1946 foiled the “Braden campaign,” U.S. Ambassador Spruille Braden’s inept attempt to alienate Perón from Argentine voters by exposing the presidential candidate’s alleged ties to the Nazis. Historians have generally agreed that, after Perón trounced his “opponent” Braden at the ballot box, a far more subdued relationship obtained between the United States and Argentina.

Not so in the field of economic policy, says Glenn Dorn. In “Perón’s Gambit: The United States and the Argentine Challenge to the Inter-American Order, 1946-1948,” Dorn takes the reader beyond the well-known Braden brouhaha to suggest a deeper, systemic conflict between Argentina and the United States. Dorn focuses on attempts by Perón, mostly through his “economic czar” Miguel Miranda, to supplant the economic presence of the United States in the Southern Cone by aggressively pursuing economic integration. Dorn demonstrates that Washington was so alarmed by Perón’s attempts to export his statist alternative to free market capitalism that U.S. officials developed an increasingly subtle-and ultimately successful-counter-campaign to discourage Southern Cone countries from casting their lot with Perón. Dorn’s article contributes a significant economic chapter to the political saga of Argentina’s efforts to make of the Cone an integrated bloc.

When it came to giving the Southern Cone a basic economic orientation, the gap in U.S. and Argentine prescriptions was wide, and the tone of public exchanges reflected that gap. In both theory and practice, there were real conflicts: the United States wanted, as Dorn describes it, “a liberal capitalist order based on convertible currencies, multilateral trade, corporate capitalism, and private enterprise,” while Argentina pursued its own state-driven “Third Position” agreements with neighboring countries (2). Although the United States more than Argentina aimed to secure a stable supply of raw materials, both countries hoped to make poorer nations

such as Bolivia or Peru ever more dependent on them. To U.S. officials, this “challenge” appeared suspiciously like a mixture of fascism and communism. And Argentines did not go out of their way to defend their economic plan as merely New Deal capitalism even though, as Laura Ruiz Jiménez has shown, many understood that the social justice they pursued was akin to Franklin Roosevelt’s. Perón instead upped the rhetorical ante and encouraged adherence to his populist policies by explicitly opposing them to “Yanqui plutocracy” (5).

With the help of the documentary gems he has collected in Argentine archives, Dorn most ably tells the story of how Peron and Miranda’s policies clashed with U.S. interests in Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia, and Peru. For instance, he recounts how Perón, in “a crude attempt to manipulate the election” of 1946 in Uruguay, interrupted food shipments so that his preferred candidate would defeat “the avowedly pro-U.S. candidate, Tomás Berreta” (8). In a swift response, the U.S. government stepped in and diverted its own food shipments to Uruguay. Berreta won. Here the difficulty in making economic diplomacy relevant to elections becomes obvious. Dorn hints that, since the U.S. government “effectively” countered Perón, it helped elect Berreta, whose administration did thank the United States (8). But besides that convergence, he presents no direct evidence that the U.S. bailout swayed the voters. Regardless, Dorn correctly sees what many called Argentina’s “economic blackmail” as “an inherently flawed tactic” because of the ability of the United States to meet Argentina’s every economic challenge (9).

Like the United States, Argentina applied economic pressure with not only sticks but carrots. Chile and Bolivia provided more “positive” examples of Argentine efforts, as Miranda said, “to economically recreate the Viceroyalty of La Plata” (10). With both countries concurrently, Argentines negotiated bilateral barter and free trade agreements meant to ensure a market for Argentine food exports in exchange for a host of arrangements that would help Argentina build its heavy industries. Washington did not only disagree in theory with Perón’s plans, but also saw in them threats against U.S. hegemony in the Hemisphere. As in Uruguay, therefore, State Department and other officials successfully killed Peronist projects by, for example, suggesting to the Chileans that they were in danger of breaking an already existing most-favored-nation agreement with the United States and hinting at possible U.S. retaliation if the Argentine-Chilean Trade Agreement, as it was known, was ratified.

The United States, Dorn observes, had just recently wised up. Just as Perón had learned from the Braden affair of 1945-1946 to use anti-Americanism to rally his countrymen behind him, so U.S. officials had learned to intervene in Latin American affairs more subtly and informally. They did so by appealing-behind-the-scenes-to the private interests of ruling classes, which were still largely aligned with U.S. capital. Dorn has fished out just the right documents to show how U.S. officials grew more sensitive to criticisms during the postwar period and made sure not to oppose bilateral agreements too openly. U.S. policymakers understood their country’s reputation as an arrogant, bumbling superpower, and re-cast it to project the image of a soft-spoken giant who used discretion and cunning rather than a big stick.

Dorn suggests that Argentina-in this grab for greater power-got a taste of what it had been feeding the United States for decades. Perón’s gambit, in fact, made of him an imperialist in his own “backyard.” It forced him to confront many of the dilemmas that had plagued the United States under the non-interventionist restraint of the Good Neighbor Policy. With Chile and

Bolivia, for instance, Miranda and Perón were clearly taking advantage of these countries' dependence on Argentine foodstuffs to compel them to enter into exclusive arrangements. Many Southern Cone "partners," as a result, perceived Argentina as a bully not that different from the one further up north. In trying to spread the "Argentine way of life," Argentina was committing the same sins of which it had long accused the United States, and so left itself open to similar criticisms. One Chilean magazine characterized Perón's viselike grip on Chile's economy as "the jaws of the wolf" (14). And, much like U.S. officials, Argentine diplomats ended up denying their strong-arm tactics by portraying themselves as "damned if [we] do, damned if [we] don't" (9). This self-pitying lament had a familiar ring.

Despite Dorn's skillful research, however, nagging questions remain. The perspectives and agency of third parties is still unclear. For instance, Dorn writes that it is "likely" that Bolivia was "stalling the Argentines, perhaps hoping to exact some concessions from the United States." But he has only circumstantial evidence to support his claim of Bolivian "duplicity" in this matter (17). Dorn is more restrained, yet still not completely convincing, on Chile. He shows that president Gabriel González Videla, more sympathetic to Perón, nevertheless turned against him. In this case, it appears that González was not duplicitous from the beginning but rather that he buckled under pressures from U.S. officials and from Chilean conservatives. However, without more complete documentation from inside each of those governments, it seems difficult to reconstruct the thought process of Latin Americans-radicals, liberals, or conservatives-who may have had more influence over the outcome of U.S. diplomacy than did U.S. diplomats themselves. Such insights are worthy of pursuit because they might help historians consider additional loci of power in U.S.-Latin American relations.

Dorn's analysis suffers most from a lack of context, which may have helped explain how larger forces in U.S.-Latin American relations helped shape Peronist ambitions and U.S. responses. There is no discussion of historiographical debates and no fleshing out of the greater meaning of Dorn's substantial findings, even for U.S.-Argentine relations. One expects, for instance, a mention of Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough's argument in *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944-1948* to the effect that most Latin American countries during those years saw a resurgence of traditional elite power after short bursts of democratic activity. Argentina, it seems, stands out as a partial exception to the rule-as Mario Rapoport asserts in his contribution to the Bethell-Roxborough book. Perhaps the most serious instance of Dorn's narrow focus of the U.S.-Perón conflict is the lack of attention given to the Cold War-an important component, in contrast, of the Bethell-Roxborough thesis. Dorn's article, to be sure, mentions communism and anti-communism. But there is no sense of change over time, no particular reason for choosing 1946 to 1948 as a time frame. Among U.S. officials, those years witnessed the transformation of anti-communism from merely an important concern into a veritable obsession that shaped U.S. relations with every area of the world. It is hard to believe that such a sea change in U.S. ideology would not have increased U.S. policymakers' sensitivity to anti-U.S. rhetoric in Argentina and hardened their opposition to Perón's "neighborly" agreements. In May 1948, for example, U.S. ambassador James Cruce was convinced that Perón policies were dictated to him by "the communists" (15). Dorn does not note the vagueness and the paranoia in that statement, nor does he recognize that it arguably would not have been uttered back in 1946. At the very least one wishes that Dorn simply state that U.S. anti-communist views did not intensify against Perón during these years, if that was the case. Instead, the reader is left

to draw conclusions from insufficient evidence. Dorn's determination to explain the U.S.-Perón relationship mostly through local conditions is admirable because it moves the focus to Argentina's archives, but the concern with communism that pervaded all U.S. policies with Latin America in 1946-1948 cannot be overlooked.

Of course, Dorn's problem is merely a symptom of his success: he has provided a compelling case study of U.S.-Latin American dynamics in the immediate postwar period without fully recognizing the value of his contribution. The contribution itself, therefore, stands as an insightful look at the international machinations and ideological subtleties-and ironies-in Argentina's attempts to dethrone the United States as the reigning trade partner in the Southern Cone.

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